

Afghan police patrolling drug route undergo passport, visa and human rights training with UN support



26 August 2010 - Afghan police stationed on the country's border with Tajikistan - part of a trade route used to smuggle drugs, people and goods - have completed training to spot fake passports and visas, while also learning about migrants' rights and developing literacy, computer and driving skills at sessions organized by Afghan officials with support from the United Nations.

"Government control extends to the borders. This training helps the police take better control of the borders and improves the Government's abilities to govern," said Vesna Stojanovic, Project Manager of the Takhar Border Management Project under the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

The training, held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan from 4 to 8 August, was organized as part of the Afghanistan Cross-Border Cooperation Project under an agreement with the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Finance Customs Department and the Ministry of Commerce.

The training was organized by UNOPS in coordination with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Tajikistan.

For the seven participating police from the border towns of Aikhanum and Shir Khan Bandar in the Takhar province of Afghanistan this was the first opportunity to visit Tajikistan - the country they look out at every day.

During the training, the participants saw samples of passports and visas from Central Asian countries, as well as 150 types of passports and visas from around the world. They learned which types of visas were valid and for how long, as well as other paperwork that could be used in lieu of passports, such as refugee travel document or Government-issued letters.

Trainees also learned how to spot a potential smuggler and were instructed in practical applications of international conventions and laws, as well as national laws, for example that Afghan and Tajik women under 21 years of age cannot travel through the border without an accompanying male figure.

Participants also received training in the rights of migrants, "such as the right to work, the right to benefit from social services such as health and education, and the right to complain if they are mistreated," said Mohammed Rahim Nazari, Deputy Project Manager of the Takhar Border Management Project.

He added that this was particularly important given that the police can legally detain a suspicious person at the border.

The training also aimed to stem counter-trafficking. While exact figures are unknown, large amounts of goods are smuggled out through the 1,200 km porous Afghan border to avoid tax payments.

In addition, about 1,230 metric tons of opiates - heroin and opium - are smuggled annually through Tajikistan and its neighbours to Europe and China, much through the Pyanj River that separates the countries, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The UNOPS training programme is based on a curriculum agreed to with the Government of Afghanistan.

"There is a centralized approach planned. This particular training will be phased out in August of 2011. You can think of our programme as preparation for the Academy," said Stojanovic, referring to the Border Police Academy which expanded its capacity in May of this year.

In addition to training, UNOPS is in the process of procuring equipment for the border police, such as drug detection equipment, a radio communication tower, motor bikes and binoculars.

To complement the border duty training, the UN office has organized a series of training sessions to improve their literacy, computer knowledge and driving abilities.

Nearly 40 police gathered daily following morning or afternoon prayers in a mosque they had built on the border to improve their reading and writing skills.

Another 20 learned how to type and use a computer; while five people received training in traffic regulations in Kabul.

"These are remote areas. There are not a lot of opportunities for education or training," said Stojanovic.

The heads of border police in Aikhanum and Shir Khan have requested an extension of the literacy, computer and driving courses.

Arrangements are also being made with UNODC to have a basic drugs training and with the German Police Project to provide police training for the officers.

"There is so much that needs to be done," said Stojanovic.

By UNAMA





Afghanistan celebrates *Jeshn* or Independence Day

19 August 2010 - Afghan nationals are marking 91 years of independence today.

Low-key celebrations are planned throughout the country as the holiday comes amid the holy month of Ramadan.

The date commemorates the Treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919 following the end of the third Anglo-Afghan War.

This year's Independence Day comes two months after the Kabul Conference, where the Government presented an Afghan-led agenda to improve development, governance and security, including priority programmes to enhance service delivery.

By UNAMA

UN urges renewed support for relief workers on World Humanitarian Day

19 August 2010 (UN News Centre) - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon marked World Humanitarian Day today by leading a chorus of United Nations officials in lauding aid workers – including some who have paid with their lives – for their tireless efforts to help those who have lived through wars, catastrophes and other terrible events.

The world body is observing the second-ever Day at its many offices and peacekeeping missions, also spotlighting the needs of the people that aid workers try to help – such as the 10 million refugees and the nearly 30 million others uprooted within their own borders, as well as the one in every six people in the world who are chronically hungry.

“On World Humanitarian Day, we renew our commitment to life-saving relief efforts – and remember those who died while serving this noble cause,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a message.

Last year, 102 humanitarian workers lost their lives, compared with 30 deaths among aid workers in 1999. In addition, nearly 280 aid workers were victims of security incidents, more than quadruple the number one decade ago.

The General Assembly proclaimed 19 August as World Humanitarian Day two years ago to commemorate the 2003 Canal Hotel bombing in Baghdad, which claimed the lives of 22 UN staff members, including the world body's top envoy in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and wounded more than 150 people.

Mr. Ban laid a wreath at UN Headquarters in New York this morning in remembrance of the world body's personnel killed seven years ago.

He also pointed out that those who survive horrifying ordeals are often left with nothing. “Humanitarian workers help them get back on their feet. They help restart their lives,” the Secretary-General said at today's ceremony. They are the face of the best that is within us, acting in solidarity with those who are suffering.”

Outgoing UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes said at the ceremony that while there are many worldwide in need of aid, relief workers' ability to reach them is increasingly at risk. “We have no other agenda than saving lives and delivering the basics of life – food, water, shelter, medical care, protection for the most vulnerable,” he said. “Yet in too many places where humanitarians work, whereas once we were respected, today we are targeted.”

The UN human rights chief Navi Pillay spotlighted how the efforts of humanitarians “represent the international community's commitment to maintaining, in the most practical sense, a fundamental respect for human rights and dignity.” The High Commissioner noted that the global support for relief work is underpinned by the conviction that the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights apply to all people and must be upheld in all situations, especially following disasters or man-made calamities.

For his part, Eric Laroche, Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises for the UN World Health Organization (WHO), paid tribute to the dedication and commitment of the many aid workers worldwide who toil in difficult and often dangerous situations. “I have witnessed first-hand the awe-inspiring humanitarian spirit demonstrated by efforts at the community, national and international levels to help affected populations in such situations,” he said in a statement. Mr. Laroche pointed to the current catastrophe in Pakistan, which has been inundated by deadly flooding that has affected many millions of people. That crisis, he said, “demonstrates the important work of humanitarians who are working around the clock to fight disease and reduce suffering.”

Somalia is the scene of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, where 12 aid workers have been killed since the start of last year and 10 others abducted and still unaccounted for. More than 1.4 million people are internally displaced in the Horn of Africa country, while 600,000 Somalis live as refugees in neighbouring countries. The death toll for Somalia in the first seven months of this year is higher than for the same period last year, with reports of nearly 1,000 civilians killed and more than 2,500 others injured. Most casualties resulted from shelling by warring groups in the capital, Mogadishu. In the past year, said Mark Bowden, UN Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator for Somalia, in his message for World Humanitarian Day, “working in the humanitarian field has become ever more challenging.” Access to those in need is on the wane, especially in the south-central region, where the offices of several aid agencies have been occupied, their workers harassed and their operations halted. “Somalia is one of far too many places in the world where humanitarian workers were once respected, and today are targeted,” he underlined. “It is a place where we have seen our ability to reach populations shrink due to threats and insecurity, so that ensuring who gets assistance is that times determined by where we can reach, rather than where we ought to reach.” Despite obstacles, relief workers in Somalia have ensured the delivery of food to 340,000 people in the capital, home to many of the country's most vulnerable, while in the rest of the country, 1.8 million people have received some form of food aid in the first half of this year.

The work of humanitarian personnel can also take a heavy emotional toll. Anas al-Qaed, 25, a community service worker in the Damascus, Syria, office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), recalled a particularly difficult case regarding a 14-year-old boy from Afghanistan that left him depleted. It took four months for Mr. al-Qaed to gain the trust of the boy, who was traumatized by the loss of his family and being repeatedly raped. “One of the most difficult aspects of the job is trying to maintain a distance from the daily horrors that we are exposed to, but it I enjoy this work because it allows me to make a difference in people's lives,” Mr. al-Qaed said.

Afghan civil society, UNAMA spur reconstruction of prison in the east

25 August 2010 - It might be a prison, but inmates in the only jail in Afghanistan's eastern Laghman province say that living conditions have improved dramatically thanks to the assistance of the international community.

General Dawlat Mahmad Aziz, the manager of Laghman prison, said the facility which used to house 226 inmates in two rooms received a complete facelift last year after it requested assistance from the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

"UNAMA had earlier raised the issue with the provincial governor and PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) of Laghman, to draw attention to the war-affected two-room prison," said Naqib-u-rahman Qazizada, Human Rights Officer of the eastern regional office of UNAMA.

"According to the minimum prison standards, the inmates should have access to adequate standards of living, such as cubic content of air, floor space, lighting, heating, and ventilation, adequate food, drinking water, health facility and their personal integrity," added Qazizada.



The PRT provided financial support for three buildings, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) constructed a kitchen, at a cost of US\$ 480,000.

One inmate, who has spent the past five years incarcerated for killing a neighbour, said 25 prisoners had shared a room before the new buildings were constructed.

"We were really in trouble during night times because police chained all of us with each other to make sure we didn't escape. Now we have comfortable rooms, training opportunities and learning courses," he said.

In addition to 24-hour health services, the prisoners can also take literacy and English-language courses taught by a prisoner, a police officer and three professional teachers whose salaries are provided by the Ministry of Education.

There is also a vocational training programme run by one of the prisoners and a civil servant that teaches inmates carpet weaving, tailoring and handicrafts. Some prisoners sell their products to visitors and staff members of the prison twice a week.

"I am very satisfied with the positive treatment of prison management," said another prisoner convicted of anti-government activities.

Meanwhile, neighbouring Kunar province has also constructed a new facility for inmates. However, the problem persists in Afghanistan's largest eastern province, Nangarhar, where construction is lagging behind the growing need for prison space.

By Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA



Northern region: Afghan groups review plans for polls

20 August 2010 - Less than a month before the scheduled parliamentary elections, Afghan electoral and human rights groups met with United Nations officials in the northeast province of Kunduz this week to share information about electoral preparations.

"We have successfully finished the voter registration process. The high figure of registered voters in Kunduz shows the interest of the people in the election," said Shah Jehan Sardari, the head of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) provincial office.

The meeting comes just days after voter registration for the 18 September scheduled polls wrapped up with 376,000 first time voters registered across the country.

The IEC announced on Thursday that 5,897 polling centres will be open during the Wolesi Jirga elections, while approximately 14 per cent of the original total closed.

Insecurity in parts of the province and concerns over intimidation and interference in the electoral process continue to be major election challenges, Sardari told gathered representatives.

"We registered 26 electoral complaints. Decisions have been made on 13 small cases and investigations are ongoing on the serious complaints, such as threats by anti-government elements and pro-government groups," said Shah Mohammad, Commissioner of the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) in Kunduz.

The IEC has distributed more than 2,000 observation and monitoring cards to electoral observers and candidates' agents.

Among the groups that will observe the voting process at polling sites is the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. The AIHRC which will monitor for violations, including obstacles to free movement and discrimination, said AIHRC's Human Rights Monitoring and Investigation Officer in Kunduz, Sayed Karim Talash.

In addition to observing, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) plans to educate 286 candidates in the region about the electoral process, said NDI's head in Kunduz, Dr. Muhammad Haroon Nasrat.

Meanwhile, the Education Centre for Women (ECW) and its partner Habibullah have a programme underway to educate 8,000 people on election issues, rule of law, good governance and the role of women in society.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UNDP-ELECT facilitated the meeting. Following a written request by President Karzai earlier in the year, the UN provides technical and logistical support to the Afghan independent electoral authorities who have full responsibility to conduct the 18 September parliamentary election.

By Shamsuddin Hamed, UNAMA



UN anti-crime agency helps Afghanistan combat corruption

20 August 2010 - The United Nations anti-crime agency is helping to bolster the justice system in Afghanistan, where reconstruction and development are hampered by corruption and poor governance.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is helping the Afghan Attorney General's office create and implement a code of ethics and professional standards for prosecutors.

It is also advising the Government on reforming anti-corruption legislation to be in line with the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), ratified by Afghanistan in 2008.

Launched last August, the code of ethics was developed in an Afghan-led process over three years and finalized with the help of UNODC and the United States State Department. Consultations across the country with prosecutors also contributed to the final draft.

The code integrates international standards with Afghan legal and cultural norms, including obligations to uphold human rights as well as the rights of those accused of committing crimes.

Dozens of its articles specifically to prosecutors and set standards for their performance, and they include an internal disciplinary mechanism for investigations, adjudications and appeals of complaints lodged against prosecutors by other legal professionals and the public.

UNODC voiced hope that the code will enhance professionalism and integrity in the Attorney General's office and is one of many steps to ensure the highest integrity in all prosecutors to boost public trust in investigations and prosecutions.

The agency will continue to support the office's training for prosecutors in all provinces and to bolster accountability and integrity.

By UN News Centre





Fighting TB in the west with support from the UN health agency and donors

21 August 2010 - With her face covered by a burka, 18-year-old Shukria walks every day to the Herat provincial Tuberculosis (TB) centre to take four different medicines in front of a health care worker.

"We have no other way to make sure the patients take their medicine properly. If they are not strict in the beginning, their body may become multi-drug resistant and we cannot heal them," said Dr Barakzai, provincial TB coordinator.

The process of watching a patient and introducing him or her to take the medicines correctly every day is part of the Direct Treatment Short Course (DOTS) strategy which has been incorporated by the Ministry of Public Health into its National TB Control Programme.

Within two months, Shukria, as other patients like her, will be given a bi-monthly supply of the pills to take home.

The Herat TB centre received 282 visitors last month alone, out of whom 27 were diagnosed as positive for TB. More than 39,000 new cases of TB are diagnosed each year in Afghanistan. About 70 per cent of those are women, according to the Ministry of Public Health.

The centre, one of more than 1,000 similar services across the country, is run by a small team of dedicated doctors with support from the UN World Health Organization (WHO) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), an international non-governmental organization (INGO).

WHO has solicited the support of the Italian Cooperation to build a larger centre which will soon be operational and allow for more room than the current small building on the compound of the provincial hospital.

While praising the new construction, Dr Barakzai warned that the commitment of the international community needs to increase to match the humanitarian needs in the area.

The comments come just days after the UN honoured its staff and all humanitarian workers on International Humanitarian Day on 19 August.

Cutting the rate of TB around the world is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which world leaders agreed to try to reach by 2015. Next month, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon will convene a high level meeting in New York with world leaders to try to accelerate the progress towards the MDGs. President Hamid Karzai is scheduled to participate.

By Fraidoon Poya & Henri Burgard, UNAMA

New project to clear mines from Ghazni city begins

26 August 2010 - This month a new project undertaken by OMAR, an Afghan humanitarian mine action non-governmental organization (NGO), will begin clearing minefields from the centre of Ghazni.

This will support the city's preparations to be named Islamic Centre of Civilisation 2013 by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO). The project is funded by the Canadian Government through the Voluntary Trust Fund for Assistance in Mine Action, which is managed by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

The OMAR project will clear nine minefields through the deployment of eight manual demining teams, one mechanical demining unit, one mine detection dog set and one explosive ordnance disposal team. In total, there are 48 identified minefields remaining in the centre of Ghazni, which contaminate over six square kilometres of land, causing deaths and injuries as well as preventing the land from being used for housing or farming in at least 22 communities. This project will remove the impact of mines from seven communities including seven different sites of special archeological or historical importance, such as shrines and monuments.

Maxwell Kerley, Director of UNMAS, said: "I am pleased that the work is now underway to clear the archaeologically and culturally rich city of Ghazni. We appeal to our donor partners and friends in the Islamic world to contribute further to this important work so that the families of Ghazni can, for the first time in 30 years, live free from the threat of landmines and other explosive remnants of war."

On completion of this project, if further funding was secured quickly, 12 demining teams could clear the remaining minefields in the centre in two years, in time for the city's designation as Islamic Centre of Civilisation 2013.

The project will follow the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan's model of 'Community Based Demining', whereby the majority of deminers will be recruited and trained from Ghazni itself with expert oversight from OMAR's experienced deminers. So far, 50 new jobs have been created in Ghazni through the project. The training of these deminers will be completed on the 1st of September and they will join the teams who have begun the work so far. A further two teams will then be recruited and trained so that eventually all eight demining teams will comprise locally recruited people.

About UNMAS

The United Nations Mine Action Service is located in the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

About MACCA and MAPA

The Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), supported by the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations, provides coordination, including planning, management and quality assurance for the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, encompassing all mine action activities throughout the country. The UNMAS provides all financial support for the running of the MACCA.