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Helmand Follow Up XXXI

More Opium Poppies in Central Helmand This Year?

The Continuing Need for an Integrated Counter-Narcotics/Reconstruction Program

By

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Timing is everything and this is the most important season of the year to initiate project activities in the counter-narcotics/reconstruction program. This key work season is when the farmers decide which crop to plant: wheat or opium poppy, and the rumors are that it will be opium poppy. And in recent years, without an integrated program, the decision has been in favor of opium poppy. This key work season begins now and continues through opium poppy harvest time in April/May. It is when the growing mass of farm labor, both local and migratory, is available to work in the fields of the labor intensive opium poppy crop or the less intensive wheat. The intensive work on opium poppy begins soon after germination when the farmers begin weeding and thinning the broadcast-planted crop by hand.

It is also the season of the year when normally fighting is reduced in the region, the result of the local priorities of agriculture over “war” and thus the seasonal nature of “war”, something Louis Dupree and others commented on years ago. We tend to associate it with the coming of winter but at least in central Helmand winter represents a break from the summer heat and not an encumbrance for fighting or work. The traditional shut down maintenance period for the irrigation system is in mid-winter, for example.

During the years when pressure was being put on farmers not to plant opium poppy (02 and 04), large hand-labor projects were initiated to

put thousands of farm laborers to work on rehabilitating the central Helmand irrigation system for pay to sweeten the loss of work on the poppy crop. These projects improved the condition of the irrigation system upon which they all depended and put needed cash in the pockets of the laborers during the critical season before winter.

This is also the season when the farmers that planted cotton will be bringing their cotton to the government cotton gin in Lashkar Gah to sell, assuming the gin will be buying this year. This year's crop should be smaller than usual because the farmers apparently collected less than usual amounts of free cotton seed from the gin at planting time (some 10 tons) and the gin bought no cotton last year. But it is an opportunity to get the farmers attention by buying this year's crop for cash at a slightly higher price than in the past, setting the stage for an increase in cotton production next year which would reduce opium poppy cultivation. They do not double-crop opium poppy and cotton if they want maximum cotton production. For the present, subsidize the price of cotton to reduce opium production and get the farmers back into major cotton cultivation. At the same time, announce the start of a small cotton-centered credit program through the cotton gin for this next cotton early planting season in March/April. In the past, the cotton gin had such a credit program where the farmers repaid the loan when they brought the cotton to the gin at the end of the season to sell. And the lack of an agricultural credit system for these cash-cropping farmers has been one of the many elements that has lead to our failure to eliminate opium poppy cultivation in this most politically important and productive region.

While there appears to be a renewed interest among the international community in support for the Helmand cotton industry as a possible source for bio-fuel and one of the alternatives to opium poppy, no specific actions have been taken that I know of.

Apparently the price for opium is high as a result of the crop disease this past year and lower production. (Ian Simpson, Reuters, 12 Nov 10) Thus there must be added incentives to get the farmers not to plant poppy...like the renewal of cotton as a crop with a reliable market and a credit system, things that the opium industry has long had. There is a continuing need for an integrated reconstruction/development counter-narcotics program after 9 years of misdirected, ineffective but expensive

actions. The support of one element, like cotton, of a needed multi-element approach has had and will have little effect.

This year, the price for both cotton and wheat should also be higher than in the past, if the events on the international markets are any indication. In October, cotton hit an all time high since 1870 on the Intercontinental Exchange with reduced production in China and Pakistan (1st and 4th in world production) due to flooding and heavy rains. (Wall Street Journal, 16 Oct 10) And Russia, a major wheat producer, banned the exportation of wheat because of shortages.

In the media, there have been reports on our distribution of vegetable seeds but with no details. The distribution of seeds for some of the winter vegetables would be ideal to fill the time (and fields) between this fall planting season and the early planting season for cotton. But again, there would need to be support for the marketing of this produce. At one point in the past, farmers witnessed good prices for cauliflower one year and many planted the next but with disastrous results. Plans for marketing were missing so the local market was flooded, prices were low and much of the produce remained in Helmand. If we were to initiate a needed winter vegetable program, we must also insure that there would be a reliable market. These farmers can and will produce bumper crops of any known crop if they know there will be a reliable and good market.

Again in the past, there has been a very active wholesale vegetable market in Lashkar Gah for both the import and export of fruits and vegetables. There is/was a very good local market for the importation of this produce from Pakistan, Iran and at least western Afghanistan during winter and early spring. Central Helmand has money. This flow of produce is/was reversed later in the season when Helmand crops matured. Hopefully the old vegetable wholesale bazaar which was crammed into a small narrow-street area of central Lashkar Gah was moved to the Lashkar Gah agricultural industrial park where there was the opportunity for more space, or across the river into the Bolan bazaar area as was being discussed in the early 2000s.

Again, this is the start of the most important work season in at least central Helmand, and the time to initiate a useful and effective reconstruction/development-counter narcotics program. To date, we

have expended millions on a variety of ineffective projects but have failed to reduce opium cultivation in central Helmand, where much if not most of the country's opium is produced. For a change, our program must aim to help the farmers to get out of opium poppy cultivation, a crop that they consider evil, and stop attempting to force them to change. There is a difference.

To start, all projects must bring immediate and direct benefits to the farmers we are trying to help and not aim at more long term future goals, as we were doing in the 70s. Also all reconstruction/development projects must be presented to the farmers in the context of counter-narcotics projects. We are not trying to win their hearts and minds through spending (an impossible task) but we are trying to eliminate opium poppy cultivation permanently and get the farmers back to cultivating legal but profitable crops and a stable uncorrupt economy and government.

As you may note, much of this is repeating what I have been writing and saying for some years. And I will continue to repeat the obvious, at least the obvious to the farmers of central Helmand from whom most of my points come. As I believe Churchill once said: A fanatic is someone who cannot change the subject. And I do not intend to change the subject.

Our counter-narcotics efforts have failed over the past nine years through our poorly timed and mis-directed projects. We must plan and implement a farmer friendly, effective and timely integrated reconstruction/development counter-narcotics program. NOW

And as I have noted before: it may be too late but it is never too late to try.

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 increasing hostilities in the region. These issues are all inter-related. I would also 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.

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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.
USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002.
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