

Peace Jirga opens amid heightened security

2 June 2010 - Afghanistan's Consultative Peace Jirga opened this morning in the capital Kabul, with 1,600 participants from across the country taking part in the three-day event aimed at developing a common vision about the way forward for bringing peace to Afghanistan.

President Hamid Karzai opened the Jirga with a speech in which he said, "The eye of hope of this nation is awaiting your decision." The President, alternately speaking in the official languages of Dari and Pashtu, stressed that Afghanistan work for peace and that it maintain its relationship with the international community.

Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, Staffan de Mistura, and representatives of the diplomatic community attended the opening ceremony.

"The Peace Jirga is an important stepping stone in developing the Afghan-led peace process," de Mistura told reporters after the opening ceremony. "The international community, and in particular the United Nations, is fully supportive of this Afghan initiative.

We are confident that the results from these discussions will lead to the next steps in a national dialogue to bring peace in Afghanistan."

The United Nations has provided technical support to the Consultative Peace Jirga.

Participants of the Peace Jirga, including about 300 women, will break into 28 working committees which will prepare and present recommendations on how to move forward in the peace process.



UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's message for International Day of UN Peacekeepers - 29 May 2010

28 May 2010 - On the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, we honour the sacrifices of the men and women who lost their lives while serving under the UN flag.

This year's commemoration is a somber one. The past 14 months have been especially deadly for UN peacekeeping.

Ambushes in Darfur... Terrorism in Kabul... And a plane crash in Haiti...

These were among the tragedies that struck peacekeeping last year, killing 121 people.

That toll was nearly matched in a few seconds with the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti last January.

The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti lost 96 peacekeepers – the biggest single loss of life in peacekeeping history.

But that dark day also became one of our finest hours, as the men and women of MINUSTAH set aside their own trauma, got the mission quickly back on its feet, and helped the people of Haiti cope with the horrific aftermath.

As we honour such moving displays of courage and dedication, we also pay tribute to the more than 122,000 military, police and civilian personnel who serve with distinction in our operations across the world.

Their efforts directly help millions of people... By providing security and promoting reconciliation... By clearing land-mines and demobilizing combatants... By strengthening institutions and the rule of law... By delivering aid and repatriating refugees and displaced persons... By supporting democratic elections, reforming the security sector... and so much more.

Peacekeeping is an indispensable part of the UN's work for a better world. Let us give it the support it needs to succeed.



In Herat, Department of Women's Affairs reaches out to the media

30 May 2010 - Herat's Department of Women Affairs (DoWA) held a two-day workshop at the Afghan Journalism Centre last week to establish a better working relationship with the media.

From 25 to 26 May 2010, 20 representatives from local television channels, radio stations and magazines discussed with UN and provincial gender specialists, in the presence of a representative of the Afghan religious institutions, how better they could work together.

Moderated by the United Nations Development Programme – Gender Equality Project (UNDP-GEP), the discussion covered the capacity of the journalists to identify and report issues pertaining to gender, as well as the working mechanism of the two main actors: the provincial DoWA and the media.

“As it appeared during the debates, both Department of Women's Affairs and the media are not satisfied with the way activities are being coordinated,” explained Noor Agha Taheri, provincial coordinator for the UNDP-GEP.

Media representatives repeatedly complained the lack of information coming from the Government body, while the women's department pointed at the need for the Herat-based media outlets to hire more female journalists and cover more of gender related subjects, such as successful women in the community or women's rights.



Presentations from various participants gave way to animated exchanges.

For Mr Taheri, this is a positive sign: “Our goal is to find out the gaps and challenges, and to strengthen the link between the two actors. Only later, after the workshop, will we be able to judge on the outcomes.”

One of the speakers and participants, Homayoon Hadid, a BBC Uzbek journalist, explained the difficulties the media face:

“There has been a lot of misunderstanding about the way the media are working and covering gender related issues.”

Mr Hadid attempted to clarify the journalists' position: “First and foremost, we are professionals, but we also need some support.”

The journalist indicated that the media need more information on the activities of the relevant authorities, and stressed the lack of means most media outlets face to follow up in the community.

Karima Husseini, the manager of the publication and awareness unit of Herat DoWA, is conscious of the dissemination capacity the media offer:

“What they can do in six months, it would take us a year to achieve through other means.”

She expects Herat media to put an end to discrimination in their staffing and their programmes, and raise awareness on their activities.

Like her partner in the workshop, she also insisted on benchmarks to the outcome of the gathering.

“Everything depends on the performance of the media in the future. Currently, they say they consider gender (issues), but I disagree,” Ms Husseini said.

Despite diverging points of views, participants fully agreed on the importance of taking into account gender in today's coverage of the Afghan society.

The workshop participants also acknowledged the necessity of a closer cooperation between the women's department and the media.

Mr Taheri is optimistic: “If our pilot project – after two years – is soon to end, we have a four-year plan and many more activities to come; we plan to cover the entire western region, and extend our activities to Badghis, Ghor and Farah provinces.”

Judging by Herat's workshop, there is a need for more awareness which, with the support of the UN, the provincial authorities will attempt to fill.

By Henri Burgard, UNAMA



UNICEF voices concern ahead of trial of last child soldier in Guantánamo Bay

29 May 2010 - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has voiced its concern about the prosecution of Guantánamo Bay detainee Omar Khadr – who was arrested in Afghanistan in 2002 for crimes he is alleged to have committed at the age of 15 – saying it sets a dangerous precedent for child victims of recruitment in armed conflicts.

Mr Khadr is the last child soldier held in Guantánamo Bay, and his case has long been highlighted by UN officials, including the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy.

UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake, in a statement issued on 26 May, said that the recruitment and use of children in hostilities is a war crime, and those who are responsible – the adult recruiters – should be prosecuted. "The children involved are victims, acting under coercion," he said, adding that former child soldiers need assistance for rehabilitation and reintegration into their communities, not condemnation or prosecution.

"The prosecution of Omar Khadr may set a dangerous international precedent for other children who are victims of recruitment in armed conflicts," Mr Lake added. He stressed that anyone prosecuted for offenses they allegedly committed while a child should be treated in accordance with international juvenile justice standards, which provide them with special protections.

"Omar Khadr should not be prosecuted by a tribunal that is neither equipped nor required to provide these protections and meet these standards," stated the UNICEF chief.

The trial of Mr Khadr, a Canadian national, is reportedly set to begin on 10 August. Earlier this month, Ms Coomaraswamy called for authorities to release the now 23-year-old detainee into Canadian custody, and to ensure efforts for his rehabilitation.

UN agency seeks US\$ 18 million to assist Afghan refugees in Iran

1 June 2010 - The United Nations refugee agency is seeking US\$ 18 million to meet an anticipated shortfall in funding for its operation in Iran, which is hosting more than one million Afghans who fled their homeland.

To date, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has received only around one fifth of the US\$ 36.8 million it has sought for its programmes for Afghan refugees, which are carried out in partnership with the Iranian Government.

"Iran, which is facing its own economic difficulties amid the global downturn, has hosted two generations of Afghan refugees but has received little international support," UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic told reporters in Geneva.

Since 2002, UNHCR has helped more than 860,000 refugees repatriate to Afghanistan. In addition, a million Afghans have returned home spontaneously since that time.

The agency noted that voluntary repatriation of Afghans from Iran has slowed considerably in recent years owing to poor security and economic conditions in Afghanistan, with only 6,000 people returning in 2009 and 3,600 in 2008.

The vast majority – 97 per cent – of the more than one million registered Afghans remaining in Iran live in urban or semi-urban settings, putting a strain on health, education and other local infrastructure.

Mr Mahecic said that in light of the slowdown in returns, UNHCR has expanded its programme in Iran to better support services pending repatriation. Increased funding is crucial for this effort.

"At present we have funds to implement only 22 per cent of identified needs across education, health, and livelihood support, as well as boosting water systems, latrines and other infrastructure in refugee settlements and in urban settings with high refugee concentrations.

"The figure of US\$ 18 million that we're requesting is to meet the anticipated gap in funding," he noted.

While many refugees in Iran are already feeling the effects of rising inflation, UNHCR believes this will only worsen when the Government's new five-year national economic policy – which will see the removal of subsidies for electricity, water and basic commodities like food – takes effect.

Under the new policy, expected to begin this year, the Government will provide a safety net of cash grants for Iranians. However, this will not be extended to refugees.

Road work continues in volatile South

28 May 2010 - UNOPS and the Governments of Afghanistan and Australia, through the Australian Government Aid Programme, this month agreed to extend their joint efforts for road construction in Uruzgan, one of the most volatile southern provinces of Afghanistan.

The tripartite agreement, signed in a ceremony at the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), calls for the construction of a 1.5-km Ultra Thin Reinforced Concrete Pavement road and 10 related structures, connecting the provincial capital of Trin Kot city to the north.

The project will take a labour-based approach, creating some 5,000 labour days of short-term employment opportunities for local residents in Charmgar village in Trin Kot District. The new approach road will benefit a total of 12,000 people living in the catchment area, particularly those living in the adjacent villages, by reducing their travel time to the city from one hour to 20 minutes.

"The existing path is so dusty that we have difficulties taking patients to a clinic or sending children to school. This new road is vital for us to solve these problems, and we are grateful for the project, particularly because the construction work really helps the jobless," said Abdul Raouf, representative of Charmgar village.

The project will be implemented as part of the National Rural Access Programme (NRAP), a multi-donor programme executed jointly by MRRD and the Ministry of Public Works (MPW) with implementation support from UNOPS.

Australia has been supporting NRAP since 2006 and has provided over US\$ 6.4 million for road improvements across the country, including in Uruzgan province. In 2009, under the NRAP framework, an Australian-funded project rehabilitated 5.6 km of road conditions in the villages of Safidkhar, Sofian and Aabbordeh. The work has been completed successfully, with 17,397 labour days created for the vulnerable members of communities.

The NRAP will continue to promote equitable economic growth by ensuring year-round access to basic services and facilities nationwide, including high risk areas of the country.

ADB president inaugurates rail line linking Afghanistan to central Asia

28 May 2010 - Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Haruhiko Kuroda has inaugurated at Hairatan a 75-kilometer stretch of railway line that connects the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif to the country's bustling northern border with Uzbekistan.

"The new rail link between Mazar-i-Sharif and Hairatan will help reduce trade bottlenecks, boost commerce, and speed the flow of much-needed humanitarian assistance," Mr Kuroda said at the opening ceremony in Hairatan on Tuesday.

"It represents Afghanistan's emergence as a regional crossroad for trade and commerce and – most importantly – the aspirations of Afghanistan's people to redefine their country's role in the region and in the world."

The rail link is being constructed from a US\$ 165-million ADB grant and should be completed by the end of this year. It will connect Afghanistan to Uzbekistan's expansive rail network, and to regional markets in Europe and Asia.

Future links are planned, which will run across the north and to other parts of the country and region, including Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Earlier on Tuesday, Mr Kuroda met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Finance Minister and ADB Governor Omar Zakhilwal, ADB Alternate Governor Abdul Qadeer Fitrat and other senior government officials in the capital, Kabul.

In his remarks at an official luncheon, Mr Kuroda said the rail link is a hallmark of the eight-member Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC), which Afghanistan joined in 2005.

"Afghanistan is at the heart of CAREC, and ADB's projects in the country's road, rail and energy sectors dovetail perfectly with CAREC's vision of helping Central Asia reap the benefit of its strategic location," Mr Kuroda said.

From 2002 to the end of last year, ADB has provided Afghanistan with approximately US\$ 2.1 billion in loans, grants, technical assistance and co-financing.

ADB's focus on infrastructure and regional cooperation is primarily demonstrated in the transport and energy sectors. Other major ADB projects in Afghanistan include portions of the North East Power System, which this time last year began bringing a regular supply of electricity into Kabul from Uzbekistan, and rehabilitation and construction of the northern portion of the country's Ring Road.



From crib to classroom: Alarming levels of school-age drug addiction in Afghanistan

2 June 2010 - Today, an international delegation spearheaded by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) completed a critical three-day mission assessing the situation of drug-dependence amongst Afghan school-age children.

UNODC was joined by the World Health WHO, Johns Hopkins University, the US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), The University of Vienna, The Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Project and NIDA International; as well as supported by Afghanistan's Ministry of Counter Narcotics, Ministry of Public Health and civil society organizations.

INL funded the mission with a view to scaling up drug-demand reduction services aimed at children and their families.

Head of delegation Dr. Gilberto Gerra, chief of the Drug Prevention and Health Branch of UNODC, sends a clear message that "Afghanistan's children and youth are the country's tomorrow - we urgently need to respond to the most vulnerable and hidden face of Afghanistan's opium problem today."

Children in conflict and post-conflict areas are often heavily affected by severe problems and war-related traumas, both physical and mental. On top of this, recent research by the INL has shown alarming trends in the exposure of children to opium in the home.

The interim INL report, "Opium Smoke: The study of second- and third- hand exposure in women and children in Afghanistan" reveals startling findings.

"Samples obtained from children in opium-consuming homes show remarkably high concentrations of the narcotic, even higher than concentrations found in samples from adult heroin addicts," says Thom Browne of INL.

The delegation visited places where the most hard-to-reach hidden populations were to be found. Orphanages, detention centres, existing drug treatment/harm reduction centres, and services for street (vendor) children were targeted within the community.

Findings from the multi-agency mission will be used to develop drug-dependence treatment interventions specially tailored for the youth.

Dr. Gerra urges "donors and policy-makers to increase children's and families' access to drug-treatment services and establish new programmes to meet their specific and often complex needs."