

20 December 2006

HELMAND FOLLOW UP XX: THE WAY BACKWARD

Richard B. Scott
Helmand Consultant

“Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing – after all other possibilities have been exhausted.”

Winston Churchill

Central Helmand today is like England in 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland and Czechoslovakia. The western democracies essentially sat out most of the 1930s while Hitler re-armed. Sadly, through inaction, erratic action and crossed bureaucratic wires on the part of the foreign donor community in Afghanistan, the Taliban are re-grouping and opium production is booming.

The 2007 opium poppy crop for central Helmand has been planted and has germinated, thanks to some early unexpected rains. The local buyers, the smugglers, and the anti-central government political groups, including the Taliban, are all happy about this event. It fits with their plans for a cash crop next spring that will break all records for opium production. It fits with their plans to undercut respect for the central government, as well as the reliability of the foreign donor community that in the past promised so much and delivered so little.

To a great extent, the negative fallout is the result of the donors' failure to act several months ago when the farmers were trying to decide what the involved governments were planning to do after this past year's record setting harvest. Based on past experience, they correctly concluded that nothing was being planned. Building on this non-action, the farmers decided to plant poppy again this year on a grand scale...with the support of the buyers and, I am sure, the urging of the insurgent political groups. Unlike some of the traditional cash crops, that the farmers of central Helmand would prefer to grow, the market for opium is always easy, reliable and good. While opium poppy is a reliable cash crop, the farmers continue to consider it an "evil" crop that they do not need **if** they receive support for their traditional cash crops...which they have not. Thus, we can consider the coming record opium harvest as much a political statement as it is an economic action.

Recent Past History:

In 2002 and again in 2004, when major rehabilitation work in central Helmand was effectively coordinated with counter-opium poppy cultivation actions, central and local government cooperation was effective. I worked with and monitored the work of local government in the field during the start-up of these two work seasons.

But local government action alone cannot be effective. "The law" cannot simply be enforced under present conditions. The suppression of opium poppy cultivation really is a matter of negotiations. It requires suitable "give and take". It is not simply a matter of political will as

some of the media or government spokes-persons would like to imply. We know that the governor and the farmers of central Helmand have discussed the opium poppy cultivation issue, especially after the international media coverage of this past year's record crop. As in the past, according to the media, the governor asked for help to counter future opium cultivation well in advance of planting time. However, in order to have something to negotiate, the governor must have projects that bring direct economic benefit to the farmers in real time. That is what it means to "give and take".

Several other factors complicate the situation:

- Security in the region has deteriorated. In part this reflects the farmers' dissatisfaction with local government actions and services. It relates to the growing belief that things are not getting better under the present system and that the promises of massive reconstruction are hollow.
- Delays and confusion resulting from the change-over from US to NATO apparently included the various projects funded through the PRTs. There is frequent reference to potential changes of reconstruction/development policy in the media coming from NATO spokesmen but any potential changes are over-shadowed by the continuing and expanding military operations.
- Unfortunately the increased military operations include the bombing of residential compounds to get insurgents, often killing civilians and young children in the process.

Observation: In areas where military operations and bombings have killed civilians, especially women and children, no amount of reconstruction funding will help "re-win the hearts and minds of the people". If you kill a relative of an Afghan, you have made an enemy, and Pashtuns have VERY long memories.

- A high percentage of insurgents are being recruited locally and are not "Taliban" coming out of Pakistani training camps, as the media commonly depicts.
- Foreign development contract teams being isolated in compounds because of security concerns.

Development or reconstruction activities can still happen in some areas of the Helmand Valley, provided there are adequate preparations carried out through negotiations with local rural and tribal leaders. Foreigners need not leave their fortress compounds. Such negotiations can be initiated through local Afghan contract teams who are from Helmand, not from Kabul. HAFO (an Afghan NGO) and others, for example have been able to complete a series of small projects in central Helmand within the past six months without losing any people. And the recent re-opening of local schools in Nad-i-Ali under the control of the local tribal and other leaders represents a good example of what may be accomplished through discussion. But the Wolis Wol of Nad-i-Ali moving from his residence in Nad-i-Ali to Lashkar Gah suggests the potential of targeting local government representatives. He was likely warned or threatened.

The Problem of this fall's opium poppy crop:

With a fall-winter crop like opium, which is normally planted in October or November and harvested in April or May action should have been initiated last summer when it was clear what the central Helmand farmers were planning. (See Helmand Follow Up XVIII for suggested actions.) Sadly, for what ever reason, nothing was done.

If any action is being planned for this fall/winter crop, it should be put into effect immediately or at latest in February, while the farmers can plant other crops, assuming that actions like spraying with herbicides has not poisoned the land, the water, the people or the political environment. Cotton and peanuts can be planted as early as March. Cotton continues to represent one obvious crop replacement for poppy in this region. An increase in cotton prices at the Lashkar Gah gin could help facilitate the transition away from an opium dependent local economy. The announcement of next fall's cotton prices would need to be made now, however, and this would need to be widely publicized. Regrettably, from the perspective of the central Helmand farmers the creditability of such announcements about future cotton payments will open many questions, based on past donor and government performance.

Early spring vegetables planted under recently developed "greenhouse" conditions could also be started soon. But many farmers will continue to be in debt to the local opium buyers (the local and almost only credit system) and are not likely to have the funds to buy the necessary plastic sheeting to build the "greenhouses". The production and marketing of winter vegetables represents an important avenue for "development" but these structures are still in a preliminary stage of development. And at the present time, the drug dealers continue to represent virtually the only local credit system.

