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**HELMAND FOLLOW UP XIX
POPPIES IN CENTRAL HELMAND AGAIN THIS YEAR**

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This will be brief.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT.

Is anyone going to take any action to reduce opium cultivation in at least one district in central Helmand before the opium poppy planting season...this year? This means renewing the dialogue on not cultivating poppy with local government (who must be involved), tribal leaders and farmers, putting several thousand farm laborers to work on central Helmand irrigation and support infrastructure, and follow up with eradication soon after germination....not at harvest time. I have proposed to focus the effort on the district of Nad-i-Ali where results are most likely to be successful and significant. I have proposed that Helping Afghan Farmers Organization (HAFO) put the project in the field because they have put two almost identical projects in the field in the past and presently have rehabilitation projects and staff working in central Helmand.

NATO's General Richards plans to continue security operations through the winter to "pave the way" for reconstruction actions next year. This will involve killing more people and increasing hostility toward the new foreign military occupational force, NATO. Positive reconstruction actions can be put in the field **now** with dialogue and agreement from local government, tribal and local economic leadership and, most important, the Pashtun farmers in the area. You can be sure the Taliban would be indirectly involved in any such agreement, if it were to be successful.

If what amounts to a cease fire can be reached in a marginal agricultural area like Musa Kala, local agreement can be reached with the cash-crop farmers of Nad-i-Ali which would allow a (another) major reconstruction effort to start.

As previously noted, the reconstruction effort would be directly related to the elimination of opium poppy cultivation, as it was in the past. Put large numbers of people to work for good wages, working on the irrigation system and its support infrastructure upon which they all depend for their traditional cash crops and livelihoods. With the record setting opium harvest of this past year, we might assume the price for raw opium is down and the price of wheat is up, all things being equal.

Since NATO and the British are now key players in Helmand, some action in support of the Helmand cotton industry may be possible. The British built the Lashkar Gah cotton gin in the mid-1960s and the Girishk cotton gin in the late 1970s (which the US leveled in '01). As any central Helmand farmer can tell you, the cash crop of cotton is one of the key elements in the equation of eliminating opium poppy cultivation. It is a crop they

know and understand, with a ready market at the Lashkar Gah cotton gin, the facility to process the cotton ready for export. The farmers will tell you that they do not need opium poppy. Opium poppy is an evil crop in their eyes. But they need help with their cash crops' marketing. "Reconstruction" of their markets for their traditional cash crops (cotton) is just as important as reconstruction of the irrigation systems that produces them. To date, support for the Helmand cotton industry has been ignored by the foreign donor community to the dismay of central Helmand farmers. The US and the British introduced cotton as a major cash crop in the region at the time the central Helmand irrigation system was being developed. **And cash crop cotton is one of the key elements in the equation of eliminating opium poppy cultivation.**

Time is running out. Fall planting season for wheat or poppy is almost on us. If no action is taken the farmers will likely plant another record setting poppy crop. The proposed actions have worked in the recent past to reduce poppy cultivation. BUT ACTION IS NEEDED NOW...NOT NEXT SPRING. The needed action involves positive rehabilitation work.

Herbicide spraying for control of poppy is a bad idea. It will poison the people and livestock who drink out of the open drains and ditches. Harvest time eradication has been proven ineffective on two previous occasions and should not be under consideration either.

As in the past, I offer my services to implement any and all the actions I have proposed or to discuss further any of the points I have raised in this series of memos over the past three years....on this same subject. Hopefully this is the voice of reason.