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HELMAND FOLLOW UP XXXX:

The Failed Counter-Narcotics Programs of 2013: AGAIN!

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“What is needed is an integrated, comprehensive response to the drug problem, embedded in a long-term security, development and institution-building agenda....Reigning in the illicit economy, criminality and corruption is essential.”

Din Mohammad Mobariz Rashidi and Yury Fedotov,

UNODC Afghanistan Opium Survey, November 2013.

This has been said many times over the past twelve years but no effective action has been taken by the Afghans nor the numerous national and international counter narcotics organizations. Everyone apparently has been searching for the “silver bullet” that does not exist: the single action that will eliminate the opium trade in Afghanistan.

See my website (scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org) for the details of this failed effort since 2002.

One of the justifications for the British involvement in the invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban regime was to eliminate the opium trade. This ignored the fact that the Taliban had pretty much eliminated the opium trade in 2000 by declaring it un-Islamic, and without any help from the outside which they requested. And the British were given the responsibility for the national counter narcotics program in the 2001 Bonn Agreement which has obviously failed.

According to the UNODC Afghanistan Opium Survey 2013 , opium cultivation increased to an all time high of 209,000 hectares (516,450 acres), 36 percent higher than 2012. And this was the third straight year of increase. And opium production rose some 49 percent to 5,500 tons of raw opium. Helmand province was reported to have increased its poppy cultivated area by 34 percent, much of which is in the newly developing desert areas to the west of the main central Helmand irrigation system, reported on by David Mansfield (AREU reports). Keep in mind that Helmand province alone has been producing some 30-40 percent of the world’s opium and some 75 percent of Afghanistan’s opium. As the past head of UNODC Costa stated a few years back, “If Helmand were a country, it would be the world’s biggest producer of illicit drugs.”

As previously noted, certainly cotton remains one of the obvious alternative cash crops in Helmand that the farmers continue to cultivate at reduced rates, with a functioning cotton

gin built by the British in the 1960s, with numerous small privately operated cotton gins, (indicating a local market) and international prices for cotton remaining high after several years of all time highs. And the US and British continue to refuse to support this small non-competitive cotton production in the context of counter narcotics under apparent pressure from the US cotton lobby. Even a small subsidy of cotton prices for the farmers (not the government ministry) which the farmers would love would be cheaper than the present misuse of funds not addressing the opium issue. We subsidize the very large US cotton industry, keeping the international price for cotton low. Why not subsidize Helmand cotton farmers as it would help eliminate a very high percentage of the world's opium poppy cultivation?? As frequently noted in the past, the farmers have been requesting support for cotton prices and marketing since 1997 as one of the prerequisites for getting out of the opium trade which they consider "evil", and have been consistently ignored. The counter narcotics programs must for a change start listening to the people who produce the offending opium: **THE FARMERS.**

According to an article from UNAMA ("Wheat and onion emerge as strong alternative to opium poppies in northern Afghan provinces", 18 Nov.13 and Times of Central Asia, 19 Nov. 13), "Officials in ... Baghlan reported "an unprecedented increase" in onion production this year – a development they described as "a good livelihood alternative to poppies."

"The farmers used to produce 27,000 metric tons of onions from their 17,000 hectares of land. And this year, the onion production increased to 37,000 MT from the same area of land," said an official at the Baghlan Department of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, Muhammad Salim.

"According to the latest UNODC-Government survey on opium cultivation, Baghlan has only 141 hectares of land under poppy cultivation this year, down from 2,444 hectares in 2004....A farmer in the Tala-Wa-Barfak district of the province, Noorullah, said profits from 4.2 metric tons of onions grown on his 1,000 square metres of land were much better than the money he earned from growing poppies." This plus a Danish NGO sponsored a high yielding variety wheat program and some effective local government officials, are likely responsible for this change. This needs to be closely monitored to see if the change, the marketing, continues beyond a crop year. Where is the market?

Why not in Helmand with its 34% increase in cultivation of poppy? Helmand has always been an exporter of wheat. Wheat was the most important cash crop through the 1970s with cotton second in Helmand. For some unknown reason the Food Zone program, which included wheat seed and fertilizer supports in Helmand, and apparently an effective eradication program, resulted in opium cultivation leaving the central Helmand irrigation system and spreading out into previously undeveloped desert lands and the drilling of deep wells for irrigation. And at one point in the past 12 years, onion cultivation quickly expanded in both Helmand and Kandahar in response to increased onion prices and demand in Pakistan and India. What is happening here?? Does anybody know...or care?? It would appear that comparing changes in Baghlan with those in Helmand, local government and/or the PRT in Helmand are looking the other way or are

sound asleep. Or the drug dealers, who never seem to get put in jail, are in complete control...after 12 years of military occupation and “reconstruction”.

We get a better understanding of events if we listen to comments from farmers in Nad-i-Ali district of central Helmand: (NPR 14 Nov 13)

“Fifteen Afghan farmers with creased, leathery faces sit in the meeting hall. Sharifullah says that in addition to corn, cotton, and potatoes, they also grow opium, which the farmers don't hesitate to admit in front of government officials.

"That is because for the rest of our product we have no market," he says. "We can't export [our crops] and get a good price for them. We can't even sustain our families."

Sharifullah says they don't grow opium in the district, but rather on the outskirts in the desert. This is a very wide area for the government to eradicate it completely," he says.

Sharifullah says that they all grow small amounts – about 10 to 50 pounds — and small teams of middlemen come to their farms to collect their crops.

"In the past two years we haven't grown any opium because the government gave us [the alternative of] cotton at a high price," he says. But, he says the government didn't show up to buy their cotton at the subsidized price, so they have returned to growing opium.”

In these brief statements we see some of the problems: No market (support) for their legitimate cash crops, equals low incomes, the shift of opium cultivation outside government controlled areas, easy marketing for their opium (these middlemen are also the source for ag credit making partial payments at the time of planting), and mixed signals from the government by offering a good price for cotton to get it planted and then not buying the produce.

I have made all of these points, also coming from farmers in central Helmand, in my past 39 Helmand Follow Up memos since 2003.

"The farmer's not able to say, 'OK, please help me out here,' because the governance structures continue to be weak," says Ken Yamashita, director for assistance and field operations at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

Wrong. The farmers have been asking for help anytime anyone would listen and have been ignored. And what have the military (US and British) with their development funds, and the 100+ man PRTeam with massive funding and expertise been doing for the past 10-12 years in Helmand??

“He says there isn't a simple solution to the poppy problem because it's tied to the larger illicit economy in Afghanistan. He and other officials say this is a long-term challenge that requires reforms within a number of government agencies that will easily take (another)10 to 15 years.”

Finally, Yury Fedotov of UNODC also states: "As we approach 2014 and the withdrawal of international forces from the country, the results of the Afghanistan Opium Survey 2013 should be taken for what they are - a warning, and *an urgent call to action.*"

Will it happen? Not likely. After twelve years, the national and international counter narcotics agencies have proven their inability or unwillingness to do the obvious to address the politically, economically and culturally very important opium poppy issue. Talk is cheap and easy.

And again after 15+ years of participating in, observing, reading about and writing about what has and has not been happening in Helmand relative to opium poppy, and offering to help plan, organize and field an effective counter narcotics program in Helmand, I remain frustrated by the accumulated insanity. When are we going to start doing something right in Helmand relative to the opium poppy industry??

Please feel free to forward this message to anyone you think might be interested. All past e-mail memos and papers on the same subject are available on request or in my website noted below. And I appreciate any and all feedback.

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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, 1998-99.
USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002.
USAID/DAI, Officer-in-Charge, Helmand Drainage Rehabilitation Project, 2002-03.
USAID/Chemonics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004-05.

