

Security Council arrives in Afghanistan

21 June 2010 - The 15-member United Nations Security Council today arrived in Kabul to assess the situation in the lead-up to the Security Council debate on Afghanistan scheduled for late June.

The Security Council's visit is also to demonstrate their continued support for the Government and the people of Afghanistan as they strengthen the foundations to ensure a sustainable peace for all.

The Security Council will review progress made by the Afghan Government, with the assistance of the international community, assess the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions and will look ahead to issues on the agenda for the Kabul Conference.

The Security Council members will meet with President Hamid Karzai, senior members of the Government and other Afghan authorities and institutions, as well as with members of civil society. They will also meet members of the international community and with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The visit is coordinated by the Permanent Representative of Turkey and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Mexico currently has the Presidency of the Security Council. Other Member States currently serving on the Security Council, and making up the delegation, are: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, China, France, Gabon, Japan, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Uganda, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Security Council holds meetings in Kabul

22 June 2010 - The United Nations Security Council held a series of meetings in Kabul today, its first full day since arriving in Afghanistan in the evening of 22 June.

The 15-member delegation had a two-hour meeting with President Hamid Karzai and senior members of the Government, at the Presidential Palace, exchanging views on the current situation in Afghanistan.

Present at the meeting were Dr Zalmay Rassoul, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Dr Rangin Dadfar Spanta, National Security Advisor; Mr Taj Ayubi, International Relations Advisor; Mr Shaida Mohammad Abdali, Deputy National Security Advisor; and the President's Chief of Staff Mr Mohammad Umer Daudzai.

ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal together with NATO's Senior Civilian Representative, Mark Sedwill briefed Security Council members in a separate meeting at the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force.

The delegation also visited the Kabul Military Training Centre, where members of Afghanistan's National Security Forces are trained.

In the afternoon, Security Council members met with members of Afghan civil society, in particular members of the Afghan Women's Network, human rights defenders and humanitarian workers and members of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission.

The delegation was also briefed by the head of UNAMA and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, along with senior staff from UNAMA and UN agencies operating in Afghanistan on the work of the United Nations in the country.



Security Council arrives in Afghanistan to assess progress, show support

UN News Centre (New York) 21 June 2010 - Members of the Security Council arrived today in Kabul to review progress made by the Afghan Government with assistance from the international community, and to demonstrate their continued support for the country's efforts to ensure a sustainable peace.

The visit by the 15-member body is led by Ambassador Ertugrul Apakan of Turkey, and it comes ahead of the conference to be held in the capital on 20 July and co-chaired by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

Next month's gathering is a follow-up to the London Conference held in January, during which the Government and its international partners jointly endorsed a strategy of transition to greater Afghan responsibility for the affairs of the country.

The visit is also taking place just weeks after the holding of the Consultative Peace Jirga – which brought together 1,600 delegates from across the country to discuss the way forward in the peace process – and as the country prepares for the parliamentary elections scheduled for 18 September.

While in Afghanistan, the Council members will meet with President Hamid Karzai, senior members of the Government and other Afghan authorities and institutions, as well as with members of civil society. They will also meet members of the international community and with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in his latest report to the Council, stated that the UN is committed to a continued long-term presence in Afghanistan, noting that this is a "critical" year in the country's transition.



Security Council mission meets with Afghan electoral officials and parliamentarians

23 June 2010 - The United Nations Security Council members continued to hold meetings in Kabul today during their visit to Afghanistan.

Security Council members met with Chairman Fazal Ahmad Manawi, and with commissioners of the Afghanistan Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaint Commission (ECC) in Kabul.

Members also met with Vygaudas Ušackas, the Special Representative of the European Union for Afghanistan.

They held talks with Afghan Ministers including Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ministers of Defense, Interior, NDS, Finance, Peace and Reintegration, Education, Agriculture, Public Health, Social Affairs, IDLG, Anti-Corruption, Head of Governance Cluster, National Security Adviser in Minister of Foreign Affairs.



In the afternoon, Security Council members also met with H.E. Mohammad Younus Qanooni, the speaker of the Lower House of Parliament (Wolesi Jirga), and other members of Parliament. The visit by the 15-member peak UN-body is coordinated by Ambassador Ertugrul Apakan of Turkey with support from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. The last Security Council visit to Afghanistan was in November 2008.

Afghanistan needs continued global support during critical transition period – UN

UN News Centre (New York) 18 June 2010 - While the overall security situation has not improved in recent months, Afghanistan has witnessed a number of positive developments, according to a new United Nations report, which urges continued international support for what is a critical period for the country.

Earlier this month, the Government hosted the Consultative Peace Jirga outside the capital, Kabul, with the participation of 1,600 delegates, including 300 women, to discuss the way forward for the country's peace process.

"Despite rocket fire and thwarted suicide attacks during the opening session, the jirga proceeded undeterred," Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon writes in his latest report to the Security Council.

