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HELMAND FOLLOW UP XXXIX:

The Continuing Failure of Our Counter-Narcotics Programs: When Will We Act Effectively?

References:

UNODC :Afghanistan Opium Risk Assessment 2013
15 April 2013

UNODC: 2013 World Drug Report
26 June 2013

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How can the cultivation of opium poppy continue to increase (or even exist) in Helmand province, producing some 30-40% of the world's opium, after:

- 12 years of US/ISAF/British military/civilian occupation including most of “the Surge” by US Marines and a British military force, all periodically being directly or indirectly involved in counter narcotics efforts;
- A huge over-funded international PRT with well over 100 people, ”experts” in development;
- Millions being spent on “reconstruction” and alternative income projects funded/fielded by USAID, DFID, INL, DEA, the US military and some of the US largest development contractors, Afghan and international NGOs;
- Periodic (if mis-timed) eradication programs;
- A widely advertized “food zone” program where farmers were given free or cheap wheat and other crop seeds, water pumps, tractors and other “incentives” not to grow poppy;
- Various counter-narcotics propaganda/information programs complete with threats and promises;
- An Afghan law outlawing the cultivation of narcotics;

- The existence of outspoken international and Afghan leaders, including the several Helmand governors, police chiefs and religious leaders during this period designed to support the effort to end poppy cultivation;
- Farmers who consider opium poppy an “evil” crop but with a reliable market, have been asking to get out of opium cultivation as early as 1997;
- An ever increasing percentage of the local population (including women and the youth) becoming addicted to opium??

In my view, the reason for the increased poppy cultivation is simple:

CORRUPTION AND GROSS MIS-MANAGEMENT

We continue to fail to ask the real reasons why (evaluations), fail to come to some reasonable conclusions, fail to make effective adjustments in addressing this most critical problem of reducing or eliminating opium cultivation in this region. Additionally we continue to fail to collaborate with the local cash cropping farmers and support the markets for some of their traditional cash crops like cotton which they continue to cultivate. For many in the development arena these farmers remain “the enemy.”

Clearly over the past 12 years we have been doing something wrong and have been unable or unwilling to recognize this fact. Most of what you read here, you can find in my 38 other “Helmand Follow Up” memos written over the past ten years.

Recently, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Chairman of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, commented on continuing our support for the counter narcotics effort (“US Shouldn’t Abandon Counternarcotics Effort in Afghanistan”, Huffington Post Blog, 10 July13). While citing the successes of the “food zone” program in reducing poppy cultivation in the zone, she did not mention the over all increase of poppy cultivation into nearby previously unfarmed desert tracts in Helmand. (See detailed research and documentation by David Mansfield, “publications@areu.org.af”). So even our responsible members of congress (and their aides) apparently are unaware of or continue to ignore what has been happening in Helmand.

The now dated 15 April 13 UNODC Afghanistan Opium Risk Assessment 2013 report and 26 June 13 UNODC World Drug Report indicate that opium production will/has increase(d) for the third straight year likely to surpass 154,000 hectares planted (as opposed to some 131,000 hectares planted in 2011) with Helmand province being the leader in cultivation. The media took renewed if brief interest in this opium production forecast in Afghanistan for the 2012-13 crop season. If the various evaluation units in the numerous development, reconstruction, counter-narcotics organizations cannot effectively address the problem, who can? As I have been pointing out for the past 15 years, some of the obvious needed actions

are not difficult but do require being put together in an effective, timely integrated program as we did in 02 in Helmand and in 04-05 in Nangarhar.

