

Stories inside include...

Interview with Somaiya Ramish:
Changing women's perceptions through film in Herat



Page 5

International Women's Day:
UNAMA
recognizes efforts of pioneer women



Page 8

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Credible elections critical for stability

Interview with the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ján Kubiš

Q. Afghanistan's presidential elections are scheduled to take place in April 2014. What needs to be done to ensure that the elections will be fair and inclusive and lead to results that would be acceptable for a majority of the population?

Ján Kubiš: First of all, we all must acknowledge and understand that these elections are Afghan-led and Afghan-managed. There is no and there will be no foreign interference, and we are taking very seriously the statements of the authorities that there will be no internal interference. We [UNAMA] have been called upon to provide support and we have also been asked to provide technical assistance. We have been asked to continue with capacity building, notably, of the Independent Election Commission and other institutions that are active in the area of elections.

No doubt, not necessarily the United Nations, but the international community will be asked to provide financial support and eventually, I assume, that ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] will be called upon to help with certain logistical and, perhaps, security support as far as the election is concerned.

What is very important for us



The UN Special Representative and head of UNAMA, Ján Kubiš. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

– as UNAMA and UNDP Elect [UN Development Programme Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow, a vehicle through which the international community supports Afghan electoral authorities to plan and conduct elections] – is to bring into the political discourse, to the attention of the authorities and institutions, including the Parliament [the Wolesi Jirga and the Mashrano Jirga], the best practices based on basic principles that should underpin any good quality election.

The people of Afghanistan would like to have better elections than previous ones. The previous one was criticized, and we, the UN, were criticized, for being part of the problem, and

not always the solution. So this time we should not be part of the problem. We should be part of the solution, while respecting the lead role of Afghanistan. We can help by bringing to the attention, for example, any proposals which may not necessarily be in line with the basic principles of independent institutions, or for having a functioning electoral adjudication mechanism for fraud mitigation and prevention measures.

We will not only provide direct expert assistance and advice. We will also speak out about principles and best practices, and we will try to influence the thinking in a positive way – this is not interference, but influence – of those that are taking decisions. This approach will help increase

trust and belief among the people so that they can see that it is worthwhile and necessary to take part in the election. Only with this broad participation in the election can you get the necessary degree of legitimacy for the new team that will come.

Q. How important is this election for the future of Afghanistan?

Ján Kubiš: It is crucial. It is the end of one stage of the development of Afghanistan, and the beginning of a new phase of the development of Afghanistan. The previous stage was very much under the influence of ongoing military operations, the engagement of ISAF and foreign military forces

Continued on page 2 >>

“The concern of Afghans for human rights is a signal that there is a need for a strong body – like the United Nations that would act as an advocate, promoter and protector of human rights.”



UNAMA's Sayed Mohammad Shah interviews Special Representative Kubiš. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

<< Continued from page 1

here. The next stage will be without this.

The political transition is crucial not only for the development, but also for the stability of the country. It is only with a smooth and transparent political transition, and with the emergence of a new leader and new team that have legitimacy and the broad support of the population, that we can enter this new building phase of Afghanistan – building on the achievements of past 11 years, but also taking into account the fact that it is Afghanistan and all of its people that have a say in their future.

This would also help in creating the fundamentals for the completion of peace and reconciliation efforts. You must have a strong and well-supported team to be able to engage with those who are currently fighting the Government. So it is extremely important for the people to feel that they are empowered through a credible election and that their voices are heard.

At the same time, it is vital to understand that this election – and the quality of this election – is extremely important for the international partners of Afghanistan. Many of them are willing to provide massive support for the country in the Transformation Decade that follows 2014. But they are not ready to support a leadership that would be elected through any sort of fraudulent process that takes away from the necessary degree of legitimacy.

Q. What role is UNAMA playing in Afghanistan's peace and reconciliation process?

Ján Kubiš: We are not starting from scratch in this respect. Peace and reconciliation is something

that UNAMA has been supporting over many years through activities like the APRP [Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program], through activities like the Afghan Peoples' Dialogue on Peace, through the activities of our 14 field offices which are engaged in dialogue with Provincial Peace Councils, with ulemas and tribal leaders.

