



## 2.8 million children to be reached in Afghan polio immunization drive

**14 February 2010 - Some 2.8 million children under five years old in southern, south-eastern, western and eastern Afghanistan will be targeted by a new three-day polio eradication drive to be launched today.**

The immunization campaign has kicked-off jointly with the representatives of the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Ministry of Public Health. It is part of an ongoing effort to eradicate polio in Afghanistan – one of just four countries in the world still affected by the crippling disease.

More than 15,000 health workers have travelled from house to house in 14 provinces – Farah, Uruzgan, Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Nimroz, Kunar, Nuristan, Laghman, Nangarhar, Paktika, Khost, Paktia and Ghazni.

As many families are unable to access health facilities in the rural parts of Afghanistan, this mobile approach is essential in ensuring that every child in the target group is reached. A total of 3.5 million doses of bivalent oral polio vaccine are required

Six rounds of national immunization days (NID) or house-to-house vaccination campaigns targeting almost 7.5 million children, have taken place during 2009. Four rounds of sub-national campaigns (SNID) were conducted for southern, south-eastern, western and eastern regions to stop and prevent the virus from spreading to other parts of the country. Four rounds of NID and four rounds of SNID are planned this year.

Circulation of wild polio virus continues, though limited to few districts. Some 31 cases have been reported in 2008 and 38 cases during 2009. Due to an ever-deteriorating security situation and the related environment of fear, access of vaccination teams to children living in conflict-affected areas is limited. Vaccination coverage is persistently low in these zones, as an average of 100,000 children cannot be reached by either vaccination campaigns or routine immunization efforts. Lack of community awareness and participation, limited female service providers, inadequate health infrastructure and population movement from polio-free areas to polio-endemic areas and vice-versa further enhance the before-mentioned factors.

With 38 cases of polio reported in 2009, the Ministry of Public Health and its partners and major donors for the eradication of polio are redoubling efforts to ensure that every child under the age of five receives polio vaccine.

Peace is necessary to access all children and vaccinate them against polio. It takes just a few seconds to immunize a child – but the results last for a lifetime. Unless polio is eradicated in Afghanistan, the virus will continue to disable children, placing even greater strains upon families. Peace and polio constitute a vital cycle for the future of Afghanistan.

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## Respect humanitarian personnel and humanitarian aid – UN and humanitarian community

**14 February 2010 - The United Nations and the humanitarian community call for respect of humanitarian personnel and humanitarian aid as increasing numbers of displaced people arrive in Lashkar Gah.**

The consequence of Operation Mushtarak in Helmand province has been a movement of civilians from Marja and Nad Ali districts into the provincial capital city of Lashkar Gah. The humanitarian community has been mobilised to provide assistance to the displaced families. There are an estimated 900 families registered with local authorities and verification of this figure is ongoing.

The United Nations as well as national and international NGOs have increased emergency capacity in the conflict area to provide non-food items, shelter and food supplies to the displaced population and so far has distributed more than 750 food and non-food item kits.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is facilitating dialogue with the military on issues relevant to the humanitarian response. “We are calling on combatants to respect the neutrality of the humanitarian community and humanitarian aid,” said Robert Watkins, the Humanitarian Coordinator. “The affected population must be assured of unobstructed access to basic services,” he said.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of displaced civilians and there are fears that civilians will remain trapped in the conflict area. UN agencies, particularly UNICEF, UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP), have increased their capacity to deal with an influx of people into Lashkar Gah. Today there are 6,000 non-food kits already in place. In addition, health emergency kits, emergency school kits as well as water and sanitation equipment are also on standby and in a position to be mobilised quickly.

“Of utmost concern for us is that robust measures are taken to avoid civilian casualties,” the Humanitarian Coordinator, Watkins said. “I would like to take this opportunity to call on all parties not to involve or use the civilian population, humanitarian actors, or humanitarian aid for any military purposes.”

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## DoWA and UNAMA want increased women participation in civil service

*15 February 2010 - Provincial authorities, community elders and women in Dai Kundi province met recently to discuss how to promote women participation in the civil service.*

The two-day workshop was held by the Department of Women's Affairs (DoWA) in Dai Kundi to provide space for detailed discussion between government authorities, religious scholars, community elders and women to talk on possible ways to encourage more women involvement in government departments.

Dai Kundi is a newly established and remote province in central Afghanistan. According to DoWA figures, the province has only 15 per cent female employees in eight district offices and 32 provincial departments with only few women in management positions.

However, Afghanistan's first female mayor was appointed in Dai Kundi province. "Women participation in the civil service is important for good governance," said Sultan Ali Uruzgani, governor of Dai Kundi province.

The Governor assured participants that his administration will do its best to employ more women in the departments.

"I will not allow any discrimination for women in the employment process and the workplace," he said.

Hawa Rezayee, head of the Women Affairs Department, told UNAMA that it was the first such meeting in the province which raised firm commitments from both the provincial authorities and community elders to encourage women participation in the civil administration.