The BBC pointed out (15 April 13) that *“Three times as much opium was produced in Helmand last year as when the British troops went there in 2006, and (the) new UN forecast says that this year’s crop will be even higher.”*

Even Russia’s President Putin commented on the UNODC report (Russia Today, 8 May 13) stating that there has been *“a drastic increase in drug production in the territory of Afghanistan and the creation of stable drug-trafficking routes to other countries, including – unfortunately – to Russia....In that connection, we must have a clear strategy of actions, which would take into consideration various scenarios for the development of the events,”* he stressed. Putin also noted that the ISAF has done little to address the problem, while Russia’s proposals on the matter have so far been ignored. I need to point out that while more recent Russian proposals have consistently promoted a more effective eradication program, the Russians continue to ignore the fact that opium poppy spread into central Helmand during their 8 years of occupation at which time they did nothing.

Earlier this year at a conference on Afghan drug problems, the head of Russia’s Federal Drug Control Service, Viktor Ivanov said: *“Since NATO began its ‘War on Terror’ in 2001, heroin production in Afghanistan has increased 40-fold, Afghan heroin has killed more than 1 million people worldwide since ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ began, and over \$1 trillion has been invested into transnational organized crime from drug sales.”* (The Final Call, 17 May 13).

From the UNODC 2013 World Drug Report, 26 June 13: In terms of production, Afghanistan retained its position as the lead producer and cultivator of opium globally (75% of global illicit opium production in 2012). The global area under opium poppy cultivation amounted to 236,320 ha. and was thus 14% higher than in 2011. Nonetheless, given a poor yield, owing to a plant disease, global opium production fell to 4,905 tons in 2012, 30% less than a year earlier and 40% less than in the peak year of 2007.

Although apparently the Taliban are profiting from the opium trade at present, in 2000 they ended opium cultivation with virtually the stroke of a pen. They were not supported by their previous western critics and were criticized for putting the farmers in economic difficulty by ending their primary cash crop without an alternative. They could do no right.

And to my amazement recently (Nightly News Bulletin TOLONews) there is a reported \$100 million agricultural development program planned with no mention of opium poppy cultivation:

***“\$100 Million Agricultural Project Launched in Helmand
Monday, 02 September 2013 17:03
Last Updated on Monday, 02 September 2013 18:44
Written by Barialay Rahimi”***

“Officials from the Helmand branch of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MoAIL) announced on Monday that an agriculture project costing

upwards of \$100 million was under way in the province and would hopefully be completed within three months. ”

“The officials plugged the initiative as an opportunity for residents to turn away from violence that has plagued the province, traditionally a hotspot for insurgent activity, and instead focus on peaceful and productive means of improving their lives. ”

“Abdullah Ahmadzai, the MoAIL's provincial head, said that the project was already started in 11 districts of Helmand. He said so far saffron corms had been distributed to 380 farmers, chemical fertilizer and seeds given to 7,400 others and livestock equipment and housing facilities provided across the province. ”

“The goal is to bring jobs in agriculture to create changes in the lives of Helmand residents, ” Mr. Ahmadzai said. ‘I am not a political man, but I can see security issues are caused by the lack of jobs, especially amongst the youth. ’”

“Mr. Ahmadzai encouraged insurgents to join the peace process and said the MoAIL would make provisions available for them to live peaceful and prosperous lives. ‘We have a plan to create 550 gardening plots available to those who renounce violence and join the peace process, ’ he said. ”

“The MoAIL office in Helmand has formulated a longer-term, five year agriculture programme it plans to implement. They claimed the programme would dramatically improve security and economic conditions in Helmand. ”

What? Another \$100 million granted for an agricultural program in Helmand? And no mention of relating this to counter narcotics efforts where 30-40% of the world's opium is cultivated and has increased over the past 3 years?? Are we insane, or deaf or blind or stupid or all of the above??

This does provide a hint as to why no one has been able or willing to address this most important issue over the past 12 years:

At least in Helmand, all reconstruction/development funds should have been tied to counter narcotics agreements with the farmers. Funds should have been kept out of the hands of the local government officials who have been pocketing much of the “development” funding.

And after 15+ years of participating in, observing, reading about and writing about what has and has not been happening in Helmand relative to opium poppy, I remain frustrated by the accumulated insanity. When are we going to start doing something right in Helmand relative to the opium poppy industry??

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, 2004-05.