Our message is, essentially, a message of peace. Only by building peace can we contribute to the economic and social development of the country, and address its persistent humanitarian crisis. For this to happen, a culture of peace must be promoted and this is what we are doing: enhancing our cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan, with the High Peace Council, and with other stakeholders, in their efforts to start a real dialogue of peace and, eventually and hopefully, provide support in peace negotiations, as appropriate.

We take seriously that this process should be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led and that is why we are here and offering our services – but it is dependent on the wishes of the stakeholders. I believe that

we have the capabilities that may be needed sooner rather than later, and for that, I can confirm that we are ready to deploy this potential in the service of peace and reconciliation.

Q. The new mandate calls for an enduring partnership for Afghanistan's so-called Transformation Decade. What role should UNAMA play after 2014?

Ján Kubiš: I believe that there will still be a lot of continuity, however, under different conditions and in a different environment after the departure of ISAF, with a sovereign Afghanistan in the lead of all of the country's processes.

Indeed, what we are hearing from our government interlocutors is for more of a United Nations presence although operating differently, given the new reality on the ground.

In many respects, we will not have any discontinuity, at least initially, in those first several years after 2014, because there will be certain processes that will most likely require the engagement of UNAMA's successor special political mission. For example, in re-

lation to peace and reconciliation efforts, I believe that after 2014 there will be a notable need to still provide support here. As well, I think that a successor to UNAMA would need to provide support in the area of regional processes; and a comprehensive approach would be needed towards the issues of human rights and women's rights. UNAMA can play a role here in the coordination of international players and in the better coordination of the UN family of agencies, funds and programmes.

I don't think that it is possible, in this initial period, to achieve this coordination of a comprehensive approach using the more traditional system of UN system entities 'self-coordinating' themselves. I think that the situation in the country will require strong coordination where civilian efforts are concerned and this would require a body like a re-organized UNAMA. As well, although it is a separate and sometimes independent activity, we may still have a certain role in helping facilitate humanitarian assistance.

With the success of the Transformation Decade, I assume that there will come a time when it will be possible to start talking about changing to the usual model for a UN presence, a traditional model, centred around a UNDP Resident Coordinator – but I don't think that this will happen quickly or soon after 2014. There is a need to have some sort of transition period for a certain number of years.

Q. How do you see Afghanistan's human rights situation developing after 2014?

Ján Kubiš: The protection of human rights is vital for the people of Afghanistan. We monitor and are fully aware of their concerns in this area and our response Continued on page 3>>



Ján Kubiš speaks with the Afghan Ambassador to the UN, Zahir Tanin, at the Security Council debate in March. (Photo: Rick Bajornas)

Security Council renews UNAMA mandate for another year

The United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution on 19 March 2013 renewing the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for another year.

While reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan, resolution 2096 mandated the UN special political mission – which was established in March 2002 – to undertake a range of activities as Afghanistan continues its political and security transition.

The coming years for Afghanistan are seen as key to its future. It is due to hold a presidential election on 5 April next year, marking an end to the second term of the incumbent, President Hamid Karzai.

The political transition coincides with a security transition currently underway, which is seeing the Afghan authorities take over responsibilities previously assumed by international allies. Also, in 2015, Afghanistan is due to hold elections for the Lower House of Parliament ('Wolesi Jirga').

The following are key points from resolution 2096:

Elections:

- UNAMA will support, at the request of the Afghan authorities,



The Council discusses UNAMA's mandate. (Photo: Rick Bajornas)

the organization of future Afghan elections, including the 2014 presidential and provincial council elections.

- While strengthening the sustainability, integrity and inclusiveness of the electoral process, UNAMA will provide capacity building and technical assistance to the Afghan institutions involved in the electoral process.

Peace and reconciliation:

- UNAMA will provide outreach as well as good offices to support, at the request of the Afghan Government, the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process of peace and reconciliation.

- UNAMA will propose and support confidence-building measures within the framework of the Afghan Constitution and with full respect for the implementation of measures and application of the

procedures introduced by the Security Council.

Human Rights:

- With the support of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNAMA will continue to cooperate with and build the capacity of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

- UNAMA will cooperate with the Afghan Government and relevant international and local non-governmental organizations to monitor the situation of civilians, coordinate efforts to ensure their protection, promote accountability, and assist in the full implementation of the fundamental freedoms and human rights provisions of the Afghan Constitution and international treaties to which Afghanistan is a State party, in particular those regarding the full enjoyment by women of their human rights.

