

UNAMA Deputy Special Representative (Political) takes up his post

6 April 2010 - German diplomat Martin Kobler, the newly appointed Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (Political) of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), arrived in Kabul today to take up his post.

Mr Kobler will be responsible for political issues in UNAMA, including electoral and parliamentary matters.

"I am really happy to serve with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan at this particular time. UNAMA is here to serve the people of Afghanistan and I commit to ensuring that all the work we do is in line with the priorities of the Government of Afghanistan. We are here to support and assist the Afghan Government and the Afghan people," said Mr Kobler.

As UNAMA's Deputy Special Representative (Political), Mr Kobler will also be responsible for matters relating to peace and stability, and security-sector reforms.

Mr Kobler was posted as Germany's Ambassador to Egypt from 2003 to 2005, and Ambassador to Iraq from 2005 to 2007. He was serving as Director-General for Culture and Communication in Germany's Ministry of Foreign Affairs when he was appointed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in early March to become one of UNAMA's two Deputy Special Representatives.

He has more than 25 years of service in his country's Foreign Ministry, and vast experience in developing policies in conflict areas. In 1974, he established the German Representative Office with the Palestinian Authority in Jericho, staying on as Office Head for three years. Then he moved to the position of Deputy Head of the Balkan Task Force of the German Foreign Ministry from 1997 to 1998.

From 1998 to 2000, he was Deputy Chief of Cabinet to then German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, before being elevated to Chief of Cabinet to Minister Fischer from 2000 to 2003. The German ambassador – who holds an advanced law degree and speaks German, English, French, Indonesian and Arabic – has also served with UN missions in Haiti, Nicaragua and Cambodia.

Born in Stuttgart in 1953, Mr Kobler is married and has three children.



Martin Kobler (Right)



Staffan de Mistura (Left)

UN top envoy Staffan de Mistura observes Mine Action Day with Deminers

3 April 2010 - Dozens of deminers wearing crisp blue uniforms and face-protecting helmets lined up to greet the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, ambassadors and donors today at a compound devoted to mine awareness and filled with the detritus of war.

"Today all over the world, particularly the countries with mines, there is special celebration, but also a special commitment," said Mr de Mistura, honouring the fifth anniversary of International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action (4 April). "I am delighted to be with the donors who are helping the Afghans to continue to confront what is one of the biggest problems Afghanistan has had for more than 30 years."

More than 10,000 deminers and associated staff work in Afghanistan, many for implementing partners of the UN-supported implementing partners of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA). Mr de Mistura, who was himself involved with clearing areas of mines for the return of Afghan refugees when he worked here 22 years ago, noted that since then, more than 15,000 minefields and battlefields, have been cleared, and millions of Afghans have received mine risk education throughout the country.

"Afghanistan can be proud of being on the side of example, rather than the problem. Afghanistan needs this feeling these days in particular, not only on demining, but in many other fields. They must feel this pride that helps us to go forward," he added.

De Mistura joined Dr Abdul Martin Adrak, general director of the Afghanistan Natural Disaster Management Authority, United States Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and Canadian Ambassador William Crosbie in saluting deminers and other mine action staff at a ceremony held at the compound of the Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR). Featuring retired helicopters and fighter jets converted to classrooms, a museum of various weapons used throughout conflicts in the region and a workshop where staff disabled by mines produce demining tools, OMAR functions as a theme park for mine awareness, education, prevention and rehabilitation, on the outskirts of Kabul.

Five demining implementing partners were represented at the event: Afghanistan Technical Consultants, Mine Clearance and Planning Agency, HALO Trust, the Demining Agency for Afghanistan and OMAR.

These organizations have removed hundreds of thousands of landmines and millions of other explosive remnants of war, helping some 1,370 Afghan communities to be declared mine-free.

Currently, about 40 Afghans a month are injured or killed by mines, about one quarter the number for 2002.



Staffan de Mistura (Left), Mohammad Noor Atta (Right)

UN Special Representative visits Mazar

6 April 2010 - The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, visited Mazar-i-Sharif today where he promised the continuation of United Nations assistance.

Mr de Mistura first went to the famous Blue Mosque in Mazar where he was hosted by religious officials and visited the Mosque's museum.

He then proceeded to the UNAMA offices in the city where he held meetings with staff and was briefed on UN activities in the north of Afghanistan.

Mr de Mistura met with Mohammad Noor Atta, the Governor of Balkh province before having a working lunch with the Governor and a press briefing with journalists.

"We are impressed by your achievements, and we would like to make them an example," said Mr de Mistura.

"The United Nations has been here for many years, and will continue to support the Afghan people even when things will go better. We will make sure that the Northern Region will receive substantive aid, even if the security situation is far better than in other parts of the country," he added.

During the meeting with UN staff the Special Representative encouraged all UN units to get closer to the local communities, to be present everywhere across the region and to continue to improve all programmes and activities.

"We have a strong office here. We will make it stronger," he concluded.

UNAMA has provincial offices in Sar-i-Pul and Faryab, with a new office in Jawzjan to be opened in the near future.

Mr de Mistura arrived in Afghanistan as the UN's top envoy on 13 March and last week he visited the UN's Gardez operations in the east of Afghanistan.

By Alexandre Brecher-Dolivet, UNAMA

Mine Action Day in Afghanistan

4 April 2010 - Across Afghanistan the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action has been marked today with a number of events and activities.

In Kabul five young artists painted their vision of the dangers posed by landmines and other Explosive Remnants of War on the walls of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA).

Further west near Herat, to mark the clearance of 4.8 square kilometres of mine fields and 5.3 square kilometres of battle areas in 2009, one of the major mine clearance organizations in the world, the Halo Trust, briefed guests in the Alaqa Qazi area of the Khosan district on the border with Iran.

The Halo Trust started working in Afghanistan 1988 and has been in Herat since 2007; the Trust currently employs a task force of around 500 staff in Herat province.

According to MACCA a total of 51,743 anti-personnel mines, 1,152,738 Explosive Remnants of War and 746 anti-tank mines were destroyed in 2009 in Afghanistan.

Last week MACCA reported that in January and February this year, the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, which comprises a number of implementing partners coordinated by MACCA, cleared 1,727 anti-personnel mines, 135 anti-tank mines and more than 110,000 different types of Explosive Remnants of War in 19 communities.

Yesterday in Kabul at Afghanistan's main event to mark Mine Action Day, the recently arrived Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan Staffan de Mistura, recalled his time in the country in the late 1980s when he was given an emergency whistle as present by a deminer.

"This whistle used to belong to an Afghan deminer. When we were moving...we entered into a mined area. And this Afghan deminer used this whistle to stop the team to going any further. Later he gave this to me and I have carried it ever since. I am very glad to bring it back to Afghanistan," said Mr de Mistura.

MACCA estimates an area of around 600 square kilometres still needs to be cleared of mines and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW).

At a rate of 120 kilometres annually, that would take up to six years at a cost of US\$ 500 million.

MACCA says for 2010-11 US\$ 242 million in funding is needed of which about US\$ 100 million is confirmed.

By Kangying Guo, Fraidoon Poya and Henri Burgard, UNAMA



Being "urban poor" is more difficult than being "rural poor"

7 April 2010 - People tend to come to cities in the hope for a better future, but not everyone in the city finds a better future, Peter Graaff, Country Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Afghanistan, told a reporter after observing World Health Day at Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital in Kabul today.

"In many ways, being the urban poor is a more difficult life than being the rural poor," Mr Graaff said. "On the other hand, in the city, people gather together very closely. So the interventions can have a big impact."

World Health Day is marked on 7 April each year. The theme for this year focused on urbanization and its effect on health.

To mark World Health Day, policy makers, communities and individuals from six cities of Afghanistan (Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif) are taking part in the global "1000 cities -- 1000 lives" campaign.

Activities include town hall meetings with mayors, cleaning campaigns, planting trees, taking family walks and promoting social solidarity by encouraging citizens to visit neighbours, orphanages, and patients in hospitals.

In Kandahar, representatives of the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), WHO and hospitals distributed gifts to doctors and nurses to reward their good performance.

In Kabul, during a ceremony held by MoPH and WHO, Kabul Mayor M.Younus Nowandish outlined the plan for 2010: "We plan to introduce Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) instead of diesel and petrol for vehicles in the capital in order to reduce the air pollution and provide a healthy environment here."

"We plan to plant another 200,000 trees on the hilltops outside the city next year," he said. "We also plan to establish some recycling factories and ban using plastic bags in the city."

However, a big problem remains: "Kabul has nearly 5 million people, and every day 2000 metric tonnes of rubbish are produced, but we have only the capacity of transferring 1600 metric tonnes out of the city," he added.

Catherine Mbengue, UNICEF Country Director for Afghanistan, agreed that this was the biggest health challenge that urban Afghans face: "People are coming to the city, but services are not available. Sanitation and clean water are among the biggest challenges, and the consequence is disease, particularly for the children and women."

A joint statement has been signed between Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), WHO and UNICEF which aims to improve health care and empower urban communities across the country.

The three bodies are committed to support inter-sectoral cooperation, proper planning and maintenance to keep drinking water safe. They also provide technical support to the MoPH, as well as advocacy, policy dialogue and promotion of public awareness on urban health issues and the concept of healthy cities.

World Health Day was first established by WHO in 1948 as a day to draw worldwide attention to a particular theme of major importance to global health.

Worldwide the year-long "1000 cities -- 1000 lives" campaign includes initiatives on public consultation and debate, city cleaning and greening exercises, public health messages, free medical check-ups, sports and other physical and school activities.

By Kangying Guo, UNAMA



Peter Graaff (Left), Dr. Suraya Dalil (Middle), Cathrine Mbengue (Right)
One day celebration, one year campaign

7 April 2010 - Afghanistan joins World Health Day today with efforts being stepped up to address urban health issues and keep safe drinking water and underground water free from contamination.

This year health-related events and activities will take place in six cities (Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif) as people and organizations join the World Health Organization's campaign "1000 cities -- 1000 lives".

Worldwide the year-long campaign includes initiatives on public consultation and debate, city cleaning and greening exercises, public health messages, free medical check-ups, sports and other physical activities, school activities and more.

The World Health Organization in Afghanistan set its priorities for 2010 at the beginning of this year to include a number of key areas:

The Disease Early Warning System, a communicable disease surveillance system with laboratory support, will be expanded;

WHO will continue its assistance to improve immunization coverage against six vaccine preventable diseases;

Training will be conducted for 500 surveillance focal points and the capacity of the Central Public Health Laboratory at the Afghan Public Health Institute will be further enhanced;

WHO will assist in developing a comprehensive multi-year plan for 2011-2015;

And polio eradication will remain a top priority for 2010, particularly in the Southern part of the country.

In addition planned activities will be held across the country, such as town hall meetings with mayors, cleaning campaigns, tree plantings, family walks and promoting social solidarity by encouraging citizens to visit neighbours, orphanages, patients in hospitals.

Today in Kabul the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Public Health are holding a celebration at the Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital to mark World Health Day.

During the ceremony the Ministry of Public Health, WHO and the UN Children's Fund UNICEF will sign a joint statement which aims to improve health care and empower urban communities across the country.

World Health Day was first established by WHO in 1948 as a day to draw worldwide attention to a theme of major importance to global health each year.

By Kangying Guo, UNAMA



Belinda Bowling (Middle)

UN's work for Afghanistan's environment honoured

4 April 2010 - The United Nations Environment Programme in Afghanistan has been honoured with one of the country's highest awards.

President Hamid Karzai has awarded the Order of Malalai to UNEP's Country Director Belinda Bowling, who has worked in Afghanistan for more than six years.

At a ceremony today Afghanistan's Vice-President Karim Khalili, presented the medal to Ms Bowling on behalf of the President.

"I am greatly honoured and humbled by the award of this medal, which I accept with immense gratitude on behalf of the dedicated, hard-working and passionate UNEP Afghanistan team," said Ms Bowling.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has had a country-level presence in Afghanistan since 2003.

During this time, UNEP has worked closely with the Government – especially the National Environmental Protection Agency and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock – to develop environmental and natural resource management capacity at the national, provincial and community levels.

Prince Mostapha Zaher, Head of the National Environmental Protection Agency said: "This is one of the highest Orders that a civilian can obtain for services rendered to the country by a Presidential Decree. You deserve nothing less than the Order of Malalai. Malalai was a legend in her own time. She is respected to this day as a courageous, visionary, humble yet tough, and above all, a pious Lady with great leadership and inspirational qualities. I believe that you have all of those qualities."

"With minimal human and financial resources, the UNEP team has achieved in seven years much more than many ever thought possible" said Ms Bowling.

"The close and collaborative relationship with our Government partners has been a key factor in this success. After six and half years working here, hauntingly beautiful Afghanistan and its wonderfully kind, hospitable and generous people will always have a special place in my heart. This is not the end of my service to Afghanistan; it is merely the end of the beginning," she added.

UNEP and its Government partners are acutely aware that the vast majority of the Afghan population, particularly in rural areas, is entirely dependent on an increasingly degraded natural resource base to survive and meet its basic livelihood needs.

Improved management of natural resources is a necessary precursor not only to poverty-reduction, development and longer-term prosperity; but also for peace, given that so many local level disputes are triggered by conflict over access to natural resources.

By Dominic Medley, UNAMA

Nowruz tree plantation drive starts in Bamyan

7 April 2010 - In the historical province of Bamyan, the provincial Government, UN agencies, local communities and youth groups have joined together to plant trees during the Afghan New Year plantation drive.

Up to 450,000 young saplings will be planted this year according to plans by Bamyan's Agriculture Department.

"I ask all the residents of Bamyan to plant at least two saplings and contribute to the greening campaign," said Dr Habiab Sarabi, Governor of Bamyan province.

According to Bamyan's Agriculture Department 150,000 fruitful and decorative saplings will be distributed to farmers throughout the province.

"The young trees will be given for free but on the condition that in return the farmers plant two more saplings in their villages and look after the young saplings," said Mr Taher Atayee, Head of the Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock department in Bamyan.

Nowruz, which marks the Afghan New Year and is being celebrated since 21 March, also marks the start of spring and the time for tree plantation in Afghanistan.

This year the Government of Afghanistan has launched the initiative "one tree for me and one tree for Afghanistan" campaign to encourage Afghanistan's population to take part in the New Year plantation drive.

In Bamyan youth groups have mobilized university and school students to volunteer for this campaign.

"Today two hundred students have joined us to plant six thousands trees around the city," said Mohammad Ali, a student at Bamyan University.

"Planting trees is important for our lives as one tree provides oxygen for 18 persons and without oxygen we cannot live," added Mohammad.

Mohammad Ali believes tree plantation is not only important for environment protection but the fruitful trees can help farmers in their agriculture income.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has planned to plant another 70,000 young trees in the new city area and in the communities in the provincial capital.

"The most important thing after plantation is taking care of the young saplings, this year we will educate and work with the communities to look after young trees," said Andrew Scanlon of UNEP.

By Jaffar Rahim, UNAMA





Islam and the Environment

7 April 2010 - The First Scientific Seminar on Environmental Concepts in Islam was held today at the Kabul University.

The well-attended seminar at the university auditorium was a joint effort of Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) and the Faculty of Theology of Kabul University, in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The seminar was opened by speakers from all the three organizing agencies and the Ministry of Higher Education.

Some 250 participants from various ministries and university students attended the seminar where religious scholars and leaders were invited to discuss the environmental concepts in Islam.

A documentary on Afghanistan's environmental situation was also produced by NEPA and shown to the participants.

The topics discussed in the day-long seminar include the responsibility of every Muslim person in Islam regarding environmental conservation; environmental ethics in Islam; cleanliness in Islam and its role in environmental preservation; religious commands in narcotics and the negative impact of narcotics on the environment; and general environment rules in Islam.

Among the seminar speakers were Al-haj Muhammad Gran, Head of the Faculty of Theology of Kabul University; Engineer Najibullah Yamin, Deputy Director-General of NEPA; Mr Sarwar Danesh, Officer-in-Charge of the Ministry of Higher Education; and Abdul Wali Modaqiq, Officer-in-Charge of UNEP in Afghanistan.

The speakers all called for sustainable development where Afghanistan's environment should be conserved for the effective use not only of the present generation but also of all generations of Afghans to come.

UNEP has been working closely with the Government – especially the National Environmental Protection Agency and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock – to develop environmental and natural resource management capacity at the national, provincial and community levels.

By Aurora Verceles Alambra, UNAMA



Spring arrives and Afghan poetry blossoms

1 April 2010 - The traditional annual "Narinj Gul" or Orange Blossom Festival has been marked in Jalalabad today.

More than ten thousand people joined the event which has celebrated Afghan poetry and writing for more than 60 years.

Local and Kabul officials, representatives from UNAMA, writers, intellectuals and poets from around Afghanistan, as well as Pashtoon poets from across the border in Pakistan from the newly named Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa, the former North West Frontier Province, joined the event.

The tradition of this annual cultural event is for renowned writers and poets to recite poems, reflecting various aspects of Afghan society.

"Every year, as spring arrives, Narinj Gul, attracts thousands of people from across the country as well as from Lower Pakhtoonkhwa – that side of the southern Afghan border and abroad," said Awrang Sameem, the Director of Culture and Information for Nangarhar province and one of organizers of the festival.

About forty poets from different from Afghanistan and Pakistan recited their poetry at the festival.

In their poems, many of the poets were critical of today's social ills particularly focusing on the youth and their responsibilities while some criticized administrative corruption, inefficient development efforts, lack of incompetent Government officials, civilian casualties and other issues.

By Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA





A life in the field: A deminer's story

5 April 2010 - **"For a deminer, the first mistake is also the last one. There is no second chance." So says Haji Aziz, from the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA) as he stares into the sky.**

He's been a deminer for fifteen years, that's experience no one can easily forget. "My story as a deminer began in 1992, during the first days of the civil war in Afghanistan. I was living in Kabul, at that time, and, in one of those battles that ravaged the city, our house was burnt. I had to escape to my homeland, in Jajai Aryab, a district of Paktya province, near the Pakistani border," he said, diving into his memories.

Jobless, at that time, he followed the advice of his uncle who told him to leave for Peshawar, in Pakistan, where he attended computer courses, as well as English classes. He finally learnt English, but his mind was attracted by something else other than computers, more important and more dangerous as well. At the time Afghan Technical Consultants, a demining NGO based in Peshawar was launching "Operation Salaam", a vast demining campaign in Afghanistan.

After decades of wars and invasions, the situation was critical and hundreds of thousands of mines were killing civilians every day. "I asked one of my relatives to introduce me to this NGO," said Haji Aziz. "Then things moved extremely fast. After a 25-days training, I was sent to Kabul, on my first demining operation."

In Kabul in 1993 the civil war had almost completely destroyed the city. In the smoking ruins of the ancient capital of the Afghan kings, fights, assassinations, torture and mass murders were the reality of the darkest hours of Afghanistan. Into this extremely difficult context Haji Aziz started his first appointment in Zindan in Kabul province. "The first day, I was not feeling really comfortable," he said. "Hopefully, I was still a beginner, and all the beginners had to start working with a more experienced deminer, as a partner."

"After 17 days of work, I heard my first blast, in the minefield. It was a Russian mine and a colleague had been seriously injured," he added.

After each accident the deminers usually rest for one day as a chance for reflection and recovery but for Haji Aziz such days became days of doubt. "I was very afraid, but I had to continue. The area we were clearing was the only footpath between two villages. So, after one day, we went back into the field."

A few days later, Haji Aziz found his first mine, which had been made in Russia. Carefully, he started excavating it and then he discovered that other mines were also planted in the same area, all in a row. When he controlled the explosion of the first one, two more mines exploded. During the same day, he discovered 20 mines of the same type. And so Haji Aziz became a deminer.

Later in 1995 Aziz was sent to the east of Afghanistan close to Jalalabad. Once again, his mission was critical: clearing the area of Sheikh Misri, in order to create a safe place for Afghan returnees coming home from Pakistan. "This is when I get seriously injured," he said. "I was excavating a mine, in a pent, and at one point the mine went out from its hole and rolled towards a ditch. Instinctively, I jumped on the ground, and the mine exploded. I was hurt in various parts of my body."

Finally, Haji Aziz was rescued by a colleague working nearby. "I was very lucky," he said. "Others didn't have my luck."

One year later in Gardez two demining teams were working close to each other with Haji Aziz a part of the operation. "I was a part of the second team. We were busy and concentrating on our work when we heard a huge explosion. We knew the first team was hit by a mine. We lost a colleague that day. He was also a friend."

At this point of his story, Aziz stopped talking for a while. Sometimes, silence has more significance than useless words. "After this incident, I decided to resign," he confessed. "I went back to my homeland, to see my father. After a while my father asked me for some money to buy flour. I realized that I couldn't afford it. I had to go back to work."

This time, Aziz was sent to Kandahar, one of the most intense experiences of his life. It was 1997 when the southern city was the stronghold of the new Taliban regime. "This is also when I experienced the best moment of my deminer's life. I was called in emergency on a location near to the airport. A child, seriously injured, was trapped in a minefield," he said. "When I arrived there, first of all I saw nothing. Everything was dusty, full of smoke. I started shouting, and then I saw a young face emerging from the dust. It was the kid."

With infinite precautions, Aziz walked towards the child. The situation was worse than expected. His leg was cut, and he was bleeding a lot. He provided him with first aid and tried as much as he could to stop the bleeding and then evacuated the child, on his shoulder. Finally, thanks to his efforts, the child survived. "Yes, it was the best moment," he added, with a smile.

For years, Aziz continued to perform his duties, with courage and determination. He saved two other children in minefields, cleared thousands of square metres of contaminated areas, and provided hope to hundreds of people living nearby, mainly farmers, who were allowed to restart their farming activities, after the demining operations.

He finally retired from the field in 2003. He was promoted team leader, then site supervisor and finally "associate operation officer" for MACCA in the North of the country. Now he has a clear vision about the future of demining in Afghanistan. "By 2011, almost 70 per cent of the contaminated areas should be free of mines. This is a big achievement, the progresses we've realized since 20 years are huge," he said. "But we still have 40 civilians per month who die, due to landmines and other explosive devices. This is too much. The effort must continue."

Ending his story on this conclusion, Haji Aziz is once again staring into space. Looking towards the place he belongs to: the fields to which he has dedicated his life to clearing of mines.