"The problems women employees face in the workplace (are) not limited to Dai Kundi. It is a country-wide issue (and) we are happy to have organized this meeting and (to) raise this issue. We will do an extensive follow-up of this matter," added Ms Rezayee.

The workshop, which had over 70 participants, included community elders from the provincial capital and remote districts. Sohrab Etimadi, head of the Provincial Council, was among them.

"When we understand that women are half of our society, we need to find means to involve them in all affairs of life," said Mr Etimadi.

UNAMA provided funding for the workshop as part of the mission's ongoing outreach efforts.

"This initiative was timely as there have been increasing reports over the last year of violations against women. It was also intended to mobilise resources further to speed up the process and to expand opportunities for women's education and employment by taking advantage of the overall climate of gender tolerance in Dai Kundi," said Heran Song, head of the UNAMA office in Bamyan.

Afghanistan's first woman mayor, Azra Jaffari, was also among the participants. She stressed that "women should not be recruited as symbol of gender balance only."

"They should be employed for their skills and their employment should have a good effect in the organization. It's also up to women to perform well and show that women can do a good job with same wage," added Ms Jaffari.

Religious scholars were also invited to the meeting to throw light on the issue from an Islamic perspective.

"Islam allows women to get out of their houses and work shoulder to shoulder with men to help build society," said Fazili, head of the Religious Scholar's Council in Dai Kundi.

By Jafar Rahim, UNAMA.

## Strengthening Afghan customs management

*18 January 2010 - Enhancing transparency and efficiency of customs facilitation dramatically increases Afghan trade volumes and revenue collection.*

Every day, trucks coming from Pakistan through the border cities of Torkham or Spin Boldak stop outside the big, shiny customs and revenue headquarter in Kabul to receive final custom clearance from the Kabul customs facility next door of the goods they bring into Afghanistan.

The long line of colorful trucks, decorated with beautiful, traditional Pakistani patterns, is a sign of the increasing trade between Afghanistan and its neighbors. While the new customs and revenue headquarter on Jalalabad Road in Kabul is a sign of the improved border and customs management of the Afghan Government.

Six years back, these trucks could wait up to 7 hours for their turn. Today, they can be back on the road in less than two hours.

Since 2003, UNOPS, UNCTAD and UNIDO have been working with the Afghan Customs Department (ACD) under the Ministry of Finance on a customs modernization and trade facilitation project to improve the capacity of the ACD to effectively manage custom clearance processes and revenue collection.

The project, which is financed through interest-free credit and grants by the International Development Association (IDA), has been such a success that based on the Government of Afghanistan's request, IDA is considering financing a follow on project to ensure that the reform process within the Customs Department continues.

From 2003 to 2009, the major focus of the project has been on establishing a more efficient and transparent customs system; improving the revenue collecting capacity of the ACD and other agencies; decreasing the obstacles and costs related to customs clearance through improvements in infrastructure, communications and administration systems; and facilitating Afghanistan's international trade.

After years of conflict, Afghanistan's customs and border management infrastructure and capacity have suffered severe setbacks. Today, a large group of bilateral and multilateral donors are involved in strengthening the capacity of the Government to effectively manage its borders.

This joint effort has resulted in:

- reducing customs clearance time for trucks from 428 minutes to around 90 minutes
  - increasing trade volumes by 300% from USD 2 billion to USD 8 billion, according to World Bank estimates
  - enhancing customs revenue collection almost 700% from USD 50 million to nearly USD 400 million
  - and strengthening the capacity of the ACD to deliver better and more transparent services through the implementation of electronic customs processing systems and training
- For the many truck drivers and their companies which daily export and import goods to and from Afghanistan this has translated into more reliable services from the Afghan Government and decreased costs of doing business.

For the Afghan people it brings hope of re-establishing the position of Afghanistan as a main trading point along the historic Silk Route connecting the East with the West and improving trading relations with its neighbors.



## UN and NGOs provide assistance to flood victims in west Afghanistan

**15 February 2010 - The recent torrential flooding in the western region resulted in the death of at least 14 people and destroyed many residential facilities.**

In a joint effort, the United Nations provided food and non-food assistance to hundreds of vulnerable families affected by flood.

Local officials claim that the largest part of damage covered Pur Chaman district of Farah province where it is believed that six children and six women lost their lives.

Abdul Hamid Mobarez, western region director for Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA), said that during the recent flooding in the West, many houses were destroyed and more than 2,000 live stocks were perished.

Mr Mobarez added that the assistance provided by United Nations and Afghan National Army (ANA) in the form of tents, heaters, blankets, food, and other essential materials, will reduce the intensity of the disaster and affected families will be able to return to their normal lives.

UN agencies such as WFP, UNICEF and UN-OCHA, and NGOs like HELP and ICRC, have played pivotal roles in recent days. Because delivering food items and non-food items to the insecure district of Pur Chaman was difficult, ANA helicopters delivered the assistance to the affected families in the area.

The United Nations managed to distribute humanitarian assistance in several districts of Herat province where rain and snowfall have also destroyed over 50 houses, affecting over 50 families.