Humanitarian Assistance:

- UNAMA will coordinate and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance with a view to building the capacity of the Government so it can assume the central and coordinating role in the future. This also includes providing effective support to national and local authorities in assisting and protecting internally displaced persons and to creating conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of refugees from neighbouring and other countries and internally displaced persons.

Development:

- UNAMA will promote, as a co-chair of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, more coherent support by the international community to the Afghan Government's development and governance priorities. This also includes support in mobilization of resources, coordination of international donors, and direction of the contributions of UN agencies, funds and programmes, in particular for counter-narcotics, reconstruction and development activities.

- UNAMA will also support efforts to increase the proportion of development aid delivered through the Afghan Government.

Regional Cooperation:

- UNAMA will support regional cooperation, with a view to assisting Afghanistan utilize its role at the heart of Asia to promote regional cooperation. ■

<<Continued from page 2

is that we should become even more active in this area.

The concern of Afghans for human rights is a signal that there is a need for a strong body – like the United Nations, with a proven track record in the area of human rights, women's rights, children's rights – that would act as an advocate, promoter and protector of human rights; and we will, frankly, be on the back of the authorities in case they would not deliver on this or not have the capacity to deliver on this.

We would always be partners with Afghanistan, strengthening and reinforcing the steps adopted by the institutions and authorities of the country to improve human rights. But we would also bring to their attention any deficiencies in the system, any problems or gaps, with recommendations on how to improve and then try to mobilize support from the international community to help Afghanistan to deliver better on this. So I see this area as increasingly important

part of the work of the UN family, and UNAMA in particular.

Q. What would your recommendations be to the country's civil society in terms of how it

"I admire how after these decades of catastrophes, war and other problems, Afghanistan and its people are pushing for and working towards a better future for the country."

can best work towards building a more stable Afghanistan after 2014?

Ján Kubiš: First of all, I am happy to see that there is an active and vibrant civil society here. And this is not only in urban areas; it includes Afghanistan's rural areas. It gives hope for the future.

I strongly encourage civil society groups to continue to be active, to continue to be vocal and continue to show their resilience as they work towards a better future for the country. I would add that we, the UN and the interna-

tional community, will support you as much as we can. We cannot solve your problems for you – this is your country and you have to find solutions, but we can help you in finding and achieving

those solutions.

Also, I would want to have civil society groups know that they should not be discouraged. Sometimes, it takes time to achieve certain goals. Do not be discouraged that now, in this time of change, there are many uncertainties. Things will eventually settle down and Afghanistan will continue to be a strong country. It will have its problems and its challenges, but these will be solved with the contributions of civil society. You will overcome challenges before you and we will be very happy to be partners with you in this.

Q. On a more personal note, you have been the top UN official in Afghanistan for more than a year now. What has made the biggest impression upon you so far?

Ján Kubiš: Quite simply, the resilience of the Afghan people. I admire how after these decades of catastrophes, war and other problems, Afghanistan and its people – and it does not matter which ethnicity, whether they're from the north, south, east or west – are pushing for and working towards a better future for the country. And, although at this point of time, there may be uncertainty about what exactly the situation will be like, they are still ready to invest in the future of the country and in the future of their families. This is admirable, especially as it is likely that no other people have suffered as much as the people of Afghanistan in recent, modern history. I am very grateful to have this opportunity to work with the Afghan people and play a role in supporting them on their path to peace and stability and brighter future. ■

Developing women's entrepreneurship

Progress and challenges for budding entrepreneurs at the Women's Business Centre in Herat

Twelve years ago, the future prospects for Herat resident Sadiqa Tamasuki looked bleak.

Her husband had passed away, leaving her to handle the upbringing and care of their six children on her own. Previously a full-time caretaker for her family, Mrs. Tamasuki eventually found work which brought in a small monthly salary – but it was barely enough to cover her family's expenses.

After some time, she decided to try starting up her own business, in the hope of achieving a measure of financial stability. Now, 12 years on since the death of her husband, Mrs. Tamasuki runs her own small business, her four daughters are married and her two sons are in higher education.

Asides from her own determination and self-reliance, a key factor in her successful entrepreneurship has been the Women's Business Centre, also known as Khadeja-tul-Kubra Business Centre, in Herat City, located in the province of the same name.

