

UNAMA NEWS

Compiled by the Strategic
Communication and Spokespersons Unit
Kabul, Afghanistan



United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
Website: www.unama.unmissions.org

11 - 18 March 2010



New UNAMA chief pledges support for efforts towards Afghan stability and socioeconomic improvement

13 March 2010 - Staffan de Mistura, the new chief of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), has arrived in Kabul, assuring his support for efforts towards achieving stability and socioeconomic improvement for the country.

"Whatever the United Nations will be doing in Afghanistan will be done to assist both the stability and socioeconomic improvement of the Afghan people, remembering it should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, with total respect for their own sovereignty and independence," said Mr de Mistura, who worked previously in Afghanistan.

"I was serving in Afghanistan about 20 years ago, another very delicate transition period. I learned and I am familiar with the traditions and culture of Afghanistan," Mr de Mistura told journalists at the Kabul airport. "I am totally aware of the fact that the Afghan people are very proud people, very attached to their traditions and sovereignty, and I'll be working along those lines," he added.

The Swedish-Italian diplomat – whose UN career adds up to nearly 40 years – had served with the UN Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan from 1989 to 1991 as fundraising and external relations director.

"I am very honoured that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon selected me, with the full support of the United Nations Security Council and in consultation with the highest authorities of Afghanistan, to lead all United Nations activities and programmes in Afghanistan at a very critical period in Afghan history," said the fifth chief of UNAMA.

Mr de Mistura added: "The United Nations has been associated with Afghanistan's history and its people for many years. We're involved not only with assisting the political stability of Afghanistan, but also with many other activities in the social and economic sphere."

"We not only have planes, but we also have a lot of expertise which we will continue to put at the disposal of the Afghan people if they so desire," he added.

"The Afghan people have suffered a lot and endured many difficult times. They deserve international support, but especially a better future. The United Nations will do its part," he concluded.

Mr de Mistura was serving as Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme in Rome when he was appointed in January 2010 by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to take on the UN's top post in Afghanistan. His previous career spanned continents, and his posts ranged from organizing major humanitarian relief efforts to public affairs and political representation.

Earlier from 2007 to 2009, he was the UN chief's Special Representative for Iraq where, under his leadership, the UN mission helped oversee the successful elections and humanitarian assistance towards reconstruction and development.

Mr de Mistura, a dual citizen of Italy and Sweden, was born in Stockholm in 1947. He is taking over the top UN Afghanistan post from Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide who has completed his two-year assignment as head of UNAMA.

UNAMA has been mandated since 2002 to promote peace and stability in the country by leading the international community's efforts in conjunction with the Government of Afghanistan to rebuild the country and strengthen the foundations of peace and Constitutional democracy.

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA



UNAMA celebrates International Women's Day in Uruzgan

12 March 2010 - In 1975, the International Women's Year, the United Nations began celebrating 8 March as International Women's Day.

Every year during the month of March, thousands of events are held across the world to inspire women and celebrate their achievements.

The day is also celebrated across Afghanistan with various activities. This year's International Women's Day – whose theme is "Gender Discrimination and Harmful Traditional Practices" – was marked with a major ceremony held at UNAMA's Tirin Kot (TK) office in Uruzgan province.

The ceremony, which was attended by more than 80 women, was graced by Uruzgan Governor Asadullah Hamdam, Senator Haji Amanullah Provincial Council Head Haji Pir Jan; and the provincial director of the Department of Women Affairs (DoWA), provincial chiefs of the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP) and the National Security Directorate (NSD), plus representatives of civil society and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

It was also attended by UNAMA TK staff led by Human Rights officer for southern region, Ms Roueida El Hage, media correspondents, and representatives from the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), AusAid and USAID.

Uruzgan is one of the poorest and remotest provinces in the central highlands where women are hardly allowed to participate in public life as compared to women in Nimroz, Kandahar and Helmand provinces.

Traditionally, women are mostly confined to their homes and education attainment among them is very low in Uruzgan. In Tirin Kot, very few women are seen outside their homes, and those who do go out are generally from other parts of the country. This, as Uruzgan women are strictly confined to their homes.

Women's freedom of movement is entirely restricted due to strict adherence to local customs.