By Fraidoon Poya, UNAMA

## Religious scholars say national reconciliation should be Afghan-led

**12 February 2010 - As the issue of national reconciliation and reintegration is gaining momentum both in Afghanistan and abroad, leading religious scholars in eastern Afghanistan have stressed that the process should be led by Afghans, not by foreigners.**

The scholars from Nangarhar province, called "Ulemas," also told a meeting called by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in Jalalabad on Thursday that the Government of Afghanistan should come clean on its reconciliation and reintegration efforts.

"The lead role on the national reconciliation and reintegration (NRR) should be given to Islamic people of Afghanistan," said Mufti Moin Shah from Spinghar district.

Mr Shah also urged the international actors in the country to respect "Islamic values."

As part of its ongoing engagement with religious scholars and elders on major issues of national importance, UNAMA's Eastern Regional Office had called the meeting with the Ulemas in order to enhance consensus on the reconciliation and reintegration process as well as to discuss the role of the scholars on this.

Altogether, 10 Ulemas participated in the meeting.

Speaking during the occasion, Maulavi Abdul Subur from Jalalabad asked the Government to send a strong and unequivocal message to the insurgents that it is "honest" on national reconciliation.

"Reconciliation and big military operations can't go together," said Mr Subur, adding that the Government and the international military need to do "a lot" to create a conducive environment for NRR.

Echoing similar views, another Ulema member, Maulavi Nooristan from Ghanikhail, said the Government should convince the insurgents that it is serious about reconciliation.

They said they are ready to assist any reconciliation efforts that are "genuine" and pledged to cooperate with UNAMA to this end.

Ismail Balla, a UNAMA political officer, told the scholars that the political mission is trying to build consensus on the issue of NRR.

"We will soon be seeking assistance of all grassroots organizations and civil society organizations to actively participate in this process," said Mr Balla.

By Tilak Pokharel, UNAMA



## Former mujahideen trade in weapons for bees!

*14 February 2010 - Barely an hour away from the bustle of Kabul and the miasma of Afghan politics, change is taking place, albeit slowly, in Qarabagh, the second largest district of Kabul province.*

At a time when political reconciliation with anti-government forces as a feasible solution to the problem of insecurity and war has become a buzz phrase among government officials, diplomats and ubiquitous media pundits, a small group of former mujahideen are leading by example and are being integrated into society.

These 50 men have laid down their weapons, for good they say, and have decided instead to embrace the sweeter alternative of peace, literally, through a vocational training pilot programme in beekeeping that will equip them with enough skills and resources to produce honey and earn a livelihood.

"This is a three-month project on beekeeping that costs about US\$ 50,000. After giving the students theoretical and practical training, we will then provide each of them with four boxes of bees as well as the tools required to extract honey from the bees," says Wahid Ummah Amani from the UNDP-supported Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme (ANBP), which is jointly conducting six other livelihood projects under the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Group (DIAG) plan, along with the Afghan government.

Today in the final days of this project, every chair is filled in a cramped mud hut that serves its purpose as a classroom. A chalk board hangs haphazardly from an otherwise bare wall, primers on beekeeping are stacked on a small stool, and a sea of winter boots line the wooden doorway giving company to the snow that has fallen overnight.

Sitting in the front row among other barefooted pupils, Abdul Hadi intently watches a volunteer brush bees off a frame. Hadi, 40 – who looks older, partly due to his greying beard and deep, tired eyes – relinquished his weapons a year ago and decided to start a new life.

"I was sick of war and fighting. I wanted to do something different," he says in Dari. "My family is very happy about this new project—it will earn me some money. Some people in my village, too, want to learn from me when I become an expert."

In the rough-and-tumble days of the 1990s, Hadi was a mujahideen commander who led 10 fighters in the civil war that ensued long after the Soviets left Afghanistan.

Now, the lugubrious battlefield has been replaced by a modest classroom; his family has taken primacy over the fighters he commanded; and the grit and the ferocity that once allowed him to negotiate the hostile terrain and the extreme conditions of the Hindu Kush and survive the country's bloodiest battles has left him frayed and sober.

Shah Mahmoud, the project trainer, also noticed a change in attitude among his students. "They are excited. They have been coming here from different villages and attending classes regularly. Some attend classes even if they're sick," he exclaims with pride, as his students listen on.

Mahmoud estimates within six months the newly-trained apiarists will be able to collect 150 kilos of honey and earn anything between US\$ 1,500 to US\$ 3,000 in the local market or through a yet-to-be set up cooperative society that will purchase surplus produce.

"Will you be happy with your new jobs?" he asks the class.

"Yes!" they collectively scream back—from the youngest, a 14-year-old boy to the oldest student in his late 40s.

For some, however, this DIAG programme has come as an urgent blessing. Noor ul Haq, another former mujahideen who took up arms during the Rabbani regime, wounded his leg and chest in a fierce gun battle and decided to enrol in this programme after remaining unemployed for many years.

"This is the only way I can support my family of 10. I'm injured. Who will give me work?" he asks grimly.

Here, in Qarabagh, away from the politics of Kabul, change is taking place slowly. Some have renewed hope, but everybody has a story.

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA

