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Helmand Follow Up XXVIII

“If we can’t get it right for the Afghan people, we can’t get it right.”
Adm. Mike Mullen, 27 July 09

**Time AGAIN to Begin Planning for an Effective Counter-Narcotics
Program for the Fall Planting Season**

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We must begin now to start planning, organizing and negotiating with the farmers for an effective counter-narcotics program to greatly reduce if not eliminate opium poppy cultivation in at least one politically significant district of central Helmand this year. This can only be done through a farmer friendly program that actually, directly and immediately benefits the farmers of the target population. It must be an integrated, multi-dimensional program that puts the very large farm labor force efficiently to work on its own irrigation system for pay. It must be flexible enough to address any other important construction/reconstruction projects that the farmers invariably request. It must include at least a small start-up agricultural credit program. It must start support for the agriculture markets for the farmers’ double-cropping, cash-cropping traditional legitimate cash-crops, something we should have been doing since 2003 when there was a project for that purpose. And cotton, a crop the farmers see as important in the counter-narcotics equation, must be one of cash-crops receiving attention. From the start, the program must be comprehensive in scope but focused geographically. It must have immediate impact. There is no single answer for the combined problems of opium poppy cultivation and security in central Helmand. And both the U.S. and British military should **not** be directly involved in the development elements of the program but should be an effective security force on call. But since the military apparently holds the dominant “integrated approach” role (A.Husarska, Wash.Post 10 July 09), this is not likely to happen.

Since the brief reductions of poppy cultivation in central Helmand resulting from the two reconstruction/counter-narcotics projects in 2002 and 2004, we have allowed opium poppy to return to record levels through misdirected actions. This past year saw a reduction in poppy and an increase in wheat cultivation that mainly resulted from farmer response to market conditions rather than to any of our efforts. There has been an over-production of opium over the past 3-4 years driving the prices down. There has been drought in the rain-fed wheat areas to the north producing a national wheat shortage, during the same period driving the prices of wheat up. And the cash-cropping farmers of central Helmand watch and respond to the markets carefully.

In March, Ambassador Holbrooke pointed out how ineffective our past counter-narcotics efforts have been, saying “It is the most wasteful and ineffective program I have seen in 40 years.” And that the funds would be better used in supporting Afghan farmers. (BBC, 21 March 09) I have been documenting this obvious fact since 2003 with proposals for redirection, ideas mostly coming from the farmers of central Helmand.

The British became just as critical of their DFID projects in Helmand a month or so after Amb. Holbrooke’s statements. This has been followed up with the administration’s “New Strategy” for Afghanistan: a military surge, a civilian surge of developers, and the largest military operation in Helmand since 9/11. More recently a plan has emerged to help some 125,000 farmers to purchase seeds and farm equipment through a “voucher” system (a credit program?), and a program to employ 166,000 young men for six months in the Helmand-Kandahar region. (Chandrasekaran, WashPost, 12 July 09) At the same time, some in the Pentagon are urging to pay Afghan farmers not to plant poppy this coming season. (This would be a mistake.) If anything, this total picture should confuse the farmers of central Helmand who would just like to see the end of violence so they can focus on their economy. Violence and insecurity do not mesh well with a cash-crop economy. While some of these plans sound good in the media (we are trying to do something big time) they would be difficult to implement effectively (an understatement). Identifying projects and organizing, supervising and managing **effectively** 166,000 men for a period of 6 months any time soon is not realistic.

Our planners must keep in mind that at least in central Helmand, including Nad-i-Ali, Marja and Shamalan (Nawa) where most of the poppy is cultivated, the farmers continue to cultivate their traditional cash-crops of wheat, cotton, peanuts, vegetables, melons, corn, etc. at a reduced rate along with poppy. They have one of the highest rural concentrations of tractors and privately owned cars in the country. There are 2-3 tractor distributors and several used car lots in Lashkar Gah. Many farmers can discuss the pros and cons of various vegetable and wheat varieties by name. By Afghan standards, the farmers of central Helmand are not poor. They are cash-cropping business men who watch and can respond to the changing markets quickly. **But they need help.**

Administrators continue to state that there is no “silver bullet”, a single direct action, like eradication, to solve the opium poppy problem but over time they have continued to act as if there was. So now we go after the drug traffickers, drug lords and interdiction as the answer. (J. English, Examiner.com 9 July 09, Shanker & Bumiller, NYT, 23 July 09) The military continues to say that the problems cannot be solved by military force alone, that the “The Afghan people...are the mission.” But they continue to act as if it can, with the military surge in Helmand to drive the “Taliban” (many of whom live there) out.

So it is now that time of year to start planning, organizing and negotiating with the farmers an effective counter-narcotics program to get them **not** to plant opium poppy this coming fall planting season. And this does not include paying farmers not to plant poppy. This will take time and we do not have much time. We must convince them to plant more wheat instead, which they will in any case, along with some cash-crop winter vegetables, like cauliflower, or leave some of their fields fallow for the early planting of cotton or

peanuts in March/April, all of which was standard practice before we allowed opium poppy to again become the primary cash-crop. And Helmand farmers generally do not need wheat seed. They are major producers of wheat and always have been. But they will accept free or subsidized wheat seed if offered.

These negotiations with the farmers and their leaders not to plant poppy in exchange for serious, long-term support of their agricultural economy must be accomplished by the Afghans, not the U.S. or British military. The “Civilian Surge” personnel should play a supportive role with planning, funding and monitoring but should not become the key players in the program. Let the Afghans do it.

