

Afghan wins prestigious UN environmental award

23 April 2010 - The Afghan Director-General of the National Environmental Protection Agency, Prince Mostapha Zaher, has been awarded the UN's highest award, the 2010 Champions of the Earth Award, for environmental leadership.

According to Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director, "Prince Zaher has transformed environmental policy and laid the foundation for sustainability in one of the most challenging countries on the planet at this moment in history.

He has balanced the day-to-day realities of Afghanistan with a determination that his country will have clean air and healthy water – backed by laws – upon which a sustainable and peaceful society can be built."

The Presidents of Guyana and Maldives are also among six winners from government, science, business and entertainment to be awarded this year's United Nations Champions of the Earth prize today for their leadership in environmental conservation.

Chinese actress Zhou Xun received the award for her reputation as a green lifestyle guru. Through her "tips for green living" initiative, Ms Xun encourages people to reduce their carbon print through simple changes in lifestyle.

United States venture capitalist and Sun Microsystems co-founder Vinod Khosla was recognized for his efforts as a green energy entrepreneur.

In September 2009, Mr Khosla's venture capital firm announced it had raised \$1.1 billion for a "green fund" that would be used to spur development of renewable energy and other clean technologies.

The trophies were presented at a gala event in Seoul to mark International Mother Earth Day, in conjunction with the Business for the Environment Global Summit in the capital of the Republic of Korea, which is being attended by more than 1,000 representatives from business, government, and civil society.

"The six winners represent some of the key pillars upon which society can build green growth and a development path to unite rather than divide six billion people," said Mr Steiner.

The Champions of the Earth, an international environment award established in 2004, recognizes achievements in areas of entrepreneurial vision, policy and leadership, science and innovation, inspiration and action. The year's awards had a special category for biodiversity and ecosystems management. To date, the award has recognized 34 outstanding environmental leaders.





Afghanistan, UN launches Vaccination Week, World Malaria Day

24 April 2010 - It is vital to immunize more Afghans against vaccine-preventable diseases and protect them from malaria, government and United Nations officials said 24 April during a Kabul ceremony launching two major health events.

Afghanistan's Minister of Public Health, Dr Suraya Dalil, launched both Vaccination Week, which commences 24 April, and World Malaria Day, which falls on 25 April.

Vaccination Week is being held for the first time in Afghanistan and 21 other countries within the World Health Organization's Eastern Mediterranean Region. Similar campaigns were also launched in WHO's Europe and Americas regions, bringing to more than 100 countries that are using the event to highlight the importance of vaccinating children against preventable diseases.

Some 2.1 million children in the Eastern Mediterranean Region did not receive the Diphtheria/Tetanus/Pertussis trivalent (DPT3) vaccine in 2009. Vaccine preventable diseases kill one quarter of children who die before their fifth birthday. Measles, influenza, polio and other diseases pose major health threats to unvaccinated children.

In Afghanistan, great strides have been made to expand immunization for vaccine-preventable diseases, including polio, but challenges still remain. "Every year in Afghanistan, an estimated 180,000 infants miss their routine vaccination. Some of those not immunized belong to hard-to-reach groups living in insecure areas lacking regular access to health services," said Peter Graaff, WHO's representative to Afghanistan, during the Kabul ceremony.

"Others are not immunized due to little awareness of the importance of immunization. Measles outbreaks keep occurring in some areas, while the wild polio virus is circulating in Southern parts of the country."

Dr Eric Laroche, WHO's Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises, said the inability to reach many of these children who live in southern Afghanistan is a major barrier for the country's efforts to eradicate polio and immunize Afghans against other preventable diseases.

"Access to communities affected by violence or distance is a major obstacle for our work to vaccinate children," said during the Kabul launch. "But we have seen that reaching out to all people, encouraging them to put the health of their children first, can be something that all sides can agree on." Afghanistan's disease control achievements include:

- Stopping the circulation of polio in many districts
- Establishing a robust Disease Early Warning System that rivals - and even betters - those in many countries around the world
- Increasing pentavalent vaccine coverage from 69% in 2006 to 83% in 2009.
- Expanding measles coverage from 64% in 2006 to 76% in 2009.
- More than 2700 vaccinators are providing immunization services through fixed, outreach and mobile activities all over the country.
- Immunization services have been expanded with the introduction of about 200 health sub-centers and mobile health teams.

Vaccination Week is a partnership between WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund that aims to do more to ensure children and all people are vaccinated against measles, diphtheria, influenza, polio and other vaccine-preventable diseases.

In particular, it stresses the need for all members of the Afghan community to be aware of the merits of immunization and to allow vaccination campaigns to take place. "Every day millions of children are born around the world, including thousands in Afghanistan," said UNICEF's representative for Afghanistan, Catherine Mbengue. "All need protection from vaccine preventable diseases and communicable diseases like malaria."

"The Ministry of Public Health is working very hard and leading our work so we can reach all the children in the country with vaccination services, however to be able to reach them we need the support of the communities so they can recognize the value of protecting their children's lives," said Ms Mbengue.

World Malaria Day is launched globally on 25 April with theme of "Counting Malaria Out." Malaria remains a major cause of morbidity and mortality and is a significant public health issue worldwide, Afghanistan being no exception with approximately 400,000 cases reported last year.

"Individuals cannot fight this battle alone. We depend on the active involvement of everyone who is committed to protecting the health of Afghans," Mr Graaff said.

"This is the strength behind the Health Ministry's Malaria Control program, which is leading a multi-sectoral effort towards making Afghanistan's northern provinces free of malaria over the next 5 years."

Journalists inaugurate press club in Kandahar

25 April 2010 - Journalists in Kandahar achieved a major milestone last week when they inaugurated the first ever press club in the south of the country.

The Kandahar Press Club, which will be funded by journalists themselves, will offer an opportunity for the media in the south to tackle the prevailing obstacles and challenges being faced in the course of their duties. The press club will organise training workshops, hold press conferences, and will serve as a media centre for all media activities in the region.

The inauguration ceremony was attended by Kandahar Governor Toryali Wesa, the head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Engineer Abdul Qadar 'Noorzai', correspondents across the southern region, the special representative of the Canadian Government for Kandahar, teachers, and representatives from the Government and civil society.

Speaking at the function, Mr Wesa said his "government is committed to freedom of expression", adding that a "free press is an essential ingredient for any democracy." Fazal Rehman, head of the press club, who also works for Ashna Radio (VOA), said that the centre will provide the media community with a place to meet, solve problems and serve as a forum to exchange ideas and experiences. Mr Rahman added that the miseries, problems and regional issues of the people will also be reflected - on a larger scale - through the media centre.

Currently, journalists in the region are confronted with various challenges, including increased security risks and intimidation, unfavourable working environment, and lack of information and support from local authorities in the aftermath of security incidents. Three journalists, working with the BBC, Canadian TV and Ariana TV, lost their lives in the line of duties and several others have sustained injuries while covering events in the region. Some journalists, however, have been criticized for lacking journalistic standards and for working toward their individual causes.

The Governor, without naming anyone, deplored some media for deliberately targeting personalities, saying that correspondents should display neutrality and professionalism. Mr Wesa also called upon all media to broadcast issues related to development, besides just reporting security incidents. Various human rights groups also welcomed the formation of the press club.

The head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Engineer Abdul Qadar 'Noorzai' said a free media is vital for the implementation of the rule of law. "I hope that the press club, alongside other civil society organizations, will endeavour to protect human rights", said Mr Noorzai.

By Mujeeb Rahman, UNAMA



Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the United Nations Secretary-General

26 April 2010 - The Secretary-General has received the final report of the Board of Inquiry (BOI) into the 28 October 2009 terrorist attack on the Bakhtar guest house in Kabul where 34 UN staff were residing.