Mrs. Tamasuki's business consists of the manufacture of small garments and carpets. Once her employees, made up of at least three female workers, finish making the products – which include turbans, shawls and ties, as well as hand-woven rugs and carpets – Mrs. Tamasuki transfers them to a store outlet she has rented at the Women's Business Centre, where she sells them to the public.

"This market is not only a hub for women customers but it gives the businesswomen moral and courage to get into the economic activities of Herat and start their own businesses," said the Director of the Herat office of the Department of Women's Affairs (DoWA), Mahbooba Jamshidi.

DoWA established the Women's Business Centre three years ago, in cooperation with the Provincial Governor's Office, and with the financial assistance of the Provincial Reconstruction Team



A young girl making garments in Herat. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

in Herat. The overall aim of this project is to empower women economically and create business opportunities for them.

In addition to the store-fronts, the Business Centre premises also contain a females-only gym and a conference hall for the holding of gatherings related to women's issues. Currently, 34 shops are fully functional, in the basement and ground floor of the Business Centre, and all the shopkeepers are women and girls. The shop premises are the property of the Provincial Government, with the business owners paying between 2,600 and 3,000 Afghanis in rent each month.

Some of the shop-keepers are the business owners themselves while others are employees, with around 30 young women and girls currently working as saleswomen, on an average salary of 3,000 Afghanis.

But, Mrs. Jamshidi notes that

the Women's Business Centre's benefits go beyond providing employment for women within its walls, with the initiative contributing to broader employment generation.

Halima Anwari, a political science student, runs a leather product business at the Centre. Along with her husband, she also operates a small workshop at the Centre, where men and women are trained on producing leather products, including jackets, bags and shoes, among other items. After six months of training, the trainees are able to do paid work from their homes.

"Our major sales are in the neighbouring countries. We also have a shop in Tehran for our products," said Mrs. Anwari, adding that "only a few people can afford to buy our products in Afghanistan."

Mrs. Anwari's long-term hopes include establishing a factory so

that she can bring all her workers together and manufacture Afghan leather products more systematically – but her plans will depend on her financial situation.

The issue of finance is a concern for many of the entrepreneurs operating from the Women's Business Centre. Some are seeking loans so that they can expand their businesses. Low-interest micro-credit loans are a popular topic of conversation, especially as, currently, several of the business owners are servicing loans with interest rates of 20 per cent – which they described as being too high.

"We need assistance in the provision of loans without interest," said Mrs. Tamasuki. "We get credits from the bank, which is initially at 20 per cent but at the end, when we count it, the interest mounts to 35 and 40 per cent. We cannot afford this kind of credit."

Other concerns among the business owners include the location of the Women's Business Centre within the city of Herat.

"The Centre is located at an isolated place and far from the business hub of the city, which means fewer visits by customers," said Sherin Shahabi, a saleswoman who also studies at Herat University.

In addition, how the Centre is run is another major concern. DoWA's Mrs. Jamshidi said that her department has developed a comprehensive plan to improve its management and prove its commercial value in the city, as well as cater to the specific needs of women.

"The priorities and needs related to women's affairs have been integrated into this development plan, which includes services in health, education and governance sectors and raising awareness on the rights of women and capacity building of women in general," said Mrs. Jamshidi.

Recently, UNAMA's regional office in Herat provided technical assistance to the DoWA as part of the preparation of a development plan for the Centre for 2013-2014. The UN mission also organized a meeting of donors in Herat at which the Department of Women's Affairs presented that plan – that encounter led to several donors committing to the funding of different projects contained in the development plan. ■

Changing perceptions through film



Interview with Somaiya Ramish

“In a city where men don’t have a cinema to watch films, the fact that women gather to watch film is a big civil movement.”

Somaiya Ramish is the head of *Bunyad-e-Madani Naw Andeshan* (New Thinkers’ Foundation) and the director of the Shahrsta radio station in Herat, the capital city of the western Afghan province of the same name. She is well-known in the province’s literary scene, with two books published, one a book of her own poetry, *‘Barai Khudam’* (For Myself), and the other, *‘Dar Prantez’* (Within the Bracket), a collection of interviews with prominent civil society leaders in Herat.

She has also produced a short film, which won the third prize in an international film festival organized in Herat last year. The arts, particularly cinema, is something close to her heart. The institute she heads, the New Thinkers’ Foundation, has established an informal women’s cinema viewing and discussion group. Over the past year, a number of women have gathered at the Foundation’s premises every Thursday to watch and discuss films.

