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SUBJ: HELMAND FOLLOW UP IV: "HELMAND FARMERS ARE DISSATISFIED"

Greetings:

This is the seventh week since I started this series of e-mails with the same subject, the same question and request for some action, any action: Opium Poppies in Helmand this Year? Given the lack of any apparent action, I would suggest that the answer to this question is an absolute "YES".

The central Helmand farmers are dissatisfied with the direction of the local double-crop, cash-crop economy.

The Helmand farmers are generally dissatisfied with the inaction on the part of the government and the international community that has made so many promises of reconstruction help. This inaction sets the stage for undercutting rumor and propoganda by those opposed to the central government.

The Helmand farmers are dissatisfied with the government cotton gin price to be paid for raw cotton that will not allow them what they consider a fair return on their cropping investment. They organized a committee, went to Kabul for discussions with the government but returned disappointed with the results.

The Helmand farmers are dissatisfied with the government action of closing down the few small local cotton gins designed to eliminate any alternative market for their cotton. This is not the action of a government aiming for an open, free-enterprise economy.

The Helmand farmers are dissatisfied with what amounts to the closure of major work on the central Helmand irrigation system, most recently the Drainage Project. In the past this project put several thousand men to work to improve and reconstruct the system, to put money in the pockets of the lower income families and gave a boost to the local economy. With few exceptions, most of the contractors and NGOs in the region appear to be more or less inactive in the eyes of the local population, at a time when RAMP funding should be readily available.

The Helmand farmers are considered by many to be the most innovative farmers in the country that understand and respond quickly to the national and international cash-crop markets. The action they take this winter crop planting season will be noted by all as an example to follow.

The central Helmand irrigation system, based on the Boghra canal designed and built by Morrison-Knutson Construction Company beginning in 1946, is the largest irrigation system in the country, with several generations of organization, training and experience in modern cash-cropping and produced some 40% of all the opium in the country until the crop was banned in 2000. Under the circumstances noted above, the central Helmand farmers are saying that they will plant poppy again this crop season which begins as soon as the hot season crops are harvested. Planting will be well underway by November 2003.

The Helmand farmers were not happy with the cotton prices last year but they did receive payment for the previous year's cotton harvest that the Taliban were unable to pay before their fall. They were very happy when these past payments were started in Spring 2002.

In Fall 2002, the government put on a very strong campaign of local radio announcements and face-to-face meetings with government officials telling the farmers not to plant poppy, that those who planted would lose their crops and be punished.

At the same time, the Helmand drainage project was started with much fanfair, opening ceremonies, radio coverage, both local and on VOA, and a dialogue was initiated between project personnel, farmers and tribal leaders on the relationship between development funds and the absence of poppy.

In support of the local cash economy, CADG bought several tons of peanuts that kept the price of that crop high throughout the harvest season. This primarily benefited the district of Nad-i-Ali where peanut has developed into a crop competitive with cotton and poppy. The peanuts were shipped to Kandahar where they were shelled, sorted and processed for the market. Several tons of top quality seed peanut were sold back to the farmers at rock bottom prices. CADG has since imported a seed press for the production of peanut oil, an action denied some enterprising farmers from Nad-i-Ali by local government.

Few central Helmand farmers planted poppy in 2002. Under the circumstances, it was a gamble. The government followed up on their warnings not to plant with a very effective eradication program involving the local watermasters to identify poppy fields, and truck loads of young men with AK-47's and rocket launchers. The eradication effort met virtually no opposition in central Helmand. Violence, insecurity and terrorism is not part of an effective double-crop, cash-crop farming culture.

SIMILAR ACTIONS OF STRONG WARNINGS, DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES, COTTON PRICE SUPPORTS, AND FACE-TO-FACE DISCUSSIONS WITH THE FARMERS IS NEEDED FOR THIS PLANTING SEASON. THESE ACTIONS SHOULD HAVE STARTED BY SEPTEMBER 2003. GIVEN LAST YEAR'S CAMPAIGN, IT WAS ASSUMED BY MANY THAT SUCH ACTIONS WOULD BE TAKEN THIS YEAR BUT, TO DATE, NOTHING MUCH HAS HAPPENED. IT IS LATE BUT NOT TOO LATE FOR SOME REMEDIAL ACTION TO BE TAKEN. IMMEDIATE ACTION IS NEEDED NOW - NOT NEXT WEEK OR NEXT MONTH - NOW.

Poppy need not be planted in central Helmand this fall if the Afghan government, the U.S. government, UNDCP and other interested governments and agencies will simply take some immediate basic actions as has been clearly outlined frequently over the past seven weeks.

As of last night, no discernable actions have been taken in Helmand to divert the coming poppy planting. Apparently some planting is already underway.

The Marja road construction is underway but with little fanfair or publicity other than it is one of the most traveled farm roads in the region. The Drainage Project in Marja is down to a token work force of about 100 men with supervisory staff from outside the region. (Some say the work has been stopped.) A UN contractor, apparently, has brought several tons of cement into Lashkar Gah for future work on the section of the Shamalan canal that has been washed out by the Helmand river. If the work starts soon, they should be in full swing by the time of the annual Helmand river flood season (mid-winter) which could complicate work on the river bank. Electric power has returned to Lashkar Gah on a periodic basis.

On the negative side, while more references are being made in the media about the coming poppy planting season, no one has yet specifically related the coming bumper crop of poppy to government policy..Afghan government and US government, and/or inaction.

And you can be sure that local entrepreneurs with the funds to speculate on raw opium gum and what the media refers to as the "opium mafia" (whatever that means in rural Afghanistan) are monitoring the events and inaction with interest. It is not difficult to predict what is going to happen without the actions recommended.

As a side note, the recent media attention Badakshan is receiving with reference to opium production is not a new development. FAO was contemplating an poppy project in 1973 when I first visited the area, Jerm Valley. I was also sent to Turkey on TDY to see that politically problematic program and then on to some US narcotics office in Geneva, associated with the UN. The plan was dropped with the coup in the summer of 1973 when the monarchy ended.

As an official outsider, it is difficult to understand what is going on with the inactivity in central Helmand. Given the events of last year, Helmand farmers do not understand it either. Officials and the media are wringing their hands over the coming and obvious opium poppy planting season. It is clear what is about to happen. The farmers are going to plant poppy. BUT THIS NEED NOT HAPPEN, AT LEAST IN CENTRAL HELMAND, WHERE THE U.S. HAS HAD A LONG AND SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP. Why are we not attempting to address this most important issue?

Ahmed Rashid quotes Secretary Rumsfeld in Kabul in September when asked what the U.S. was going to do about drug production. He responded, "I don't really know."

For the past seven weeks I have been outlining what needs to be done at least in Helmand, the potential greatest source of raw opium in Afghanistan. I have offered my services to do what I have been saying needs to be done. I have offered to do the work without payment. I have a long term association with that region, I like the people and hate to see them return to an illegal cash crop when they had rather grow legitimate cash crops. Our inaction is pushing them back to poppy production.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT - PLEASE TAKE SOME POSITIVE ACTION NOW.