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HELMAND FOLLOW UP XXXVIII
Clearly There is Continuing Need for an Effective
Integrated Counter-Narcotics Program

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“Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing – after all other possibilities have been exhausted.”

Winston Churchill

You have seen this quote before but unfortunately he is wrong relative to the continuing, failed counter-narcotics/reconstruction program in Helmand Province.

After 12 years of occupation, fighting and feeble but expensive attempts at counter-narcotics, in Helmand Province at least, (the area in the country that produces some 40-50% of the world's opium) there was an increase of 19% in land planted in opium poppy this past year with 75,176 hectares planted in poppy. See:

http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring//ORAS_report_2012.pdf This was the highest level of cultivation since 2008. At the same time there was an increase of poppy fields eradicated from 1,940 hectares in 2011 to 3,637 hectares in 2012, which amounted to only 5% of the total...nothing. And the \$14.6 million Food Zone Project was in effect between September and December 2011 (opium poppy planting season) in 10 districts of Helmand with the distribution of certified wheat seed, fertilizer and “high value horticulture seeds” to some 42,000 farmers. Assuming all these figures are correct, clearly we are not doing the right thing. Sorry Mr. Churchill.

Helmand is likely the province with the highest concentration of US and NATO military forces in the country (the fear factor) and a British led Provincial Reconstruction Team with some 160+ members. And USAID has had several of its largest US contractors designing and implementing projects in the area since 2002. Central Helmand has the largest modern irrigation system in the country, some 130,000+ acres of irrigated land, and some of the most innovative, productive double-cropping, cash-cropping farmers to be found. They are not subsistence farmers or gamblers as some analysts would have us to believe. In the 1970s, cotton was the second most important crop (which they still cultivate) after high yielding varieties of wheat. There remains a functioning government cotton gin in Lashkar Gah build by the British in the mid-1960s that receives little if any help from its home ministry and none from the international community. Reflecting the importance of cotton in the region, there are also numerous small privately owned cotton gins scattered through the area. And there is rumor of a new cotton gin to be built in Kandahar with private funds...for processing Helmand cotton.(??) How about the still functioning but unsupported Bost cotton gin in Lashkar Gah?

Given the millions that have been spent on reconstruction, development and counter-narcotics in this region by both the military and civilian agencies since 2002, we might have expected a more positive result rather than an increase in poppy cultivation, had there been a more coordinated, integrated effort but there was not.

The U.S. Dept. of Defense strategy?: www.defense.gov/news/1230_Report_final.pdf
The December 2012 “Report (to Congress) on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan” from the Department of Defense states (p. 122): “The Afghan government is the lead for all counternarcotics operations. The Afghan government regularly partners with the U.S. and international organizations to target narcotics traffickers and facilities.” And the main goal of the US counter-narcotics strategy “...is to reduce the ability of the insurgency to draw support from the narcotics industry and to develop more capable, accountable, effective, and self-reliant Afghan counternarcotics security forces.” i.e. The Dept. of Defense is not responsible for the increase in poppy cultivation this year but has a “...role in support of (counter-narcotics) operations includes building the capacity of the (Afghans), improving border security, promoting information sharing, and fostering regional and international cooperation.” But given the frequent reporting of local government and police involvement in corruption related to the drug trade, this is probably not a very effective strategy.

In this report, the Dept. of Defense states: “Areas with ISAF and ANSF presence have seen a steady decline in cultivation, most notably in Helmand, Afghanistan’s largest poppy growing province, where cultivation has declined for three consecutive years after the Governor of Helmand initiated a designated food zone which has pushed poppy production to outlying, less fertile growing areas. Poppy cultivation decreased during the 2012 harvest season due to poor growing methods, less arable land available, over fertilization, and insufficient water supplies.” This basically contradicts the UNODC annual report noted above but is supported by few if any statistics. There may be a contradiction in the two reports on the use of the terms “cultivation” measured in hectares, and “production” measured in kilos of opium produced per hectare. In fact there was a reduction in production due to a combination of disease and an unscheduled cold spell. UNODC states: “The yield survey undertaken by UNODC captured the effects of the disease/adverse weather conditions at least partially. In the Southern region (which includes Helmand), for example, the yield survey showed a reduction of more than 50%, but an even smaller yield cannot be excluded in some parts of those regions.”

On the subject of opium production being pushed into less fertile growing areas, the expansion into these areas began at least during the Soviet occupation or soon after when HAVA lost its influence, with land being cultivated on the desert side of the Boghra canal and along the various main drains, from which the farmers were pumping water. Along the Boghra they were also digging shallow wells to tap the seepage. And in a few cases, they were putting in pipes, made from the old power line poles, to siphon directly from canal water. The expanding use of out of project desert land is not new and frequently involves landless farmers, internally displaced persons (IDP) and long-term settlers who wanted to expand their holdings. Briefly, in response to farmer complaints, the Taliban government in Helmand stopped the various illegal water uses from the Boghra canal

because it was reducing the volume of water reaching the legal farmers/settlers at the lower end of Marja.

But rather than focusing on policing and the natural elements of the situation, like disease, poor soils and water shortage to explain the ups and downs of opium production, at least for central Helmand, it would be more useful to focus on the farmers and the agricultural economy in developing an effective counter-narcotics program. For example, on the 10-12 of December there was another regional conference: "The Kabul Regional Event on the Impact of Illicit Drugs on the Society and Communities in Afghanistan and Neighboring Countries – Seeking Societal Solutions to Counter the Drugs Problem".

(www.narcon.gov.pk/.../Kabul%20Regional%20Event.%2010-12.12...)

It involved Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, parliamentarians, tribal leaders, sports heroes(?), opinion leaders, a total of 100+ individuals that discussed "...how the countries of the region can better cooperate to counter the negative impacts of illicit drugs." It appears to have covered subjects that have been discussed in several past similar conferences. For example, one of the concluding statements to come out of the conference was:

"Most opium farmers are poor. But not all poor farmers are involved in opium" In Afghanistan, where the cultivation takes place, alternative livelihood programmes need to be developed and expanded especially in vulnerable regions so that farmers are provided options to move away from cultivation. By the same token, those who do provide the impunity and opportunity are to feel the hand of law enforcement. Honesty and sincerity is required from all involved, since without these, all the investment provided for the cause will not reach those in need and the poppy problem will remain."

The conference final conclusion was: "The participants representing the people of the region expressed readiness to follow up wherever they can on these and other innovative approaches for citizen support in a united fight against drugs."

No doubt this conference was costly and is likely to have little impact in the long run. The funds could be better used in the development of an effective counter-narcotics program rather than more talk which we seem to relish.

With the complete turn over of the Afghan Taliban government and personnel in 2001, the British were given the responsibility for coordinating a counter-narcotics program on the long term but failed to follow through effectively. In Helmand in the spring of 2001 they initiated a last minute opium poppy-eradication-for-pay project which was fraught with mis-management and corruption. (For details, see my final report on the Cotton and Alternative Crops Project in my website.) Because of security concerns, the British team was not in the field to monitor or implement but met with the responsible Afghan field teams (local government) each morning during the process. Again, if you cannot field monitor projects, you should not expect them to meet your expectations.

Apparently USAID, INL and the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics are/have initiating/ed a Food Zone Project in Kandahar this year, about which I know nothing except that next year's opium poppy crop is in the ground, and that Helmand Province continues to be the

largest producer of opium in the country. Helmand should have remained the primary focus of counter-narcotics, but clearly with a series of different approaches as I have been outlining for 10+ years. (see my website.)

In a recent article by Associated Press' Kathy Gannon, "Afghanistan Taliban's Popularity in Helmand Grows Despite U.S. Military Efforts", Huffington Post World, 12/19/12, the apparent relationship between military occupations, corrupt local government, opium poppy and the economy is spelled out...again. Relative to poppy and the crop substitution program, if there is one, a shop keeper in Marja, "... Mohammed Haider, said poppy farmers who planted substitute crops such as cotton are losing money because they cannot sell their harvests. He predicted poppy production would double when foreign soldiers leave in 2014." (There are variations of this same article to be found in a large number of newspapers around the country.) If/when there is an effective crop substitution project initiated, as much energy should be expended on the markets/prices elements as on the agriculture elements like seed and fertilizer. This has not been happening as far as I know.

In short, the combination of our military occupation, mis-directed reconstruction, a corrupt local government and police, have resulted in an ineffective counter-narcotics program which corrupts, gives support to the local Taliban, undermines a legal local economy and results in gross insecurity.

"All other possibilities (apparently) have been exhausted." Except for the obvious: a coordinated, integrated, promised, effective reconstruction/counter-narcotics effort with all the involved organizations on the same track, focused on the people, and the agricultural economy (both production and sales) upon which most of the people are involved. So let us try to do the right thing for a change.?

As always, I would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this memo with anyone interested in central Helmand farmers, the reduction of opium poppy cultivation and/or a reduction in the increased hostilities in the region. All these issues are inter-related. I would be happy to help plan, organize and deploy any of the suggested actions outlined here. After 10+ years of very expensive mis-direction, perhaps it is not too late to do the right thing...perhaps.

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 or in my website noted below.

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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.