UNAMA recently spoke with Mrs. Ramish about her activities.

Q: What triggered the idea of a women’s cinema viewing and discussion group in Herat?

Somaiya Ramish: We are living in a city which does not have a cinema theatre, despite the fact that cinema has become a part of daily, regular life. So, we had the idea of gathering women together

to watch films – and, so far, the idea has been successful. At least 10 to 15 women and girls take part in each gathering. We watch the film together and then discuss the main ideas from the film. We get to know today’s modern cinema, its famous directors and producers and their production styles and techniques. This helps us increase our awareness on cinema and filmmaking in general.

Q: How has this initiative changed women’s perceptions towards their roles in society?

Somaiya Ramish: This is a very basic intervention and we cannot see its impact quickly. In a city where men don’t have a cinema theatre to watch films, the fact that women gather to watch film is a big civil movement. During the past year, we have watched at least 50 films and these include films that won the Oscar awards or were nominated for Oscars. We created a connection between the women of our city and those internationally famous films, which undoubtedly has had an impact on some level. But we hope to witness a more practical, visible impact in the future.

Q: What kind of films do you choose to watch in the women gathering?

Somaiya Ramish: We don’t discriminate in the selection of films. Our priority is to watch famous movies from

Afghanistan and from around the globe. If a film is produced in Afghanistan and we recognize it as a great piece of art, we will certainly screen that film. We have screened some good documentaries that have been produced in Afghanistan, or about Afghanistan, and some short Afghan films that were nominated for Oscar awards. However, most of the films we choose are on topics related to women, or its main characters were famous women, or they were directed by women.

Q: If you choose to watch an English-language film, how does the audience follow what’s being said?

Somaiya Ramish: Some of the women understand English, but we try to ensure that the films have subtitles in Farsi [Dari] so that it is easy for everyone attending to understand the dialogue.

Q: Do you think women in Herat are playing their due role in the society?

Somaiya Ramish: Despite the fact that Herat has a religious and conservative society, women have made significant progress and today we have prominent women in all walks of life, including in cultural, social, art and literature fields. Having lived under immense social restrictions, the women in Herat have not only moved ahead but also paved the way for future generation of women to play their significant

role in society.

Q: From your perspective as a writer and a poet, how important do you think is the role of women in Afghanistan’s peace process?

Somaiya Ramish: There is a notion that has been repeated again and again: that women are half of society. [Just like men] women need peace, and they can play a crucial role in the country’s peace process. They can play a direct role on the High Peace Council, and, indirectly, women can guide men at the family level: they can encourage their husbands, brothers and children to support the peace process.

Q: In your opinion, do women think differently to men?

Somaiya Ramish: Just as men and women are different physically, they also think differently. The difference in their thinking is real – but it does not mean that women’s thoughts are somehow better than men, or that men’s thoughts are somehow better than women. It is simply different. And the difference should be taken into consideration in all matters of life.

Q: What is your message to Afghan society regarding women’s empowerment?

Somaiya Ramish: My message is very simple: people should forget discrimination against women and allow men and women to live their lives equally. ■

New film focuses on child marriage issue

A new animation produced by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) will highlight the traumatic experiences of young girls forcefully entered into child marriage.

‘Teacher Malalai’s Adventures: Zarmina’s Early Marriage’ will help demonstrate the health and psychological consequences of children being married and “portray how child marriage denies the rights of a girl,” says Dr. Nigina Abaszada, a gender expert serving with the UNFPA in Kabul.

According to the latest survey by Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (AMICS) for 2010/2011, a staggering 46 per cent of Afghan girls are married before they are 18 and over 15 per cent before they even turn 15. AMICS says Afghanistan continues to have one of the world’s highest rates of child marriage. In

line with the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN recommends that the age of marriage is set at 18 years, with child marriage defined as a formal marriage or informal union before age 18.

Afghanistan’s major television outlets will soon start broadcasting the seven-minute animated film which is produced by UNFPA in cooperation with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

Given the fact that radio is the mass medium best able to reach the biggest number of Afghans a radio version of the film will also be produced for broadcast on a variety of Afghan radio stations.

The film tells the story of the young 14 year old Zarmina who is taken away from school by her father so that she can be married off. The animation portrays Zarmina’s older sister, Soniya – also married to a man while under age – giving birth to a dead baby in the hospital. A doctor tells the father that he has lost his grandchild because Soniya was much too young and physically unable to give birth. Only then does the father realize the harmful consequences of child marriage and decides to drop the idea of having Zarmina marry. The story ends when the father sends Zarmina back to school.

“Many issues related to early marriage are inter-connected and we wanted to explain this vicious circle through a simple but concise and comprehensive story of the tragic consequences of child

marriage for one family,” Dr. Abaszada said about the film.

According to AMICS which carried out its research through the Central Statistics Organisation with the support from UNICEF, early marriage in Afghanistan is strongly correlated to education, with young uneducated women being more than three times as likely to be married before the age of 18 in comparison to those with secondary or higher education. The results of the same study indicate that only over 22 per cent of Afghan women are able to read and write.

“It is important to remind everyone that early marriage denies a girl of childhood, disrupts her education, and significantly increases the risk for child delivery complications and exposure to domestic violence and abuse,” Dr. Abaszada said. ■

UNAMA’s International Women’s Day



At a 28 March 2013 ceremony in Kabul, organized to mark the International Women’s Day, UNAMA honoured 10 Afghan women pioneers in their respective fields. The colourful event also saw performances by renowned singers and an acrobatic group ‘FACE OFF’. Detailed report on page 8. (Photos: Fardin Waezi)

VOX POPULI

In the first of a new series, UNAMA poses a question to Afghans in different regions of the country. For this issue: *“What role should women play in Afghanistan’s society?”*

Bamyan

Ewaz Khan, bazaar shopkeeper

“Women should educate themselves. We should all send our girls to school – educated women educate their children, and only with education can we bring about change. Educated women know how to raise up successful children. Women should also work in government offices. We should make better use of half of our society.”



Laghman

Qalandarshah, food vendor

“Women can play a vital role in several fields of life... women should be given all their rights, such as the right to an education, the right to work and so on.”



Kunduz

Abdullah Rasuli, Mediothek Community Centre coordinator

“Humankind is like a bird, with two wings representing man and woman – a bird can’t fly with only one wing. So progress in a society is impossible without the involvement and participation of women. Afghan women have the capability but the government and the international community have to pave the way for them and support them.”



Balkh

Mubina Saeed Khairandish, founder of Rabia Balkhi radio station

“I believe that there have been many opportunities for women since the collapse of the Taliban – they can participate and have their say in key decision-making processes, and in society in general. However, there are still the problems with a lack of capacity among women caused by decades of deprivation which needs time and support to be rebuilt. But generally I am optimistic about women’s future.”



Nangarhar

Sabrina, resident, Nangarhar province

“Women should not think that they are weaker than men. The role of women starts from the family. In order to play a good role in society, women should, first of all, focus on their family – how to better raise, feed and educate their children, as children are a society’s future. In the meantime, women should participate in all social and political processes, including elections.”



Kandahar

Mohammad Rafiq Rafiqi, taxi driver

“Parents should allow girls to marry whom they want and without taking a dowry. Parents shouldn’t impose their decisions on girls as is commonly seen in our society. In some cases, girls are married at young ages, which is not correct. Moreover, we shouldn’t prevent girls from getting an education... women make up 50 per cent of society and neglecting this huge portion of our population is ignorant.”



Sultan Shah, child street worker

“My parents are old and I have five older sisters and they are not allowed to study and work so they are all at home, and I, as the only male, have to work and earn food for all of us. If they were allowed to study and work, I would be at school and my parents would be in a much better condition than they are now.”



Herat

Khail Parsa, civil society activist

“Unfortunately, during the dark era of the Taliban regime, there were attempts to systematically undermine women’s role in society, but they couldn’t succeed. The new government... has so far tried its best to support women and to encourage them to take part in economic and political activities. Now we can see that women have an active participation in education, politics and economics. I’m optimistic that it will be continued and one day, in the near future, women and men will have equal rights.”



UNAMA marks International Women's Day

Empowerment of women is a top priority for United Nations



Ten women pioneers in their respective fields were given special awards for their achievements in their fields. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

The contributions to society of a range of Afghan women pioneers and leaders were celebrated in March, at a United Nations-backed event linked to the observance of International Women's Day.

