

Helmand Follow Up X: A Call for Action

27 July 2004

HELLO?

In Helmand, the cotton crop is maturing and the winter planting season is fast approaching: the planting season for traditional wheat or opium poppy. This past year, Helmand had a bumper crop of opium poppy, the result of inaction on the part of the national and international agencies and organizations that in theory have an interest in such things. The U.S. media mostly ignored this event.

IT IS NOW TIME TO TAKE SOME COORDINATED REMEDIAL ACTIONS IF THE BUMPER CROP OF OPIUM IS NOT TO BE REPEATED THIS COMING YEAR.

Is any organization, agency or country in the process of taking any action at all this coming crop season to block the cultivation of opium poppy in Helmand or are we still standing around with our hands in our pockets saying “whoa-is-me.” For Helmand, it would appear that the latter is the case.

For Helmand, it is not, would not be that difficult to take the necessary actions to block the cultivation of opium poppy. We did it in the winter crop season of 2002-03. And this process has been outlined for all of you on several occasions over the past year. I will summarize it below.

Again, why the focus on Helmand? It is the largest and most productive irrigation system in the country, inhabited by smart cash cropping, double cropping farmers. They are cash cropping farmers not subsistence level farmers searching for an income. They have established cash crops that they understand and have depended on. This includes cotton that gained major importance in the mid-1960s with the construction of the Bost Cotton Gin. They did not produce opium before the USSR invasion of 1979. They produced some 40% of the country's opium during the bumper crop years of the Taliban when Helmand cotton was mostly off the international market with only a few Pakistani buyers involved. Politically, Helmand is an important region of the country. Helmand is an innovative and trend setting region of the country. To keep Helmand out of opium production would be a major achievement. We did it in the winter crop season of 2002-03 and we can do it again this year...and next year, and the year after.