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**Helmand Follow Up XXV  
NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED RECONSTRUCTION/OPIUM POPPY  
REDUCTION PROGRAM IN CENTRAL HELMAND**

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**SUMMARY:** As another near-record opium poppy harvest ends in central Helmand, it is time to start planning **now** for an **effective** reconstruction/opium poppy reduction program for next year. I will outline what needs to be done in our attempt to help local government to regain some level of support and trust of the farmers of central Helmand and begin to eliminate the out-of-control cultivation of opium poppy. And as in the past, I offer to help plan, organize and implement the program I have been outlining in this series of memos over the past 4-5 years. And, as always, this memo focuses on the central Helmand region; some 35,000 hectares of irrigated land with smart, double-cropping, cash cropping farmers who did not cultivate opium poppy before 1980 but who presently cultivate a sizable percentage of the country's opium poppy.

Our efforts to date in both reconstruction and opium poppy reduction have failed primarily because the various organizations, agencies, countries, Afghan central and local governments have been unable to agree on what needs to be done, when, how to do it or how to focus on the obvious, and this includes a close working relationship with local government who must take the lead role. The rapid turnover of organizations' and local government personnel, lack of institutional long and short-term memory, is clearly a factor. (Is this the 4th governor of Helmand since 2005?) The last time there was a potentially successful start was in the fall of 2004...four years ago. Since that time, we have lost the confidence and trust of the target population, the farmers of central Helmand, and the local government through irrelevant projects, bad timing, misdirection, inaction and killing innocent people. We have allowed the return of the cultivation of opium poppy to record levels through our misdirection and ineffective programs. And thus, we have allowed, supported, the return or the re-emergence of the "Taliban" movement and many of the lawless elements in the region...banditry. Through our failed programs in this region, we have lost the support of local government and allowed them to slip into involvement in the opium trade. Corruption in this instance is a function of hopelessness. As an editorial in The Khaleej Times of Dubai reminds us (6 April 08), "...the blossoming drug trade is a continuous reminder of American failing in Afghanistan."

First we must accept the fact of a need for an effective integrated reconstruction/opium poppy reduction program that **meets the needs of the farmers** we are trying to change, the cash-cropping, double-cropping farmers of central Helmand. The simple solution of poppy eradication alone, as has been frequently pointed out by Mansfield, Rubin, Sherman, Siddiqui, myself and many others, will not work but it will turn these successful farmers even more against us and support the continual re-emergence of the

“Taliban” element, many of whom are probably also central Helmand farmers. A well timed eradication effort near planting time, preceded by an open dialogue between local officials and farmers on not cultivating opium in exchange for an **effective**, long term and dependable set of reconstruction activities can work. This last is where we have failed to date.

But a more effective uncorrupt local government alone, eradication alone, effective enforcement alone, alternative livelihood projects alone, market support alone, increase of cotton prices alone, reconstruction work alone, better seeds and fertilizer alone, the magic contract crop alone or a farm credit program alone will not solve the problems of the central Helmand farmers and their cultivation of opium poppy. We must move away from the single minded approach frequently expressed by official spokespersons. There must be an integrated program that attempts to address most of these issues, and more, **on a long term basis.**

Central Helmand farmers do not like to cultivate opium poppy. They consider it an evil crop. They know that more and more Afghans are becoming addicted locally...including their relatives. The management of the labor intensive cultivation and harvest of poppy is complex and does not net the levels of income the media (and the farmers) would have us believe. As the farmers have frequently said, opium poppy cultivation is too much work for the returns, and labor costs are too high. Opium poppy is a very labor intensive crop.

There must be a program developed that includes at least these basic elements:

1. Have the governor re-establish an active local government-farmer dialogue on eliminating opium poppy cultivation in the context of a dependable reconstruction and market support effort. But this dialogue **MUST** be supported by a continuous and reliable reconstruction effort. The farmers have had enough of government and foreigner unfulfilled promises.
2. Re-start reconstruction and development activities using primarily hand labor that are first focused on projects of **direct benefit** to the target population of farmers e.g., irrigation, drainage, farm roads, bridges and local schools, etc., not women’s gardens and fountains, agriculture fair day demonstrations...or cobblestone roads to irrelevant places.
3. Establish a basic farm credit system that competes with that of the narcotics trade and supports the traditional legal cash crops of the region.
4. Help support the markets of the traditional cash crops in the region which the farmers continue to cultivate: wheat, cotton, peanuts, vegetables, melon, corn, mung bean. Support the known cash crops that are still being cultivated, and markets first.
5. In the context of all of the above, initiate a opium poppy **eradication program in the fall planting season** during planting and germination season with follow up after the small plants have emerged from the ground. In central Helmand opium poppy can be identified before germination by the configuration of the irrigation paddies. Wheat and

poppy paddies are different. The eradication effort should **not** be initiated at harvest season after the farmers, farm labor and share-croppers have invested much money, labor and time in the crop. This poorly timed action has resulted in eradication failure since the British program in the spring of 2002. We should learn from our mistakes.

6. The eradication teams should be made up of the local police forces who must receive additional training (even short term) and be paid regularly and on time with an additional incentive/danger pay supplement. The timely and early eradication effort, after forceful government warnings not to plant, will take pressure off the police from accepting bribes from the farmers. The farmers will have time to re-plant a legal fall crop (wheat) or hold fields fallow for early spring planting of cotton or peanuts as early as March.

This year's eradication effort at harvest time failed. Limited eradication occurred in the immediate vicinity of Lashkar Gah but in more distant locations, Marja and Nad-i-Ali, the proposed actions failed though threats of violence, and bribed eradication teams. Since the spring of 2002, eradication efforts at harvest time have generally failed. Aerial spraying of herbicides should not be considered given the obvious political and potential health implications of that action.

**Development action and opium poppy reduction.** There should be **no** reconstruction/development actions that are not associated with opium poppy reduction in central Helmand, and all project staff must understand this and be part of the anti-poppy/narcotics dialogue. And inversely, there should be **no** opium poppy reduction/eradication effort not preceded by **effective** reconstruction/development actions that put many of the local farm labor to work on **relevant** projects. With the PRTs and CERPs, where most of the real development funds seem to be channeled, the line between the military occupation and development work has been blurred in the farmer's minds. We cannot kill their relatives and expect to win friends among the same people through development projects. Pashtun farmers do not think like that. Given these points, the foreigners associated with our presence in Afghanistan should never say they are not there to get rid of opium poppy cultivation...not the military in operations in Garmser and not the engineers working on the various development projects. Everyone should be involved in the anti-narcotics dialogue **but this assumes that there is an integrated development/poppy reduction program as outlined here.** To date there has not been such a program, and nearly everyone has denied being associated with the opium poppy reduction effort...if there is one.

**THE DIALOGUE:** The governor and his staff must re-initiate the anti-narcotics dialogue with the farmers, tribal leaders and other influential local leaders. According to the media, all the governors since Sher Mohammad have been having similar discussions but without backup, follow up or effective related reconstruction actions that directly benefit the poppy growing farmers. The dialogue cannot be just a matter of threats. The concept of the rule of law has not been around since at least the time of the Taliban. It is a matter of negotiations and agreements with the local leadership. And the beneficial actions must start before or at the same time as planting season. This means that the

dialogue must be started soon. But no development actions should be started without local leadership agreement, support and security guarantees.

**But this dialogue must not be initiated unless the community of donors can and will support an integrated reconstruction/poppy reduction program on the long term and through local government. The farmers are fed up with meaningless discussions and promises.**

**WHERE TO START THE PROPOSED PROGRAM?** To start, this proposed program should focus on the region where success is most likely and the impact on opium poppy cultivation would be the greatest: CENTRAL HELMAND. Within central Helmand the program should start in the district of Nad-i-Ali with at least 11,500 hectares of irrigated land where a sizable portion of the nation's opium poppy is cultivated. It is also a center of cotton, peanut, vegetable and melon cultivation. The program should stay out of the more marginal areas where security has been a problem in the past. Nad-i-Ali is a district where very limited violence has occurred, for what ever reason, and remains one of the most productive districts in the country. And the elders took responsibility for the local school system many months ago but most schools are presently closed. There is a US NGO privately funded primary school for both boys and girls (separate) in Nad-i-Ali that has functioned since the late '90s. Three similar irrigation reconstruction projects have been successfully started in this district in the past but failed through lack of support and follow up. In 2002-03 opium poppy cultivation was cut by some 85% in one crop season. This limited success should have developed into a broader integrated program like that being proposed rather than being shut down for a year in the process of changing contractors. In short, the farmers in Nad-i-Ali will know what is expected from them with limited explanation. No doubt they will be skeptical of the potential long term project when the plan is again explained to them, given their past experience. But from the beginning of the dialogue on not cultivating poppy, beginning in 1997, the farmers have continually requested three basic elements that would help them move out of poppy cultivation:

