

Delay to Afghan polls will ensure better preparations, UN envoy says

24 January 2010 - The top United Nations official in Afghanistan has welcomed today's decision to postpone the country's parliamentary elections by four months, saying it will give election authorities more time to prepare for the polls.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) announced in Kabul that it was delaying the parliamentary polls until 18 September, citing Article 55 of Afghanistan's electoral law, which allows the IEC to delay elections on security, financial or technical concerns. The polls were supposed to have been held by May.

Kai Eide, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and the head of the UN political mission in the country (known as UNAMA), issued a statement saying that the postponement will allow extra time to prepare for staging the polls.

"This would have been extremely difficult to do by the original date," Mr Eide said.

"It also provides time to make improvements to the electoral process based on lessons learned during the presidential and Provincial Council elections in 2009."

Election authorities found evidence of fraud during the first round of presidential polls last year.

This Thursday in London, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown will co-host an international conference on the way forward for Afghanistan.

New press club in Kandahar inaugurated

26 January 2010 - Afghan journalists in Kandahar have established the region's first ever press club.

The main purpose behind the formation of the club is to offer a place for journalists in Kandahar and in the south of Afghanistan from where they can work from, organize training workshops and carry out other media activities.

Work has been ongoing for the last two years to get the club off the ground and this week journalist associations came together to elect the club's officials. Some 70 media correspondents cast their votes at the club's elections. Representatives from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Kandahar's provincial council and the head of the Information and Culture Department acted as observers during the process.

"The press club is a positive initiative and will provide an opportunity for the local people, government officials and other organizations to get easy access to the media. On the other hand, it will bring unity amongst the media correspondents and resolve the prevailing problems faced by them in the region," said Engineer Noorzai, the head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in Kandahar.

The formation of the press club comes at a time when the local authorities in Kandahar are in the process of establishing a Government Media and Information Centre at the governor's offices.

By Mujeeb Rahman, UNAMA

Mine Action successes in Afghanistan in 2009

26 January 2010 - The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan has published details of mine action in the country last year.

Statistics from 2009 show that 280 communities across Afghanistan were declared impact free between January to December 2009.

51,743 anti-personnel mines, 1,152,738 explosive remnants of war and 746 anti-tank mines were destroyed last year.

430,989 women and girls and 655,018 men and boys received mine risk education courses across Afghanistan.

Mine Action efforts in Afghanistan have been active from 1988 and since then more than 12,000 hazardous areas have been cleared throughout the country.

Dr Haider Reza, Programme Director of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA) said: "The implementers of mine action have shown great perseverance in the face of the many challenges to their work and they should be proud of these results. With their work, they have served their fellow Afghans by reducing the deaths and injuries caused by mines and other explosive remnants of war and supported the rebuilding of their country."

Mine Action in Afghanistan has a number of benchmarks to be met.

Under the 2006 Afghanistan Compact signed in London land area contaminated by mines and explosive remnants of war must be reduced by 70 per cent by March 2011.

In October 2007 all known stockpiled anti-personnel landmines in Afghanistan were destroyed as stipulated by the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty and the Afghanistan Compact.

Ottawa also requires Afghanistan to clear all emplaced anti-personnel mines by 2013 as well as provision for mine risk education and assistance to mine survivors.

MACCA continues to work with the Government of Afghanistan to ensure increasing national leadership on Mine Action.

Significant progress made by the Government in the area of mine survivors over the last year includes the passing by Parliament of a National Disability Law and ongoing discussions around the UN's Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

MACCA says these are positive actions by the Government that will help promote the inclusion of landmine survivors and all persons with disabilities in social, economic and educational opportunities.

Figures from the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan for 2009 show 481 people were killed or injured in incidents related to mines or explosive remnants of war.

322 males were injured and 93 killed and 51 females were injured and 15 killed.

By Dominic Medley, UNAMA





UNODC to international community: Support Afghanistan's High Office for Oversight & Anti-Corruption

21 January 2010 - The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime today called on the international community to support the Government of Afghanistan's High Office for Oversight and Anti-Corruption as it praised the office for enjoying the trust of the Afghan people.

In a press conference held at the Kabul headquarters of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Jean Luc Lemahieu, country representative for UNODC, made the call in the presence of Oversight Office's Deputy Director-General Qaseem Ludin.

"The international community and the Government should support the High Office, ensuring that it has the powers, resources, and independence that it needs to fulfil its challenging and crucially important responsibilities," stressed Mr Lemahieu, pointing out that "Afghanistan needs a strong and independent and adequately resourced institution capable of leading the fight against corruption."

The UNODC country director for Afghanistan said that the High Office for Oversight "enjoys public trust" as the UNODC survey participants "said that after tribal or religious leaders, the body they would be most likely to report corruption to would be the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption."

Mr Lemahieu stressed that the UNODC report is "not another accusatory finger pointing towards the Government" but "the start of a recovery process with a correct diagnosis of the situation... allowing targeted evidence-based policy which is to be agreed upon at the London Conference."

He said the London Conference on Afghanistan on 28 January "is an opportunity for the Government and the international community to come together to renew their commitment to partnering for a better future for Afghanistan."

"Corruption will be a critical topic of discussion at this conference, and this report will inform that discussion and assist the Government and international community in setting tough but realistic strategies and benchmarks that will lead to real progress in the fight against corruption," he added.

Mr Lemahieu noted that the Afghan Government had "already designed a framework for its anti-corruption efforts, and UNODC and the rest of the international community have committed their full support to this crucial effort."

The Government of Afghanistan presented its anti-corruption strategy during yesterday's 13th meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) co-chaired by UNAMA chief Kai Eide.

"The purpose of this study is not to embarrass the Government or harm the image of Afghanistan. The international community also has responsibility for the prevalence of corruption in Afghanistan, and corruption occurs in every country in the world," said Mr Lemahieu.

He stressed: "The purpose of this report is to provide detailed and practical information to the Government of Afghanistan and the international community which they can use as they take on their shared responsibility to reduce the corruption documented by this study."

UNODC presented the findings of its pilot survey on corruption where it interviewed 7,600 people in 12 provincial capitals and more than 1,600 villages around Afghanistan.

The extrapolated data revealed that corruption "occurred more often in rural areas than in urban areas" and that "bribery was more prevalent in the South and North than in the East and West of the country."

The survey also found that "men were more likely than women to have paid bribes" which are "usually explicitly demanded and paid in cash."

Customs officers were found to be the "recipients of the most costly bribes, on average"; while "officials requesting bribes the highest proportion of the time" are customs officers, prosecutors, police officers and judges.

"Police were the recipients of the greatest number of bribes, followed by municipal/provincial officers, then judges and prosecutors," said Mr Lemahieu who added that "people also reported being forced to bribe doctors, nurses and teachers."

"The cost of an average bribe was US \$158, a huge amount of money in a country this poor, where the per capita income is only US\$ 425 per year," said the UNODC official who further revealed that over the past 12 months, "US\$ 2.5 billion in bribes were paid, equalling 23 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP."

"This is similar to revenue accrued by the opium trade in 2009 (estimated by UNODC at US\$ 2.8 billion). This means that the amount of money changing hands through corruption and through the narcotics trade together is equal to half of the country's licit GDP (gross domestic product) – a shocking figure," lamented Mr Lemahieu.

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA





Agricultural projects boosting employment in Afghanistan

25 January 2010 - Conservation in Afghanistan is moving forward as a major UN-supported project has produced millions of saplings and provided work for thousands of people.

Since 2003 until the end of 2009, 3.5 million fruit saplings have been produced by the Afghanistan Conservation Corps and 400,000 labour days created in some of the least-developed parts of Afghanistan.

The conservation corps has also implemented more than 350 sub-projects in 24 provinces and produced 3,200 hectares of pistachio forests.

In Afghanistan, natural resources are critical for people's livelihoods, particularly for those who live in rural areas, perhaps some 80 per cent of the population.

The Afghanistan Conservation Corps was set up in 2003 by the Government of Afghanistan and funded by the Government of the United States of America and managed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

The corps aims to work with Government and local communities to conserve Afghanistan's biodiversity whilst improving rural livelihoods and building capacity to restore and manage forests, rangeland and sustainable watersheds.

Vulnerable local residents, such as returning refugees, internally displaced persons, widows and ex-combatants, have been offered work opportunities to re-integrate into society.

Many of the projects are identified and implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, the National Environment Protection Agency and other government ministries.

Selected households are provided with the means to establish home nurseries with tools, saplings, and training.

In addition to the nursery efforts, pistachio forest management is another important component of the corps' work.

Afghan nuts are renowned across the world for their intense flavour and dark green colour and pistachios were once a major export product of the region.

Whilst in 1977, pistachio woodlands covered 55 and 37 per cent of the land in Badghis and Takhar provinces, respectively, the pistachio forest has now largely disappeared.

By working in two of the last remaining stands of natural pistachio forests in the world, the provinces of Samangan and Takhar, the conservation corps and partners hope to generate employment for poverty-stricken, rural, semi-nomadic Uzbek, Hazara, Pashtun and Tajik communities whilst providing the national and international communities with high-quality pistachio nuts.

On average, areas with pistachio reforestation have experienced a 20 per cent increase in incomes.

By Kangying Guo, UNAMA

Provincial Council members stress reaching out to rural population

23 January 2010 - Outgoing and newly elected members of Provincial Councils in the east of Afghanistan have stressed that their councils should reach out to the rural population to address their problems.

During introductory workshops for the newly elected council members, hosted by the eastern regional office of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan in Mihtarlam in Laghman Province and Jalalabad in Nangarhar Province, council members – past and present – also vowed to maintain good relations with the international community, including the United Nations. "People have a lot of expectations from the provincial council," said Fazal Hadi Muslimyar, former chairperson of Nangarhar's Provincial Council. Mr Muslimyar also advised the newly elected council members to organize field missions on a regular basis and talk to the people.

Eighteen out of 19 members of the Nangarhar Provincial Council, including all four female members, showed up in the UNAMA-called meeting. Ibrarullah Murad, a member of the new Nangarhar council said: "Our main goal should be the solution of problems our constituencies are facing and the promises we made (in the run up to the election) should be implemented." Mr Murad said the council should ensure its coordination with the international community through UNAMA. While welcoming the Nangarhar council members, Nahid Abuakar, the head of UNAMA eastern region, expressed her belief that council members will be able to overcome their private, political and tribal differences and work with unity. Nfas Gul, one of the four women members of the Nangarhar council said members should visit rural areas to identify women's problems there, besides maintaining "very close relation" with women rights activists.

If local conditions don't allow them to visit certain areas, added another female member, Nilofar Azizi, "we should reach out to the people through media and the Mullahs." UNAMA's Ms Abuakar expressed her belief that the council will be able to represent all the people of Nangarhar province, "those who voted for you and who didn't, all the geographies and districts, including the districts which lack representation."

In the run up to the August Presidential and Provincial Council elections, UNAMA helped the outgoing council prepare a handover note to incoming members, in which they had advised them to engage more with the media and stay united.

By Tilak Pokharel and Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA