



Supermarket attacked in Kabul

28 January 2011 - An attack today at a popular city centre supermarket killed a number of civilians, including reportedly a child.

Afghan police continue to investigate the attack, which occurred around 2.30 in the afternoon, during the end of week holiday, and precise numbers of people killed and injured is not yet clear.

UNAMA director of communications, Kieran Dwyer, spoke to media and condemned the attack, saying that it followed "a number of attacks on Afghan civilians across the country in the first weeks of the year."

These attacks have occurred in districts in both the south and north of the country, resulting in multiple deaths of civilians, including children.

"There can be no credible claim that this or other attacks involve legitimate targets, when these attacks indiscriminately kill and injure civilians," Dwyer told media.

UNAMA's 2010 annual report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan will be released next month.

By UNAMA

continue "to act within their clearly defined areas of competence, in accordance with the relevant laws and the Afghan Constitution."

In a broad ranging speech at the inauguration, President Karzai spoke of the need for Afghans to increasingly take the lead in all aspects of governance and development of their country.

De Mistura highlighted this point, saying that "transition" will be the key word in Afghanistan in 2011 as Afghans increasingly manage all aspects of security and governance.

President Karzai also emphasized that the parliamentarians must represent all Afghans, and not simply focus on individual provinces or communities, in a call for national unity.

Meanwhile, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the inauguration and acknowledged the statesmanship of President Karzai.

In a statement attributable to his Spokesperson, the Secretary-General said the inauguration marks the end of the electoral process and "the beginning of a period in which Afghan governing institutions must work together to solve the pressing problems that the country faces."

For full texts of the statements, including Dari and Pashto translations, please visit the [UNAMA website/press statements](#).

By UNAMA

Afghanistan's Parliament convenes

26 January 2011 - Afghanistan's Lower House of Parliament, the Wolesi Jirga, convened today as its 249 members were sworn in by President Hamid Karzai. This is the country's second Parliament to be inaugurated since 2001. There are 69 women members of the assembly.

"Today is a historical day for Afghanistan and for all the countries wishing and working with Afghanistan for its future," Staffan de Mistura, the Special-Representative of the UN Secretary-General, told journalists following the ceremony.

The inauguration comes four months after the 18 September elections organized by Afghanistan's Independent Elections Commission (IEC) with oversight by the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided technical and logistical support for the polls.

Over 5 million ballots were cast in the parliamentary elections, with voters braving threats and a very tense security situation.

The IEC detected widespread irregularities and instances of fraud, and ultimately disqualified around 1.2 million ballots.

Tensions rose in the past week with more than 200 losing candidates sitting-in the presidential palace and holding rolling demonstrations to protest President Karzai's decision to open the legislature before a special tribunal had reviewed all allegations of voting irregularities.

A political compromise led to today's inauguration, while the courts will continue to investigate allegations of criminal fraud.

Speaking to the media today, Special Representative de Mistura emphasized the significance of the Parliament being able to start its work, including approving the State budget, while "justice can continue to take its course."

This echoed the 22 December statement of UN Security Council, where members specified that Afghan institutions should



Photo courtesy of IRIN

Visit of SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict

UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict Radhika Coomaraswamy will visit Afghanistan on Sunday, 30 January, for the signing of an agreement with the Government of Afghanistan to stop the use and recruitment of children in the Afghan National Security Forces.

Coverage of the signing and highlights from the visit will be posted on the UNAMA website.

<http://unama.unmissions.org/>



Fears over child recruitment, abuse by pro-government militias

22 January 2011 - Pro-government militias in parts of Afghanistan are believed to be recruiting underage boys and sometimes sexually abusing them in an environment of criminal impunity, local people and human rights organizations say.

In a bid to counter the intensifying insurgency, the Afghan government and US/NATO forces have been setting up controversial community-based militias, such as the Afghan Local Police, in insecure provinces. To date, thousands of men have been recruited to such bodies in Kunduz, Baghlan and Kandahar provinces, says the Interior Ministry.

“The militias and commanders are hiring young, underage boys in their ranks for different illicit purposes,” said Haji Abdul Rahim, a tribal elder in the southern province of Kandahar.

Another elderly man, Khan Mohammad, accused pro-government militias of kidnapping teenage boys primarily for sexual exploitation.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) also said it had received reports of child recruitment by pro-government militias in some provinces.

“We’re seriously concerned about this,” said Hussein Nasrat, a child rights officer at AIHRC, adding that his organization was investigating the issue.

“The use and abuse of children by local armed groups is very worrying because they [pro-government militias] fall beyond the formal, legal and disciplinary structures within which the police and army operate,” he said.

The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said it had not received “confirmed information” on the issue, but that it was concerned about the “association of children with such forces” due to their community-based status.

NGOs have demanded that the government and US/NATO forces stop using local militias and instead devote greater resources to developing a more professional and accountable police and army.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, meanwhile, has said the proliferation of armed actors impedes and threatens humanitarian work in Afghanistan.

“Internally displaced and isolated children in conflict-areas are particularly at risk...”