The four-member BOI, set up in December 2009 was led by Andrew Hughes, a former senior Australian Federal Police Official and former UN Police Advisor. It began its work in February 2010 and traveled to Kabul the same month. Its report was submitted to the Under-Secretary-General for the Department of Field Support, on 21 April 2010. The relevant findings of the report have been shared with the Afghan authorities and other relevant stakeholders have also been informed.

The report details the tragic incident in which three Afghan security personnel and five UN staff members lost their lives and several others were injured. The United Nations mourns the loss of these brave individuals who died in the service of peace.

The report describes the confused situation at the Bakhtar guest house with the attackers and responding security personnel both dressed in Afghan police uniforms and a fire raging through the compound. The report suggests the possibility that a UN staff member, Close Protection Officer Louis Maxwell, may have been killed by Afghan security forces who may have mistaken him for an insurgent. Mr Maxwell died protecting his UN colleagues, many of whom are alive today because of his heroic actions. The report was not able to determine who fired the shots that killed the three other United Nations staff members though it leaves open the possibility that they also may have been killed by friendly fire. The report highlights a number of shortcomings in the UN security measures as well as with respect to coordination between the UN and both its international partners and the host government authorities.

In light of the seriousness of the matter, the Secretary-General has instructed that the Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security, Gregory Starr, review the security findings highlighted in the report. He will lead a team to Kabul next week, to discuss next steps and follow up with the Afghan authorities. The Secretary-General has also instructed Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Alain Le Roy, and Special Representative Staffan de Mistura, to contact relevant NATO officials in Brussels and Kabul for further consultations on how best to ensure improved coordination in the event of future emergencies of this nature.

The Secretary-General reiterates the UN's commitment to transparency and the strengthening of security for its personnel serving in dangerous locations. He calls on the Afghan authorities to ensure a thorough investigation into the attack on the guesthouse and the killing of UN staff. He pledges the UN's continued dedicated work to assist the Afghan Government and the Afghan people to move the peace process forward in Afghanistan.

WHO calls for intensified response to Afghan health challenges

26 April 2010 - At a press conference in Kabul today, Dr Eric Laroche, Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises, World Health Organization (WHO) and Peter Graaff, WHO Country Representative also said more needs to be done to reduce infant and maternal mortality, and in areas of emergency planning and access.

The World Health Organization's Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises, Dr Eric Laroche, is calling today for an intensified response to Afghanistan's humanitarian health challenges.

Dr Laroche, the former UNICEF representative to Afghanistan during 2001 and 2002, says millions of Afghans are vulnerable to a wide range of acute and complex emergencies, including natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, and conflict, particularly in parts of the country's south.

"Much has been achieved in recent years to expand health care in many parts of the country, but we still see today that many Afghans remain extremely vulnerable to a wide range of humanitarian emergencies, and more needs to be done to protect them," Dr Laroche says.

This includes making more doctors, nurses, midwives and health facilities available in more parts of the country, particularly remote districts and villages in areas such as Badakshan and the Central Highlands. Insecurity in southern parts of Afghanistan has severely restricted access to health services for hundreds of thousands of people in Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces in particular.

"WHO wants to help all people who are committed to alleviating humanitarian suffering in Afghanistan," Dr Laroche says. "This can be done by better preparing for emergencies, increasing access to communities isolated by harsh terrain, natural disasters and conflict, and expanding the coverage of health services in the country."

WHO co-chairs the Health Cluster-grouping of international and local humanitarian bodies with the Ministry of Public Health. The Health Cluster, including partner NGOs, is providing emergency health services for 500,000 people throughout Afghanistan. WHO also works closely with Afghan authorities at all levels in many health fields, including disease surveillance and control of vaccine preventable diseases, TB and malaria, and health system development including training health workers and providing technical guidance on health issues.

While in Afghanistan, Dr Laroche has met with senior government officials, including the Second Vice President and the Minister of Public Health.

He visited the capital of Samangan province, part of which was struck by a recent earthquake, for talks with local authorities on the response to the emergency and to offer support. Dr Laroche is also meeting with members of the international and national humanitarian community active in Afghanistan.

