

UN officials tread the 'Silk Road' to Afghan development

1 August 2010 - A week of concerts with Ustad Safdar Tawakuli and other Hazara singers, buzkashi horse matches, theatre performances by youth groups and sales of homespun carpets and honey jars, wrapped up today at the second annual Bamyan Silk Road Festival.

Held in central Afghanistan near the lakes of Band-e-Amir National Park and the city of Bamyan whose sandstone cliffs once guarded the colossal Buddha statues, the festival is meant to encourage tourism and promote cultural heritage in a province considered the most secure but poorest in the country.

"This was an excellent opportunity for all United Nations agencies to come together to enjoy the Bamyan Silk Road Festival, as well as to discuss matters of common interest," said UN deputy envoy for Afghanistan, Robert Watkins.

Watkins led a senior delegation into the central highlands to see first-hand the UN's impact there and to discuss what more can be done to strengthen programme delivery in the area.

On an experimental plot near a stream where children wash dishes, the Bamyan branch of the Variety and Seed Industry Development Project breeds and sells to farmers nationwide modified seeds of wheat, lentil, chick pea, potato and soy bean.

Despite 80 per cent of Afghans working in agriculture, some 40,000 people starved to death last year, according to a UN Security Council report.



"Improved seeds increase yield by at least 30 per cent. With simultaneous irrigation, improved seed quality and plant protection to fight against diseases and pests, we could achieve food sufficiency for the country," said Tekie Tekeste, Representative of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), which runs the project in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL).

"Higher yield of seeds leads to greater disposable income and a higher quality of life," said Abdul Qadeer Nazri, Quality Control Specialist, standing near a patch of Chanang-Won soy beans.

A former hub on the historic Silk Route, Bamyan lacks access to modern markets. Less than half of the province has roads. Of those, only about half are accessible all year round, according to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

The shortest road connecting Bamyan and Kabul is 180 km long and takes about eight hours to drive in good weather.

The first 50 metres of asphalt on an alternative two-lane road were laid last month in a ceremony attended by Governor Habiba Sarabi, the only female governor in Afghanistan.

The road project is overseen by a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) from New Zealand with support from the Ministries of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and Public Works, the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and the international community.

"In this region, we deliver as one. All the UN teams are one with the local counterparts, the provincial government, the PRT, the international community and the non-government organizations," said Heran Song, Head of the UN Central Highlands office.

"In the Kabul Process, it is good timing to renew our commitment and to coordinate more on efficient delivery," said Song, referring to the process of transition to greater Afghan responsibility and ownership in security and civilian areas which began at the London Conference in January and was reaffirmed last month at the Kabul Conference.

At the conference, President Hamid Karzai unveiled a national set of priorities and programmes for improved security, governance, economic growth and better service delivery to citizens, which is being put into action by the Government with support from the UN and the international community.

The delegation to Bamyan included senior representatives from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

By UNAMA-SCSU

WHO conducting 'largest ever' delivery of medicines in Afghanistan

3 August 2010 - The World Health Organization is currently conducting the largest-ever delivery of medicines and health supplies to Afghanistan, sending 430 tonnes of life-saving materials - enough for 1 million people - to health providers throughout the country.

The Ministry of Public Health and its implementing NGO health partners are recipients of the health supplies, which are being provided to prepare the health sector to quickly respond to the impacts of conflict, hazardous natural events and other ongoing and potential humanitarian crises.

"It's about empowering local communities, civil society and the government so they can ensure emergency health care for more Afghans and reduce loss of life and suffering associated with recurrent crises," said Peter Graaff, WHO Representative to Afghanistan. "Countries and communities are the first responders to crises, and they, in turn, need the resources to respond immediately to risks in their communities."

The medical supplies are sufficient to cover the immediate health needs of 1 million people. These include treating at least 1000 major (and a larger number of minor) casualties; 170,000 cases of pneumonia and other respiratory diseases endemic to the Afghan winter; and 40,000 cases of life-threatening diarrheal diseases. In addition, WHO has procured equipment needed for four complete Intensive Care Units, which will be established in existing hospitals to prepare remote, underserved communities.

"This can be seen as a success story of the UN 'cluster approach' - one that closely coordinates efforts, advocates together and jointly ensures that resources are in place to respond to health crises," said Luiza Galer, Health Cluster Coordinator.

WHO leads the efforts of the Health Cluster network of UN agencies, civil society organizations and government partners to ensuring more Afghans receive emergency health care and that the country's health system is better prepared for emergencies.

UNICEF supporting government response to the needs of children affected by floods

2 August 2010 - UNICEF is distributing emergency assistance in the provinces that have been worst affected by recent floods, ensuring that the urgent needs of children are met.

The flooding follows torrential rains that have hit central and eastern parts of Afghanistan in the course of the last week. Afghan officials say the floods are the worst the region has experienced in more than 80 years, and further rain is forecast.

According to estimates by the Afghan Government the floods have left several thousand individuals homeless in northeast Kapisa, central Ghazni, Laghman, Nangarhar, Kunar, Logar, Khost and northern Parwan Provinces where over 4,000 houses have been destroyed. Much of the arable land and crops on which the local population relies have been devastated. The destruction of road and bridges by the heavy rainfall, combined with insecurity have hindered the response. The death toll so far is reported as 80.

As of today UNICEF has provided 430 tents to Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces. Water family kits, water storage items and chlorine for water purification for 2,000 families and high energy biscuits for 10,000 children under five and pregnant and lactating women are expected to reach Kapisa today.

"Children are always the most affected by emergencies. It is critical that they have access to clean water. They must be protected from the threat of diarrhoea and the outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles," said UNICEF Country Representative in Afghanistan, Peter Crowley. "But we must not forget that other services such as education are to re-start as soon as possible, to help children regain a sense of normalcy."

Working with the government of Afghanistan as well as other United Nations agencies and partners, UNICEF is responding to the hygiene, nutrition and primary health needs of up to 4,000 families in central and eastern regions. Oral rehydration salt to prevent diarrhoeal death, chlorine for water purification, high energy biscuits to cover immediate nutritional needs, and equipment for hygiene and water storage had already been prepositioned earlier this year and are expected to reach the worst affected areas in the next 48 hours. A measles campaign is scheduled for the coming days.

Government, UN distribute life-saving aid to thousands in eastern Afghanistan

1 August 2010 - Relief aid provided by various United Nations agencies and Afghan partners has started to reach the nearly 4,000 families affected by last week's flooding in eastern Afghanistan.

"Hopefully, we will not have a big gap," Said Alam Khan of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the Nangarhar provincial capital of Jalalabad said.

The distribution of assistance by Afghan government officials follows a detailed assessment of damage caused in three eastern provinces – Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman – and airlift and boat rescue of hundreds of people stranded in waterlogged homes.

According to the assessment completed this weekend by various Government and aid agencies, about 2,500 homes were completely destroyed, thousands of livestock lost and hectares of land washed away, including much needed bridges and canals.

"We have discussed about the resources available (with various UN agencies) and they are fairly sufficient," Khan added.

Relief aid containing mostly non-food items such as tarpaulins, tents, blankets and kitchen kits provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) started reaching the affected population yesterday, according to the Jalalabad office of OCHA.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) has committed to providing food for three months to the affected families in Nangarhar and Laghman provinces, while the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is ready to distribute wheat seeds as part of a post-disaster package.

The Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) funded by the International Committee of the Red Cross is providing all relief aid to the flood victims in the third province, Kunar.

Local Government bodies such as the Afghan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) and the Department of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (RRD) helped finalize the needs assessment and assisted with distribution of aid, with support from the UN agencies, ARCS and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the International Rescue Committee.