Organized by UNAMA, and in partnership with its frequent media collaborator, Channel 1, the three-hour event, held in the capital, Kabul, included the presentation of special awards, a display of artwork and musical performances.

Ten women – pioneers in their respective fields – were given special awards, while more than 40 others – chosen by their respective institutions, were recognized for their achievements in their fields.

The pioneers included Afghanistan's champion athlete, Tehmina Kohistani; Nasreen Jan, a police officer, in recognition of her deep-seated dedication to her work; Manezha Hewad, an artist from the Afghanistan Centre for Arts also known for her activism; and Saddam Jan Ameeri, a student at the Kabul Polytechnic University's Engineering Department, who came first in the university's 1389 (2010-2011) entrance examination.

Observed around the world on 8 March annually, the UN-backed International Women's Day recognizes women for their achievements without regard to divisions, whether national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic or political. This year's theme was 'A promise is a promise: time for action to end violence against women,' and sought to strengthen the international community's commitment to putting an end to violence against women.

Addressing the Kabul event, the Director of UNAMA's Strategic Communications and Spokes-

person's Unit, Massoumeh Torfeh, said that the empowerment of women and the elimination of violence against them is a top priority for the world body, and, in particular, for UNAMA.

She noted that the UN political mission's reports on the elimination of violence against women and civilian casualties caused by the conflict have had a strong impact in helping changing perceptions towards women. In regard to the latter, UNAMA's most recent report on the protection of civilians, issued in February, found that while the number of civilian casualties in the armed conflict had dropped for the first time in several years, there had also been a 20 per cent increase in the number of Afghan women and girls killed and injured in the conflict.

"UNAMA's mandate stresses the participation of women in the country's political process, particularly the ongoing peace and reconciliation process and the upcoming presidential elections," Ms. Torfeh added.

The issue of women in Afghanistan featured strongly in the resolution renewing the mandate of UNAMA, which the UN Security Council recently adopted, extending the mission for another year, until March 2014.

The resolution notes the progress made regarding

women's participation in Afghan governmental bodies and institutions and encourages their further participation in decision-making processes. In it, the Council, also reiterated the need for their "full, equal and effective" participation at all stages of the country's peace processes and urged "their involvement in the development and implementation of post-conflict strategies" in order to take into account their perspectives and needs.

In her comments, Ms. Torfeh called on Afghan women to participate in the political life of the country and choose candidates who had better policies on women. She noted that as they made up 50 per cent of the population, women had power through their votes to encourage better policies on women, adding that "this is a crucial year in determining the future of Afghanistan and you have to play your significant role in both the elections and in the peace process."

Afghanistan is due to hold a presidential election on 5 April next year, marking an end to the second term of the incumbent, President Hamid Karzai.

The presentation of awards and speeches – which included one from a parliamentarian from the Wolesi Jirga [Afghanistan's Lower House of Parliament], Shinkai Karokhail – were followed by an exhibition by women artists, with a common theme of issues and challenges

Afghan women. The art exhibition was followed by the musical part of the event, which began with the screening of a song – Entitled 'One Woman: A Song for UN Women' – produced for International Women's Day by the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and launched in March.

"'One Woman' calls for change and celebrates courage and determination by ordinary women in the daily life and the women who make extraordinary contributions to their countries and communities," the representative for UN Women in Afghanistan, Ingibjorg Gisladottir, said in introducing the song.

Following the screening, a collection of music video clips were shown, each highlighting issues of women's rights. These were followed by live performances from a selection of Afghan artists, including two special guests for the occasion, the well-known Afghan singers, Wajeha Rastgar and Shehla Zaland; Bahar; Hadiya Rastgar; Farzana Nawabi; female rap singer Sosan Feroz; rap singers Mateen and Farhad from the group 'FM'; and the 'FACE OFF' acrobatic group. ■

From the editor

This is the first edition of the 'United Nations: Afghanistan Quarterly,' which replaces our monthly newspaper 'Afghanistan and the United Nations.' As we always strive to make our contents all the more interesting and reader-friendly, our revised newspaper will have in-depth interviews of national and international decision-makers in Afghanistan and more visual contents along with researched articles on important topics. This edition is devoted mostly to issues relating to the International Women's Day celebrated by UNAMA 8-28 March. **Please write to us with your feedback: UNAfghanNews@un.org**



Female rap singer Sosan Feroz performing. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)