Child soldiers

– Radhika Coomaraswamy

Children are recruited and used for military purposes by the Afghan national police, as well as the following anti-government groups: Haqqani network, Hezb-i-Islamic, Taliban, Tora Bora Front and the Jamat Sunat al-Dawa Salafia, the UN Secretary-General said in a report in April 2010.

Internally displaced and isolated children in conflict-affected areas are particularly at risk of recruitment by non-state armed groups, Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, said in a February 2010 country mission report.

“The recruitment and use of children by both [anti-government] armed groups and national security forces was documented throughout the country by the UN Country Task Force on children in armed conflict between 2008 and 2010,” UNICEF’s country office told IRIN.

In addition to recruiting children as foot soldiers, the Taliban and other insurgent groups are accused of using children as suicide bombers, and forcing them to plant improvised explosives.

“Armed opposition groups continue to perpetrate grave violations against children in the context of the armed conflict,” said UNICEF, adding that the fragmentation of armed opposition groups was jeopardizing dialogue with them on the issue of child soldiers.

Poverty and unemployment are believed to be pushing children into joining armed groups. Extremely low levels of birth registration and weak identity documents are also contributing to the problem, UNICEF said.

Sexual abuse

War-related sexual violence is another issue which needs tackling, human rights organizations say.

Children, particularly boys, are sexually abused by different armed groups and 'baccha baazi' (meaning "boy play", a paedophilic practice) has been reported among armed forces across the country.

Despite assurances by the government that child sexual abuse will be tackled and perpetrators punished, little has been done thus far, according to AIHRC.

"This is most probably due to the social stigma attached to the issue as well as the inability of the government to fully control armed group leaders who may be perpetrating such acts," Coomaraswamy said in her report.

As a result, cases of the sexual abuse and exploitation of children have rarely been tackled due to impunity and the weak rule of law, AIHRC said.

Children are also killed, wounded, detained, displaced and denied access to essential health and education services by the warring parties, human rights organizations say.

In the first half of 2010, 176 children were killed and 389 wounded in the conflict - up 55 percent on the same period in 2009, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported.

Backed by the UN and other international actors, the Afghan government says it is committed to tackling all the problems which adversely affect children in the context of war. However, human rights bodies such as AIHRC accuse the government of promising much but delivering little.

Courtesy of IRIN

Government's media centre spotlights press freedom on second anniversary

23 January 2011 - The Afghan Government Media Information Centre (GMIC) celebrated its two year anniversary last week with a pledge to continue involving Afghan youth in its work and discussions about press freedom and access to information.

The GMIC is a "bridge between the Government, media and the people," Hakim Asher, the Executive Director of GMIC told UNAMA News at the 18 January event in Kabul.

Cabinet ministers mingled with members of the diplomatic corps, and international and local journalists, including staff from the state-sponsored Bakhtar News Agency, Radio Kabul and Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA) with which UNAMA has a production and broadcasting partnership.

The GMIC was established as a joint effort between the Government of Afghanistan and key international stakeholders to coordinate media-related activities and provide one channel through which information from the Government could be shared with journalists and the general public.

In his opening remarks, Asher noted the key role that the first GMIC Executive Director, Wahid Omar, had in establishing the GMIC, calling him a "catalyst for everything achieved so far."

In the year ahead, Asher said that the GMIC plans to sharpen the abilities of government press officers through media training classes, and strengthen the GMIC's regional presence outside of its centres in Kabul and Kandahar.

The third priority is to continue working with Afghan youth - half of the population is under 18 years of age - by strengthening the GMIC's internship programme for senior Afghan students and recent graduates.

Out of the 80 people working at the GMIC, most are at the start of their careers with the youngest just 20 years old.

The team was lauded by US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, who said he was "struck by the dynamism, confidence, and dedication of the Afghan staff of professionals."

The United States is the main donor to the GMIC, with additional support from the United Kingdom, Canada and the Netherlands.

Among the night's other speakers, BBC Pashto Kabul editor Dawood Azami urged the Government to pay "as much attention to Afghan media as international media" while cautioning journalists to work harder to achieve balance in their coverage.

There are roughly 36 television stations, 95 radios and 800 print media throughout Afghanistan, according to the latest information provided by the GMIC. Many are privately owned by foreign and NGO sponsors.

The media boom of the past decade has brought with it new challenges for the Government, and raised questions about media ethics and censorship.

In his speech, Minister of Information and Culture Sayed Makhdoom Raheen called on authorities to investigate the case of Radio Kapisa director Hojatullah Mojadeddi, who has been detained for the past three months in eastern Afghanistan, so that "we can decide whether to love him or hate him."

Mojadeddi was released from detention the following day. It is not clear if the Minister's speech and the release are related.

Reporters Without Borders called Afghanistan one of the most dangerous places to work in journalism, ranking the country 147 out of 175 in its Press Freedom Index.

There have been at least 85 cases of violence against journalists since March 2009, according to Media Watch, a locally produced newsletter cited by Freedom House.

The same day as the anniversary event, an unknown assailant sprayed acid in the face of a journalist and author Razaq Mamoon in what news reports said was retaliation for politically charged writing.

The Human Rights Unit of UNAMA systematically monitors the situation of press freedom in Afghanistan.

The monitoring is done in the context of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966 - of which Afghanistan has been a member since 1946. The Covenant is part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

By UNAMA

