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Helmand Follow Up XXXVII

Help for Central Helmand Farmers?

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This New York Times article on Helmand opium poppy is one of the best I have seen in recent times:

In Poppy War, Taliban Aim to Protect a Cash Crop

By **TAIMOOR SHAH** and [ALISSA J. RUBIN](#)

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/12/world/asia/taliban-poppy-war-targets-tractors-and-police.html>

“This year there is more poppy cultivation in Helmand...” and the farmers see the Taliban as the “...protectors of their economic interests...” according to Helmand government people.

As previously noted, clearly our counter-narcotics efforts have been a failure and need serious revision. We are not only seen as a foreign military occupation force by the farmers but as enemies of their economic interests, at least in Helmand. Initially, 10 years ago, we had planned to establish a modern version of the Marshal Plan which included the “reconstruction” of the agricultural economy in which most of the people of Afghanistan are involved as farmers. This should have been the focus and heart of our misguided “winning the hearts and minds of the people” strategy but we have tended to focus on things like roads, court houses and industrial parks. And this should have included a continuation of the successful Taliban opium poppy ban.

To start, eradication has a place in any counter-narcotics strategy but **not** at harvest time. A farmer friendly program would have the eradication effort following a pre-planting time comprehensive dialogue with the farmers stressing no opium poppy this season (among other things) with an eradication follow up soon after germination. As previously noted with photos to illustrate, wheat and poppy have different configurations (in Helmand) for the irrigation paddies and can be easily identified.

This is just prior to the harvesting of the maturing, blooming opium poppy plants and just after the early-season planting of cotton. We are too late this year to have an effective farmer friendly counter-narcotics program. But given the slow speed with which we can apparently act, it is time to begin to plan and organize for next year. After all this time, I am not attempting to be polite.

It is my understanding that the present failed, mis-timed eradication program in Helmand has now ground to a halt...since this NYT article was written. This should come as no surprise and it is a real coup for the Taliban. It must be seen as a product of our mis-management and incompetence in dealing with our promised reconstruction/counter-narcotics effort beginning in 2002.

The key to success is that we and the local government become the supporters and protectors of the farmers' economic interests. We have not been doing this. It means a shift away from opium poppy cultivation which seems unlikely while the present local government is reportedly so deeply involved in the opium trade. The shift would require, to start, support and if necessary subsidizing the markets for their traditional cash crops...and this includes the important cash crop of **cotton** which the farmers know, understand and like(d) as a cash crop since the mid-1970s. They have been asking for help with the price paid for cotton by the Bost cotton gin since 1997 as one of the prerequisites for getting out of opium poppy cultivation. We have consistently ignored their requests and opium poppy continues to expand and become more entrenched as the primary cash crop through the years of our errors.

Within the past week I have had two different comments out of Helmand, from Afghans, on our failure to support this important cash crop with the infrastructure necessary to support it: the Bost cotton gin built by the British foreign aid program in the mid-1960s which still functions but in need of spare parts and at least administrative support.

One response to my questions on cotton was simply that the farmers, some of whom continue to cultivate cotton, see the Bost cotton gin as not paying enough for raw cotton to make a reasonable profit...unlike the poppy crop, and that the gin was not buying all the cotton being produced but is selective in who they buy from. This is probably the result of the problem of Kabul (what ever ministry) funding only the purchase of some 3,000 m.t. as in the past. I do not have all the details but could be learned in 5 minutes in Lashkar Gah.

The second response was that the gin has bought only 2940 m.t. this past buying season which is considerably less than the 9,024 m.t. bought by the Taliban government in 1999 before the poppy ban when they mostly bought on credit from the farmers and sold at rock bottom prices to Pakistani buyers. They were determined to keep the cotton industry functioning although they had virtually no funding, no spare parts and little knowledge of the international markets.

In addition, unlike in the past when cotton seed was given away free at the gin for planting time, the gin is apparently now charging 37 Afs. per Kg. for seed and buying raw cotton from the farmers for 54 Afs. per Kg. Clearly this is a government formula that will push the Helmand farmers out of cotton cultivation...one of the traditional cash crops that could be a competitor with opium poppy...when combined with a timely, uncorrupted and farmer friendly eradication effort.

As a side note, the district of Musa Qala, along with other foot-hill districts, were not part of the US funded development work on irrigation systems between 1946-79 but were considered "out-of-project" areas and not subjected to the counter-narcotics agreements in force in central Helmand. These regions had limited water from inadequate sources like the Musa Qala wash and korez systems, and cultivated opium poppy as the primary cash crop under the King, the Daoud regime, the communists and into the present with a one season pause during the Taliban ban.

CONCLUSIONS:

We must make an attempt to help support some of the traditional cash crops like **COTTON** in at least central Helmand (where much of Afghanistan's opium is produced) as part of our presently ineffective counter-narcotics

program. The farmers have been requesting support for years. The farmers continue to cultivate some cotton but the Bost cotton gin, the primary and traditional buyer and the supplier of the necessary seed, are taking actions that are working to reduce cotton production. The Bost cotton gin needs support and direction which they are not getting from their home Ministry in Kabul...or us. As time passes, more land is being brought under opium poppy cultivation, opium production is increasing, the opium industry is becoming even more entrenched which results in government corruption.

Under the present administrative arrangements in Helmand, the PRT being lead by the British DFID must take the lead in this effort. We can and should be pressing the British and the local government to take the necessary actions with our support in funding and security. To stand around with our hands in our pockets and do nothing effecting in counter-narcotics, as I have been documenting for 10 years or so, can only be termed as criminal. I am not an unbiased observer.

I would be happy to help with the planning, organizing and implementing of at least some of my proposals to address the narcotics issue in Helmand and support the innovative cash crop farmers in central Helmand, many of whom are/were my friends, who would prefer to cultivate legal cash crops...with some help from their friends....hopefully us.

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Scott's Helmand and USAID Experience:

(Most of the 1960s were spent working on projects in Turkey.)

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, 1998-99.

USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002.
USAID/DAI, Officer-in-Charge, Helmand Drainage Rehabilitation Project, 2002-03.
USAID/Chemonics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income
Project, 2004-05.