Geographic Focus: This proposed program cannot **effectively** be implemented in Helmand province as a whole this coming planting season for security and administrative reasons. The administrative network, both local and foreign, could not implement or monitor a province-wide program, nor could the military protect it. And if the program cannot be carefully monitored in the field, we must not expect it to be implemented as planned. The program must be focused on a limited area to start. A geographically widespread project in the province would attract too much attention, be difficult to monitor and protect and would have limited impact. The district I propose is Nad-i-Ali (some 30,000 acres of irrigated land) because of its high involvement in opium poppy cultivation, central location, geographical openness (security), experience with three similar projects in the past, the center of continued legal cash-crop cultivation, and our detailed knowledge of the area, with many local contacts between farmers, the proposed NGO and the irrigation system watermasters.

But if the development agencies are not willing to fund this program on the long term, it should not be initiated. The necessary negotiations between local government and the farmers will involve government assurances/promises of long term (not six months) reconstruction work and legal cash-crop support, as in the past, in exchange for not planting opium poppy. These farmers who agreed and acted on this exchange on two occasions in the past will be skeptical. Assuming agreement can be reached with the farmers, we must not fail to follow through with the agreements that would further undercut local government credibility.

Eradication: As previously noted, there remains a role for a well timed eradication element in this proposed broad scope program. In the negotiations process, the farmers must agree to stop cultivation opium poppy in exchange for a long term reconstruction project, help with marketing of their traditional cash-crops, an agriculture credit project, etc. They will be warned of a follow-up eradication program for those that do not follow the agreements and plant poppy. In the recent past when eradication was considered the answer, the eradication actions were implemented by some special Afghan eradication forces at harvest time when the farmers, sharecroppers and farm laborers had a full growing season invested in the crop. Generally in central Helmand the farmers and the eradication teams negotiated a price for not taking out the mature poppy fields. Violence sometimes occurred when negotiations broke down, the farmers did not have the necessary money or the “Taliban” wanted to make a political point. But this proposed

eradication program would start soon after planting and germination in the fall when the offending farmers would still have time to re-plant with wheat or other winter crops. This was the successful pattern followed in 2002 and 2004 in collaboration with the irrigation system's watermasters. In central Helmand, the irrigation paddies for wheat and opium poppy are different in width so a wheat field can be distinguished from a poppy field as soon as the fields are prepared for planting. (see below)



Wheat

Poppy

A detailed discussion of the Guidelines listed below can be found in Helmand Follow Up XXVII which many of you have seen. I will forward another copy to anyone on request.

As previously discussed and often repeated:

“Reconstruction” should include immediate (British) support for the Bost Cotton Gin in Lashkar Gah which would include technical assistance and funding to allow the gin to pay for the 2008 cotton harvest. (The US cannot be involved with supporting the cotton industry without an act of congress. Several US Representatives have been informed of this problem as it relates to opium, but no action resulted.) Earlier in the season the rumor was that the price to be paid for cotton by the gin was to be increased by some 70% to 108 Afs. per *mon*. Wishful thinking. It appears more recently that the cotton gin has no funds to buy what should be the incoming cotton crop harvested in the fall. Again, the British would do well to immediately fund the cotton gin to allow them to pay for the

2008 cotton crop. In the past the gin issued the farmers an IOU chit for cotton delivered to the gin. Under the present political conditions, it is not clear what the gin is doing and what might be acceptable to the farmers. It is also likely that the gin is in need of additional spare-parts for their ginning equipment (all made near Atlanta, Georgia) since the last that I am aware of was brought in 2002. **“Reconstruction” should also include support for the other traditional cash-crops’ markets of the region** in need of support like melons, vegetables, peanuts and, this year, wheat. Nad-i-Ali represents the center for most of these traditional cash crops.

Proposed Guidelines for a Successful 2009 Central Helmand Counter-Narcotics Program:

- Put the people to work rehabilitating their own irrigation system for pay,
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- Use effectively supervised and monitored hand labor,
-
- Implement projects that bring immediate and direct benefits to the **rural** people,
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- Work on the irrigation system upon which they all depend starting with the drainage system that has not seen rehab work since 2004,
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- Focus on one politically important central Helmand district for impact to start: Nad-i-Ali, where a similar program has been started three times in the past,
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- Let the Afghans, local government and proposed NGO, do the negotiations (with close collaboration and monitoring), but insist on a low profile,
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- Contract an Afghan NGO with Helmand experience for the reconstruction work: Helping Afghan Farmers Organization (HAFO).
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- Take action to support the markets for at least some of their traditional cash crops like cotton,
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- Initiate an agricultural credit system within the context of an established institution, eg., the cotton gin.
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- Support, train, closely monitor **and pay** the local police,
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- Eradicate opium poppies of offending farmers just after planting season, not at harvest time,
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- Begin talking with our enemies,

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- Stop killing our friends,
-
- Establish a separation between military operations and development actions. The military must understand that a foreign military occupational force cannot make friends with Pashtun farmers.
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- Be flexible.
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- If the U.S. and British development agencies are not willing to fund this program on the long term, 4-5 years, this program should not be initiated. Central Helmand farmers have had enough broken promises.

As previously noted, we must do the obvious, obvious to the cash-cropping farmers of central Helmand. We must follow the guidelines that they have been requesting to get out of opium poppy cultivation for the past ten years, mostly outlined above. **We must start listening to these farmers, “if we are to get it right”.**

I would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this memo with anyone with an interest in central Helmand farmers, the reduction of opium poppy cultivation and, hopefully, a reduction in the increased hostilities in the region. These issues are all inter-related. I would be happy to help plan, organize and deploy any of the suggested actions outlined here. 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.

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