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HELMAND FOLLOW UP XXVI

ANY EFFECTIVE ACTION PLANNED FOR OPIUM POPPY
PLANTING SEASON THIS YEAR?

Richard B. Scott
Helmand Analyst

It is **now** time to initiate an effective opium poppy reduction program in the area that consistently produces a high percentage of the country's opium: central Helmand, irrigated by the Boghra Canal. This is the largest and perhaps the most modern of all the systems in the country with smart, in the past cooperative, cash cropping, double-cropping farmers. As previously noted, this program must combine:

- An **effective local government-farmer dialogue** about the program. This would include guarantees from village elders on security and agreements not to plant poppy in exchange for a major development effort.
- **Reconstruction activities** that bring direct and immediate economic benefit to the farmers in the target region putting hundreds of farmers and farm labor to work for pay rehabilitating their own irrigation system and the infrastructure that supports it. **DIRECT IMMEDIATE BENEFITS TO THE FARMERS.**
- An **effective poppy eradication action immediately after planting season** with follow up after germination by local law enforcement officers...**not at harvest time.** In central Helmand, poppy fields and wheat fields can easily be identified because the irrigation paddies are different.
- Insured **support for and field monitoring of the police officials** involved in the eradication effort. First, they must receive their regular salaries each month and on time. And they must receive additional supplementary danger pay. There is frequent reference to corruption but at the same time the police are not getting paid a reasonable wage or on time. The two are related. The eradication action would not include any aerial spraying.
- Start up of a **farm credit system** in support of at least one legal and established cash crop the farmers see as important, probably cotton, and an announcement of an above average price to be paid for cotton next year. On the long term, there must be a general agriculture credit system established. The opium poppy industry has a well established, if informal, credit system with which we should have been competing over the past five years...but have not.

- The reconstruction activities **should be started**, again, **in the Nad-i-Ali district** where success is most likely. The work should be **contracted with HAFO**, an Afghan NGO with years of experience working in this district on similar projects, with local contacts and staff in the region. The director of HAFO, Eng. Jawed (a native from the region), says they can still work in Nad-i-Ali. Let the Afghans do it.

Apparently USAID, in collaboration with the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture, initiated a \$50 million development program in Helmand o/a 3 August 08, "...aimed at helping farmers grow food crops instead of opium poppies." (J. Burch, "Afghan airport to help switch from drugs to fruit", Reuters, UPI and Adnkronos, 4 August 08.) Some \$18 million will go for paving the Lashkar Gah airport runway, improving the terminal and establishing an agricultural industrial park for processing and packaging agricultural produce. The rest will go for "...agricultural development in the province, ensuring markets for the farmers and providing technical assistance." (Wasn't this to have been the target for the RAMP?) The produce mentioned in the articles included pomegranates, raisins, almonds and pistachios. The governor saw this program as, "...a deeply important project for Helmand." And it is an important project for Helmand, over time, if it works.

The timing for the project is perfect for this year's opium poppy planting season (October/November/December) **but it will have virtually no immediate economic impact on the farmers in central Helmand** who cultivate a relatively large percentage of the country's opium poppy. The program's goals are relatively long term in nature and will require the planting and maturing of trees and vines. Presently none of the mentioned tree/vine crops are of major economic importance in central Helmand. Central Helmand has always been primarily a field crop region with surface irrigation. None of the present and traditional cash crops are mentioned: wheat, corn, vegetables, melons, peanuts, cotton, etc. In past statements from USAID, there are plans for a flour mill, an animal feed mill, a tomato juice factory, an oil press, and the like. But central Helmand farmers, like most farmers in the world, are focused first on the coming planting season. Few central Helmand farmers will see the paving of the Lashkar Gah airport as of major significance. This is an understatement.

Paving the Lashkar Gah airport is not a priority. This basically compacted dirt strip has been in use for some half century, in this region with less than 4 inches of rain a year. Baktiyar Airlines used it in the 60s and early 70s. The Soviets used it in the 80s. I hitched a ride on a C-130 carrying two vehicles that landed there in '02. Both civilian and military aircraft have been using it over the past 4-5 years. And, as noted, **it will have no immediate economic impact on the farmers of the region**. It will impress foreign visitors and move development funds, however.

And the British PM, G. Brown, just announced a \$120 million development package for Afghanistan, among other things, to pay teachers salaries (How about the police?), and \$17 million going for a radio station for Helmand province. Unless the Taliban have blown up the Lashkar Gah radio station, Helmand Radio has been functioning for years. And while these figures are impressive and timely, **these "developments" will have no direct economic impact on the farmers** who are cultivating opium poppy. And opium poppy cultivation

relates to virtually all the problems in central Helmand, including security. The farmers of central Helmand will not see a new radio station as a priority but will see the \$17 million as wasted funds that could have benefited the rural population, most of the people in Helmand.

As a side note, these announcements of development funds going into Helmand province are impressive and look good in the international media. They are used by various spokespersons to justify proposed actions like aerial spraying of opium poppy as a final solution in the face of failed results. But everyone since '04 has continuously ignored actions that would immediately and directly benefit the target population of central Helmand farmers...and actions that the farmers themselves have been requesting since 1997 to stop cultivating opium poppy. **Why not try the obvious for a change?** The actions outlined here and over the past 3-5 years worked in both 02 and 04 to greatly reduce opium poppy cultivation in central Helmand with near complete farmer cooperation. We should try spending development funds first on projects and activities that immediately and directly benefit the farmers growing much of the nation's opium poppy. It would have a positive effect.

Hopefully, this fall the central Helmand farmers will plant a higher percentage of wheat than usual rather than mostly opium poppy. This will result from the very high price of wheat in the country and the lower price for opium, due to the over production of opium over the past 2-3 years. And many of these farmers watch prices on the local markets on a daily basis. There is an opportunity to have a major impact on opium production this year in the context of this situation. But to have a major impact on opium poppy cultivation, a program along the lines of that outlined here and over the past 3-4 years is needed, a program that would have direct and immediate economic benefit for the farmers of central Helmand.

Security in the region has been deteriorating rapidly. The district offices (Wolis Wol) have changed hands on several occasions over the past couple of years in Darwishan (Garmser) and Shamalan (Nawa). Presently the Marines are holding the fort in Garmser but apparently are leaving soon. But both regions are difficult in terms of a limited road network with reasonable visibility, too many trees and ditches in which to hide. Marja fell to "Taliban" control this past week. And Nad-i-Ali police forces are coming under more frequent attack, losing at least two stations over the past ten days according to the media. The district officer moved his residence out of the area 2-3 years ago. These districts make up what I generally refer to as Central Helmand, irrigated by the Boghra and Darwishan canals. (Garmser is marginal South.) And Nad-i-Ali has been the most stable, being nearer to Lashkar Gah with a well developed, open roads network and few trees. And, my bias, these farmers are perhaps some of the most cooperative, innovative farmers in the province. (Insecurity and violence do not fit well with a cash crop economy.) Like Marja and much of Nawa, the population of Nad-i-Ali is made up of the descendants of settlers given land as the irrigation system was constructed in the '40s-'70s. There is a tradition of a close working relationship between the farmers and the local government that controls the water distribution system.

Again, with the security situation deteriorating, it may be too late to do anything constructive in central Helmand, working with the farmers and reducing opium poppy cultivation. **But it is never too late to try.** The farmers of central Helmand are not our enemies and we have invested some 60 years and millions in funds in the area...and they know it. We must attempt

to develop an integrated reconstruction program for the region that will bring immediate and direct benefits to the rural population, most of the people in the province, and stop funding expensive activities that look good in the international media but dismay the farmers. We must attempt to develop an integrated reconstruction program with an opium poppy elimination goal that is not simply a meaningless “law enforcement” program but one aimed at benefiting the rural population in this process of change. Since 04, this has not been done. **Try it this year.**

I CAN HELP.

Richard B. Scott
2598 W^o Hwy 34
Drake, CO 80515

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/Chemetics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004.