- Improve the irrigation systems (water) using mostly hand labor,
- Improve the local farm road system again using mostly hand labor and,
- Increase the price paid by the cotton gin for their raw cotton.

The farmers of central Helmand consider cotton an important element in replacement crops for poppy. Use of hand labor is important because it puts the very large farm labor force to work and money in their pockets.

**Perhaps it is time we start listening to what the farmers have been requesting for almost ten years relative to eliminating opium poppy cultivation in this region.**

**WHO?** As previously noted, the most logical organizations to take the needed reconstruction actions would be Afghan NGOs like Helping Afghan Farmers Organization (HAFO). HAFO has been successfully working on reconstruction projects in this region for 10-12 years. Many of their staff are from the region, (including their

chief Eng. Jawed). They have the necessary contacts to make things happen relatively quickly. And they are a known quantity to many of the local people and government. They have participated in two previous reconstruction/anti-poppy projects similar to what is being proposed here, in close collaboration with local government, Helmand Valley Authority (HVA) and Helmand Construction Unit (HCU). Let the Afghans do it but monitor the project carefully. If you cannot monitor a project in the field, don't expect it to happen as planned...regardless of who is doing it. There are many knowledgeable and effective Afghans in Helmand that are capable of fielding an effective program.

**WHAT?** Drainage is always a problem for central Helmand Irrigation and its tight clay soils. The last drainage work in Nad-i-Ali was in 2004. Work on the farm drain system could be the start with other projects being easily identified in the process. Work on the drains can be started at almost any time of year. It could be started for this program in late summer and early fall during hot season crops harvest time and while the farmers are considering what to plant for fall...wheat. The farmers and the watermasters will quickly identify needed projects when they realize the reconstruction program has re-started. And the first question to ask about a proposed project: Will it directly benefit the farmers we are trying to influence?

Beginning around 15 January, the traditional irrigation maintenance shut-down period of about 40 days, work can be initiated in the primary irrigation system of canals and ditches, desilting and repair. There is no shortage of potential reconstruction projects in this large irrigation system that received little or not maintenance for 20 years.

In addition, there are marginal areas within the primary irrigation system that were not developed or drained during the initial construction and settlement periods of the 1960-70s but have been settled and farmed since 1980. These areas can be another focus of work for improvement.

**CREDIT:** Establish a local farm credit program that supports the cultivation of the traditional legal cash crops in the region, e.g., wheat, cotton, peanuts, mung bean, corn, vegetables and melon. There is already a functioning informal credit program that supports the cultivation of opium poppy. In six years of our military occupation and failed development efforts, we have been unable to establish a competitive credit program. Before the Soviet invasion, for example, there was a credit program associated with the cotton gin and with a fertilizer program. Free cotton seed and fertilizer on credit were distributed through the gin on a local group (relatives and neighbors) responsibility basis. Re-payment of the loan occurred when the farmers brought their cotton to the gin for processing. If one farmer failed to repay the loan, the total group lost eligibility for further loans. Fertilizer for the winter wheat crop was also available through the Ag Bank. The Ag Bank in Turkey had a similar village agricultural credit program in the past with the village unit as the responsible group. There are still individuals in Lashkar Gah that were involved in the pre-war credit program that could help re-start the system.

**To start**, a relatively simple program associated with one crop, cotton, through the Bost Cotton Gin would be a logical point. There is time to plan and initiate a cotton credit

program before the next cotton planting season in March/April 2009. And it would be seen by the farmers as an attempt to support what **they** consider one of their important cash crop alternatives to poppy. While US funding cannot be used for this purpose, the British who built the cotton gin and established cotton as a major cash crop in the region, could fund this relatively easy start up credit program.