Speaking during the ceremony, DoWA Director Ms Farishta Samay highlighted several challenges faced by women in Uruzgan. "Most of the women in Uruzgan are deprived of their basic rights. Their situation is a real cause of concern with growing cases of forced marriages, marriage of girls at young age, running from homes, denial by their male counterparts to participate in public activities and other social cases. Majority of women are kept behind doors to look after their children and to do house chores," said Ms Samay.

Uruzgan Governor Hamdam, while speaking at the occasion, stressed the need to provide women with education. He said that women are provided with fewer opportunities to engage in political activities.

"Practical measures are required in order to change the conditions of women in Uruzgan. Firstly, we need to provide them with education opportunities and, secondly, women's participation in political activities should be ensured," added Mr Hamdam.

"We have certain plans on hand to change the lives of women. Initially, we would like to explore ways to increase the ratio of education amongst women," said the Uruzgan governor, adding, "Women should also play their part by persuading their daughters and sisters to go to schools and acquire education. They shouldn't be ignorant of their responsibilities towards building a progressed and prosperous society where gender equality is ensured."

Mullah Bahadur Agha, a local cleric, highlighted the rights of women in the context of the Holy Quran. He said that women are given equal rights to men, except in a few instances where men enjoy more rights; however, it doesn't mean that women are degraded.

"Women's rights are enshrined/protected in Islam. They have a great value and play a key role in the development of a society. For instance, if there wasn't mother, world wouldn't have existed now. The problems faced by women in Afghanistan are mainly due to false cultural and traditional norms which truly contradicts the teachings of the Quran and Islam which preserve women's rights by all means," said Mullah Agha.

UNAMA Human Rights Officer Ms El Hage, for her part, said "Muslims should speak with pride in pointing out that women received certain rights at the time the Holy Quran was revealed to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH)."

"However, in practical terms, today in some Islamic countries, women are treated by men as second-class citizens. The Holy Quran ensures equality between men and women," added Ms Hage.

The Afghan Constitution and legislation, as well as international human rights treaties – to which Afghanistan is a party – also confirm these principles.

"The phenomenon of violence against women and girls in Afghanistan can be viewed as a harmful practice as it is reinforced by tradition and culture, is widespread, and often has the implicit acceptance of families and society," added Ms Hage.

Women's Day was also celebrated with great enthusiasm in Nimroz and Zabul with hundreds of women participating.

By Mujeeb Rahman, UNAMA



Nearly 8 million Afghan children to benefit in latest UN polio vaccination drive

15 March 2010 - United Nations agencies and the Afghan health ministry are conducting a three-day campaign aimed at vaccinating an estimated 7.7 million children under the age of five against polio.

Afghanistan is one of four countries – along with India, Pakistan and Nigeria – where the highly infectious disease which can leave patients totally paralyzed is still endemic.

The campaign which began yesterday is the second one launched this year by the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Afghan Ministry of Public Health, building on a series of national immunization days and house-to-house vaccination schemes which ran last year.

A similar polio vaccination campaign last month targeted an estimated 2.8 million children.

Meanwhile, WHO is boosting its stock of medical supplies in the southern province of Kandahar, in anticipation of a deteriorating security situation and possible population displacement, Nilab Mobarez of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) told reporters in Kabul today.

The agency has pre-positioned enough supplies to cover the essential health needs of 80,000 people for three months.

The UN is continuing to monitor the situation in the neighbouring southern province of Helmand in the wake of recently military operations there, and have increased emergency supplies in the area, UNAMA added.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), some 275 families – about 27,700 people – were displaced from Marjah town and Nad Ali district in Helmand from 8 February to 4 March.

UN partner agencies reported that 88 per cent of the displaced families have received assistance, including from UNHCR, WHO and the World Food Programme (WFP).

Afghan reconciliation process must respect constitutional order, Ban says

16 March 2010 - Cautioning against a militarization of the overall effort towards greater peace and democracy in Afghanistan, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon says there is growing consensus for a political process to end the conflict, as well as for the establishment of a programme to reintegrate low- and mid-level insurgents who wish to give up fighting.

"Above all, efforts to end the conflict must result in a strengthened political order underpinned by the constitution," the Secretary-General says in his latest report on the work of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

"Those who choose to reconcile must respect the achievements made since 2002 and accept the aspirations of the majority of Afghans to a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan where each and every Afghan can enjoy his or her rights as enshrined in the Afghan constitution," Mr. Ban adds.