Helmand farmers should not be punished for donor inability to act effectively over the past several years or to have a program in place now after this year's opium poppy crop has already been planted. As in the past, the farmers of central Helmand would have cooperated if they had been given viable alternatives. We also know that great social pressures have been placed on the farmers of the region and their families to plant poppy this year...as happened last year.

A plan for herbicide spraying has been broadcast to the region, first on BBC Pashto o/a 9 Nov 06 and then in a recent interview with John Walters of the Office of National Drug Policy o/a 9 Dec 06. Apparently the Afghan government has now agreed with this plan although it previously had rejected the idea. The farmers are worried. At least for central Helmand, ground or aerial spraying is not a good idea. Most residents get their drinking water from the open ditches and drains of the irrigation system. Virtually all farm animals-- including the several thousands of sheep of the nomads that winter camp around this system-- drink from these sources. Even with ground spraying, if the 30,000+ acres of poppy are sprayed, the herbicide will get into the ditches and drains of the system and affect the health of the people and animals both in the short and long term. It clearly is not a good idea...unless we are aiming at the physical punishment of the farmers and their families.

Ground spraying, like the plowing of some of the poppy crop last year at harvest time, would result in the farmers paying off some of the eradication teams, under the watchful and often ill-informed eye of the foreign military security forces. Again, this is not a process that will bring confidence and respect of local government or the foreign military security forces.

Attempting to plow the present crop of poppy is a possible alternative. However, with the size of the crop, this would be an overwhelming task and would also result in pay-offs. But at least it would represent a symbolic action on the part of the government and may be better than no action at all....Taking no action, of course, will represent a statement of defeat. Under present conditions, plowing could also produce attacks on the eradication teams.

At this late date, there do not appear to be many potentially effective actions to take to counter the coming record harvest. But if action is to be taken, it should be taken as soon as possible, not at harvest time. And if taken, it should be seen as being supportive of farmer needs. We have enough enemies.

As noted, one alternative action would be: after eradication, announce an increase of cotton price to be paid by the Lashkar Gah gin. The seed is already free. This could represent a shift in policy which might begin to change the political tone, at least in central Helmand. There should be a coherent policy, however, and it should be clearly defined and clearly articulated so that Afghan farmers know where things might be going.

Side note: We are now into weeding time for the germinated poppy crop. This involves large numbers of hand laborers. Large labor intensive projects with good wages could compete for hand labor and draw hand labor away from the poppy crop, drive labor prices up and make opium cultivation less appealing. One of the problems the farmers in central Helmand frequently associate with opium poppy cultivation is the high cost of hand labor. But immediate action is needed. Not a matter of weeks but a matter of days. Can the donor community respond?

The annual maintenance shut-down period for the Boghra Canal normally happens o/a 15 January every year. It is also a limited but great opportunity to put people to work on activities that will get the farmers' attention...the Boghra Canal, the source of most of the irrigation water for central Helmand, and compete for hand labor with the poppy crop. Could some work be organized for this coming work period? HAFO could do it.

For England, by some strange quirk of the calendar, 1939 was followed by 1940 and things did not get brighter for the western democracies for several years. Can we take timely and effective action?

PLANNING FOR NEXT SUMMER:

As for most things agricultural, planning for next winter's planting season needs to begin a year in advance. The problem of opium production in central Helmand will not go away without positive, effective action....starting well before the next year's poppy crop gets planted.

Recommendations:

With all due respect, **do the obvious**. The community of donors working with local Afghan farmers and government should design programs that are responsive to what the farmers of the region have been requesting in scores of meetings that I have attended since at least 1997.

- **Water.** Continue to improve the irrigation system...providing more water and increasing the efficiency with which it is distributed and used.
- **Jobs.** Use hand labor for virtually all development work, putting as many people to work as possible at reasonable wage levels. (People who know Afghanistan have been advising this action since at least 2001. It still remains a critical priority.)
- **Transport.** Improve and development all farm and main roads through the region, keeping in mind that the region gets about 4+ inches of rain a year...and needs good drainage.
- **Credit.** Introduce at least a limited agricultural credit system to compete with the informal opium-based credit system. This should have been started in 2001.
- **Cotton.** Increase the price paid for cotton at the Lashkar Gah cotton gin making it the convenient, reliable and economically viable market it was in the 1970s. Cotton continues to be one of the obvious replacements for poppy. The cotton gin could be the startup location for a fledgling credit system...as it was in the past.

Regionally, cotton prices have remained “stable”. Pakistan has been cotton-short during this past crop season and is buying foreign cotton (estimated at some 1.4 million bales) even from India. I do not know if it includes purchases from Afghanistan but Helmand cotton is viewed as good quality in Pakistan. The Afghan cotton industry needs help.

Personal note:

I would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this memo with anyone with an interest in central Helmand farmers, the reduction of opium poppy cultivation and, hopefully, a reduction in the increased hostilities in the region. These issues are all inter- related. I would be happy to help plan, organize and deploy any of the suggested actions outlined here.

Please feel free to forward this message to anyone you think might be interested.

Experience: USAID/Afghanistan, Research and Evaluation officer, 1971-78. USAID/Mali, Project Manager, Mali Rural Works Project, 1979-81. USAID/Pakistan, Project Manager, Tribal Areas Development Project 1982-84. Pashto Service Chief, VOA, 1984-90. USAID/DAI/Pakistan, Chief-of-Party, Kala Dhaka Area Development Project, 1990-93. INL/MCI, Project Manager, Helmand Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, 1998. USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002. USAID/DAI, Officer-in-Charge, Helmand Drainage Rehabilitation Project, 2002. USAID/Chemomics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004.