**CASH CROPS:** Given the over production of opium over the past 2-3 years, the price of opium must be down. Clearly the price of wheat is up some 70% from last year? One report in April indicated that wheat was selling at 200 Afs per *mon* in Lashkar Gah and peanuts at 170 Afs per *mon*. Good prices for selling. The price of wheat would be a good talking point with the farmers to get them to plant wheat instead of poppy this next fall. A fertilizer credit program for wheat might be attempted. And it would be useful if the World Food Program would buy some of its wheat from Helmand for distribution in the north of the country where apparently they had a semi-crop failure this year. This would drive the prices higher. Good for the farmers but bad for the town people. And apparently WFP would have to review their policy of not buying and distributing wheat in the same country.

Apparently the Bost cotton gin has announced that the price for cotton will be 108 Afs per *mon* this crop season. This crop is in the ground and developing. It was not clear if the increase in cotton prices is part of some kind of development program or just someone's idea from Kabul. It would be good as one element in the negotiations dialogue with the farmers not to plant poppy next year.

**STUDIES:** Since 2002, scores of foreign teams have passed through Lashkar Gah making studies of all imaginable elements of the local scene. Hours and days have been spent discussing issues with local officials, requesting reports, information and statistics. HAVA has been particularly targeted since it represents the largest irrigation system in the country. Most of these teams disappear, never to be heard from again. But by late 2002, local officials were already complaining about the arrival of these teams in their big new vehicles requesting information, photocopies of files, blueprints and more, while most offering nothing in return. And as the director of HAVA at the time pointed out, his copy machine was his ballpoint pen. The blueprint machine was from the 1950s, and the ammonia and paper used was bought by the old archivist, who had kept the archives intact through the war years, from money some of the study teams paid for copies.

Study teams must learn to provide basic funding to the offices involved in the study, and where possible, some basic concrete action should be funded at the time of the study.

The coming \$20 million water management and agriculture research project is a case in point. I am unaware of the details of the program involving several US agricultural universities but it would appear to be primarily a study to plan and recommend future actions with considerable amounts of the total funding no doubt going for vehicles, offices, housing, security and administrative costs. To have had enough information to write the proposal, this group must have done field studies to have some understanding of what is needed. Hopefully this grant will include some direct immediate actions in at

least training if not some related construction and equipment for the related Afghan organizations. The Afghans will not appreciate another costly study of agriculture research and water management needs, the problems of which have been studied numerous times and recommendations made over the past 50 years in at least central Helmand, the largest irrigation system in the country. And a starting point would be to contact Tawab Assifi, irrigation engineer and technical advisor in the President's office. He worked with HAVA for more than a decade in the 1960s and '70s and is fully aware of the problems of water distribution in that and other regions. He has also served in positions as governor and minister over time.

There are many obvious reconstruction/development projects of direct benefit to the farmers of central Helmand that can be identified and started quickly as part of the proposed integrated reconstruction/opium poppy reduction program without additional study teams. Studies generally do not bring direct and immediate benefits to the target populations of cash crop farmers...if ever.

**CONCLUSION:** While this is generally a condemnation of our past and present misdirected reconstruction/opium poppy reduction efforts, over all, there is little to be positive about. And I have again outlined a proposal for positive action. We have spent massive amounts of funding with little to show for it. This point has been recently commented on in several reports and commentaries like that from ACBAR, and others. It is time to attempt a change. Apparently there is a plan for an increase in military build up and actions in southern Afghanistan which will complicate if not block the implementation of this outlined proposal. The military and government spokespersons of all the involved countries and organizations continually say that the present political situation cannot be settled by military force but they continue to act as if it can. And I believe that it is a mistake for the military to take the lead in reconstruction funding. It will not change the farmers' minds relative to a foreign military occupational force in their country.

As I have noted before, it may be too late to take effective and positive action to change the farmers' views about their government and the cultivation of opium poppy BUT IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO TRY.

LET US TRY TO PUT AN INTEGRATED RECONSTRUCTION/OPIUM POPPY REDUCTION PROGRAM IN THE FIELD THAT IS BASED ON WHAT THE FARMERS IN CENTRAL HELMAND HAVE BEEN REQUESTING FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS...OUTLINED HERE AND IN THE PAST TWENTY FOUR EMAIL MEMOS.

**I CAN HELP.**

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## 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.*

*JNL/MCG, 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/Chemconics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004.*