The Government of Afghanistan distributed Afs 100,000 (US\$ 2,000) to the next of kin of nine people killed in Laghman province.

At least 15 other people were killed in neighbouring areas. Afghan National Army helicopters rescued hundreds of people in Behsud district of Nangarhar province and Sarkano district of Kunar.

By Tilak Pokharel, UNAMA

Solar panels and modernized electric bill payments boost power in Kandahar

29 July 2010 - Afghan officials have installed renewable energy and modern technology programmes in southern Afghanistan to ease the way some services are provided and to create job opportunities for young people.

"We understand and appreciate the value of such projects which are useful for the local communities," District Governor Haji Shah Mohammad said at a launch of 22 solar street lights installed to illuminate the road from the Baba Wali Shrine, a popular picnic spot, to the Arghandab River.

The project, worth US\$ 97,000 and implemented by the Department of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (RRD), was inaugurated last week by district officials, the head of the development shura or consul, tribal elders and community representatives.

Solar power is considered a useful and cost effective source of energy, generating electricity in an area where there is shortage of dams and other means to produce electricity.

UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director Achim Steiner has said the UN agency supports similar projects which provide "clean and renewable energies in developing countries."

In addition, Kandahar is one of nine provinces nationwide taking part in a pilot project launched by the Ministries of Finance, Power and Energy, Urban Development and Economy to computerize the departments of power and energy. "The new system is to facilitate the local population where they will be able to get rid of the old lengthy procedure for delivery of their electricity bills," said Fazal Ahmad, the head of the power and energy department in Kandahar.

Officials will go door to door to record readings from electricity meters on bi-monthly basis and will deliver bills to households and shops. Under the old system, residents and business owners kept track of their own energy use in special notebooks, returning to the departments on a semi-regular basis to pay bills. The process could take up to four months and some people were able to circumvent the system entirely with bribes.

In addition to reducing administrative pressure, the system is considered a major step towards good-governance in Kandahar. "We are happy that a government department is striving seriously to provide computerized services to the people," one resident said.

Ensuring environmental sustainability is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that world leaders agreed to reach by 2015. With the deadline approaching, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon will convene a high-level summit in September in New York to try to speed up the progress towards the MDGs. President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan is expected to attend the summit, which coincides with the annual opening of the UN General Assembly.

By Mujeeb Rahman, UNAMA

Poppy Eradication Verification Final Report launched by MCN and UNODC

3 August 2010 - The Afghanistan Poppy Eradication Verification Final Report released by the Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) shows that a total of 2,316 hectares of eradicated poppy fields have been verified by MCN/UNODC in 11 provinces.



Afghanistan launches new drive to prepare health sector for response to crises

3 August 2010 - Afghanistan has launched a new drive to better prepare its health sector, and the broader community, to cope with and respond to the impacts of conflict, hazardous natural events and other potential humanitarian crises.

Supported by the World Health Organization, the country's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has decided on a range of actions aimed at strengthening the health sector capacity to reduce the loss of life and suffering associated with recurrent crises that affect Afghan communities.

In a larger effort to make the health sector self-reliant, a landmark workshop held in Kabul on 10-11 July agreed on a roadmap outlining critical steps needed in the areas of risk reduction and emergency preparedness, including:

- Institutionalizing disaster preparedness and response into the health sector;
- Improving the health risk management capacities of the MoPH at all levels;
- Improving links between all components of the government's national disaster management system along with key partners in the international community;
- Conducting an in-depth risk assessment for all-hazards;
- Developing a national health emergency preparedness and response plan;
- Developing a capacity building program, including helping communities reduce risk and prepare the public for emergencies.

"The Ministry of Public Health and WHO have decided not to delay action until disaster strikes but to prepare Afghanistan's health system and communities now so they can be resilient to all hazards affecting the country," says Mr Peter Graaff, WHO Representative to Afghanistan. "It is too late to reflect on what should have been done after a crisis has occurred. It is now time to reduce the risk of illness and death, disruption of the health and other essential services and to prepare communities and the health system to respond to emergencies rapidly and effectively."

The Kabul workshop was attended by UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations and government agencies from the health and non-health sectors, including the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority. The workshop helped analyse hazards and vulnerabilities and looked closely at the current gaps in capacity and resources to deal with emergency preparedness and disaster risk reduction.



World Breast Feeding Week: 1 - 7 August

1 August 2010 - World Breastfeeding Week will be celebrated across Afghanistan from 1-7 August in a major campaign led by the Ministry of Public Health with the support of UNICEF, WHO and other health sector partners.

The seven days are commemorated every year to focus attention on the important health and social benefits breastfeeding provides for babies, infants and mothers.

One-fifth of neonatal deaths could be prevented by breastfeeding within the first hour after birth. Exclusive breastfeeding, at least for the first six months, provides a child with the best possible start in life.

Evidence has shown that infants 0-6 months old, who are not exclusively breastfed, have 7 times the risk of death from diarrhea and 5 times the risks of death from pneumonia, compared with exclusively breastfed infants. Exclusive breastfeeding almost eliminates an infant's exposure to unsafe food or water with a potential to prevent 1 in 8 of all under five deaths.

Breastfed children respond better to immunization, have better cognitive and mental development, while mothers who breastfeed are at lower risk of anemia, early breast cancer, ovarian cancer and weakening of the bones.

Breast milk offers an excellent source of nutrition for infants and, especially where clean water is lacking, helps keep young children safe from dangerous water-borne diseases. In countries such as Afghanistan, where access to clean water is limited, the use of baby formula instead of breast-milk exposes vulnerable children to the risk of contracting deadly diseases.

The Code of Marketing for Breast-milk Substitutes, which was endorsed by the Afghan Ministry of Justice in 2009, emphasizes the ban on milk-powder donations in emergencies and the positive impact of exclusive breast-milk feeding to protect children's healthy growth.

While the decision to breastfeed is made by mothers themselves, health care facilities can and should have a vital role to play in promoting this lifesaving practice. This year's World Breastfeeding Week focuses on the vital role of health facilities in promoting the ten recommended steps for good breastfeeding practice, including by ensuring that mothers have the information they need to make healthy choices for themselves and their children, and that they and their families are provided with the support they need in order to be able to act on those choices.

At present, just over a quarter of maternity facilities have been certified as Baby Friendly, and this year's events focus on making the 10 Steps the standard practice in all facilities and to better integrate infant feeding interventions throughout national health systems.

In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Public Health is leading efforts to improve countrywide breastfeeding practices. Eight hospitals, in Kabul and the central, northern, western and southern regions have been trained to promote successful breastfeeding and support mothers through the antenatal, delivery, and postnatal phases, up to the second birthday of the child. Action at community level is also essential, to ensure that mothers get the support they need to be able to practice breastfeeding correctly.

Afghan, UN officials in Herat highlight importance of breastfeeding

3 August 2010 - Breast milk provides a baby with all the essential fluids, energy and nutrients needed during the first six months of life, according to a campaign launched this week by the Ministry of Public Health with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN World Health Organization (WHO) and other partners.

This year's theme, "Breastfeeding: Just 10 Steps - the Baby Friendly Way," spotlights the impact health-care workers have on how mothers decide to feed their babies. "Action is also needed to ensure that breastfeeding mothers are supported ... by their husbands, families, and the community at large," Peter Crowley, UNICEF country representative, told an assembly of provincial authorities, doctors, nurses and other health sector workers in Herat city in the west.

While early initiation of breastfeeding can decrease newborn mortality by around 20 per cent, the majority of women do not breastfeed, according to UNICEF. In a country where access to clean water is often lacking, breastfeeding can keep young children safe from dangerous - often fatal - water borne diseases such as diarrhoea.