In his report, the Secretary-General notes that President Hamid Karzai plans to hold a peace jirga, or grand assembly of elders, on reconciliation next month. The UN is also planning a major international gathering on the way forward for the country that is scheduled to take place later this year in Kabul.

With both of these events on the horizon, Mr. Ban calls in his report for the international community to support the Afghan political process and to respect the people's own understanding of their country.

"There is no sovereignty without capacity and responsibility, and the purpose of the transition is to ensure that the Government of Afghanistan has both sufficient capacity and sufficient responsibility to exercise actual sovereignty," the Secretary-General writes.

The Security Council is expected to review the report on Thursday and vote next week on Mr. Ban's recommendation to renew UNAMA's mandate for another 12 months.

The new UN envoy to Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, arrived in Kabul this weekend to replace outgoing envoy Kai Eide.

The Secretary-General notes this transition in the report, praising Mr. Eide for having lived up to the words when he first arrived – that he was there to serve the people.

The report also pays tribute to the men and women of UNAMA who daily "make the ideals of the United Nations into a reality."



All girls' schools in Nangarhar to get computers: Governor Sherzai

17 March 2010 - Nangarhar's Governor has announced that every girl's school in his province, including those in remote districts, will soon have at least one computer class.

Nangarhar's Provincial Governor Gul Agha Sherzai told this at a gathering organized in Jalalabad to mark International Women's Day last week.

He also said that his Government is fighting hard for women's rights and equality.

While underlining "the critical role" of women in the overall development of Afghanistan, Governor Sherzai said women are the "trainers of the whole world."

The event, organized at the Governor's Palace, saw the participation of about 500 people, including civil society, women's organizations, scholars, representatives of the international community and the Government, aid organizations, and the international military.

"We have been fighting hard to ensure equality for women," Sherzai said, adding that his Government is trying to organize "business tours" for women.

According to him, the Sherzai Training Centre – established after his name – has provided training for 1,500 women in the last five years and most of them are now employed.

Speaking on the occasion, the Director of Women's Affairs in Nangarhar, Sheela Baburi, read out a message from the Acting Minister of Women's Affairs, Husain Bano Ghazanfar.

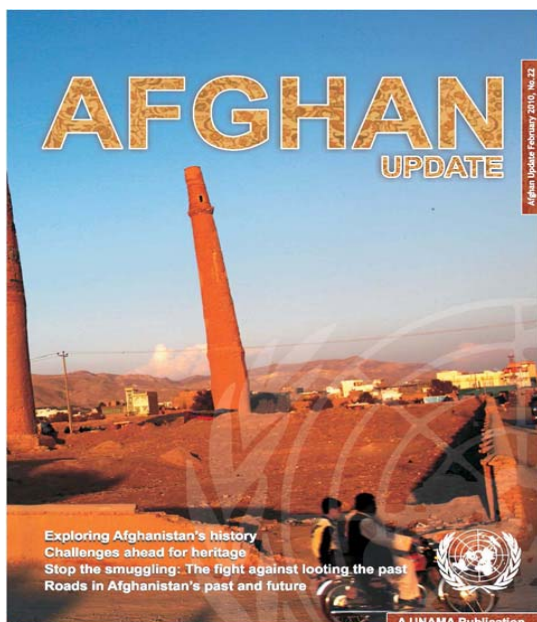
"Our sisters, despite all kinds of difficulties and hardships, are making every effort – not only in Kabul but in all provinces – to get their rights. We are very optimistic about our future," read the message.

The Karzai Hall, which was the venue of the event, was decorated with messages like "husband is the mind and wife is the heart of a house", "if you respect women, you will have strong nation and bright future" and "access to education is the basic right of both men and women."

Munira Akhundzada, UNAMA's Human Rights Officer, read out a message by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay.

A similar event to mark International Women's Day was also organized in Laghman and Kunar in the east of Afghanistan.

By Tilak Pokharel and Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA



UNAMA launches Afghan Update Cultural Heritage edition

The latest edition of Afghan Update explores the country's history and recognizes the need to preserve it for future generations.

As a part of the campaign to launch the Cultural Heritage issue, UNAMA ran a three-week long series of articles on the website, including pieces exclusively written for the Mission by historian Nancy Hatch Dupree, UNESCO's Brendan Cassar, and authors Bijan Omrani and Matthew Leeming.

Read the complete set of articles:

<http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=3919>

Download the entire magazine from the 'Publications' section of the UNAMA website.