The campaign, launched on Sunday, is also meant to highlight the benefits of breastfeeding at later stages. Breast milk meets half or more of a child's nutritional needs in the first year and up to a third in the second year.

The Breastfeeding Week campaign runs in most countries through Saturday.

By Henri Burgard, UNAMA





Herat displays art works by 19th century European visitors to Afghanistan

4 August 2010 - Exhibited in the Chahar Suq Sistani, a site restored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in the heart of Herat's old city, the works - prints, watercolours, lithographies - reflect the impressions of European visitors to Afghanistan between 1830 and 1920.

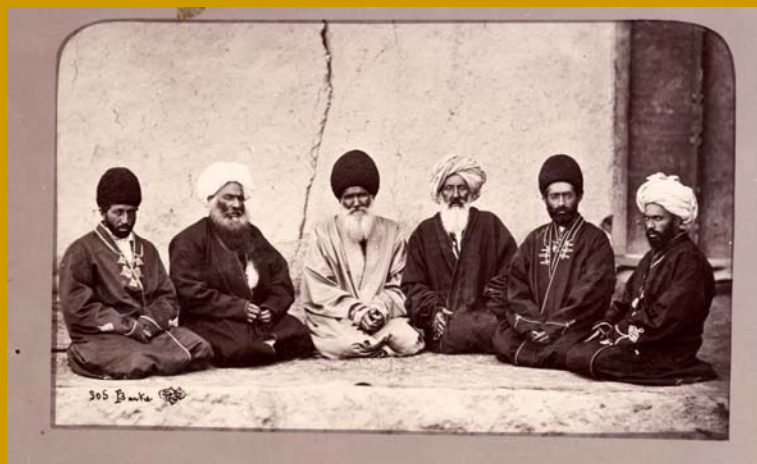
"We intended to make the Afghan public aware of the material, and the British Library offered to supply it," Jolyon Leslie, Chief Executive Officer for the AKTC, said about the origin of the exhibit which opened on Sunday.

The high resolution copies show familiar landmarks, such as the tomb of Babur, and some which have since disappeared - such as a watercolour depicting the Herat Mosalla Complex destroyed by the British fearing an imminent attack by Russian troops.

While many of the existing pieces in the collection had a military origin, the organizers insisted on displaying a mostly civilian view to the material. The entire collection will be handed over to the Afghan national archives, as a resource for researchers.

"This has both a cultural and educational purpose," said Jolyon Leslie, who announced the exhibition, which received 20,000 visitors when it was displayed earlier this year in Babur gardens in Kabul, may travel northeast next month to Balkh or Mazar-i-Sharif.

By Henri Burgard, UNAMA



Afghan youth photograph modern life in Afghanistan

4 August 2010 - From a boy injecting heroin to children playing football near the ruins of Darulaman Palace in Kabul, a newly opened photo exhibit in the capital city's Babur Garden aims to show the challenges and joys of life in Afghanistan through the camera lenses of 32 Afghan photography students, including nine girls.

"My favourite is one of an old woman carrying heavy wood," said Abdull Wage, a security guard in a high-ceilinged, pristine white hall where the photos are on display.

"She probably walked two hours from the mountain to carry the wood to her village. It tells the story of Afghanistan, that she needs to do this at her age. She should be retired."

The photo is by Zerikya Gulistani, a 27-year-old photographer who trained last year with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

The particular photo was taken this spring during a three-month class conducted by Aina Photo Agency of Afghanistan with support from the Canadian Government.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had funded previous classes.

To be eligible, students needed to have graduated high-school, be younger than 35 years of age and have a basic command of English and computer skills.

The goal of this and similar professional training programmes at Aina is "to heal the wounds among Afghans" and to "change the vision of Afghanistan held by the outside world," said Mohammad Faheem Dashty, Aina chairman and editor-in-chief of Kabul Weekly.

The exhibit "Through the Eyes of Afghan Youth" is currently on display. Some of the photos will also be featured in an upcoming book.

By UNAMA-SCSU