The final communiqué issued by the jirga endorsed President Hamid Karzai's initiative to convene a national dialogue on ways to restore peace. It also requested the release of Afghans held in detention by the Government and international forces, the de-listing of individuals from the so-called "Consolidated List" of those subject to UN sanctions in connection with Al-Qaida and the Taliban, and safety for those who join the peace process.

"I am heartened by the outcome of the Consultative Peace Jirga, a step towards reaching out to all Afghans to promote an inclusive dialogue aimed at achieving stability and peace in Afghanistan," Mr Ban states.

"The United Nations supports such nationally driven efforts to end conflict in Afghanistan and remains fully committed to working with the Afghan authorities and people as they strive for a peaceful and inclusive society."

The Government is now preparing for the international conference to be held in Kabul on 20 July – where it is expected to present an Afghan-led plan for improving development, governance and security – as well as for the parliamentary elections scheduled for 18 September.

The conference, which the UN has been requested to co-chair, is a follow-up to the London Conference held in January, during which the Government and its international partners jointly endorsed a strategy of transition to greater Afghan responsibility for the affairs of the country.

Mr. Ban says he is encouraged by the state of preparedness of the Afghan electoral institutions for the upcoming polls, welcoming steps taken by the Independent Electoral Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission, while highlighting the need for more comprehensive and long-term electoral reform. "Strengthened Afghan electoral institutions in the lead will instil greater public confidence in the electoral process and contribute to improved, more credible elections," he stated.

The Secretary-General is particularly pleased that the preliminary list of candidates contains the names of more than 400 women, and stressed that adequate security must be provided to ensure that these women have equal access to the electoral process. "Election security will remain a critical issue and the Independent Electoral Commission must balance polling centre security against the need to make the elections accessible to all Afghans."

He also notes that, despite the considerable growth and reform plans for the development of the Afghan National Security Forces, the security environment remains unstable. "A comprehensive approach on security sector reform needs to be supported by effective governance and progressive advances in the political process, to counterbalance concentrated military efforts," states Mr Ban.

He adds that the UN is committed to a continued long-term presence in Afghanistan, noting that this is a "critical" year in the country's transition, and states that it is incumbent on the UN mission (UNAMA) to focus its efforts on a limited set of priority tasks where it can bring the greatest added value and deliver effectively.

Special Representative comments on the electoral vetting process

23 June 2010 - We are at the beginning of a process where Afghan institutions are running their own elections and doing this for the first time.

In accordance with Afghan electoral laws this information was then passed on to Afghanistan's electoral institutions – the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) to act upon.

The final candidate list has been announced. Out of 2,577 candidates - 13 candidates appear to have been excluded for having links to illegal armed groups.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Staffan de Mistura said: "The process of vetting has not produced a satisfactory result so far. The Independent Electoral Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission have done their jobs in carrying out their part of the vetting process."

"The Vetting Committee could have done a more thorough job and at this stage we are disappointed. The ultimate word, and the ultimate vetting, is up to the Afghan voters, the electorate, as it is in any country. I understand that His Excellency President Karzai is equally concerned and planning to constructively and proactively attempt to address this issue," he added.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting the IEC and ECC technically and logistically as required over the coming months.



Vetting process for upcoming Afghan polls not thorough enough, says UN envoy

UN News Centre (New York) 23 June 2010 - The top United Nations envoy in Afghanistan today voiced discontent with the process of vetting candidates ahead of September's parliamentary elections, stating that it has not produced a satisfactory result.

"The Vetting Committee could have done a more thorough job and at this stage we are disappointed," Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), said in a statement.

The final candidate list for the 18 September polls – the first time Afghan institutions are running their own elections – has been announced. Out of 2,577 candidates, 13 appear to have been excluded for having links to illegal armed groups.

The vetting of candidates was carried out, at their request, by the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defence and the National Directorate of Security.

In accordance with Afghan electoral laws, this information was then passed on to Afghanistan's electoral institutions – the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) – for action.

"The process of vetting has not produced a satisfactory result so far," stated Mr de Mistura, while adding that the IEC and ECC have done their jobs in carrying out their part of the vetting process. He noted that President Hamid Karzai is equally concerned and planning to "constructively and proactively" attempt to address this issue.

While pledging the UN's commitment to supporting the IEC and ECC technically and logistically as required over the coming months, the Special Representative pointed out that, in the end, it will be up to the people of Afghanistan to determine who will best represent them.

"The ultimate word, and the ultimate vetting, is up to the Afghan voters, the electorate, as it is in any country," said Mr de Mistura.

Meanwhile, the members of the visiting Security Council delegation met today with Afghan electoral officials and parliamentarians in the capital, Kabul, including the Chairman and commissioners of the IEC and ECC.

The mission by the 15-member body, which last visited Afghanistan in November 2008, is led by Ambassador Ertugrul Apakan of Turkey and intended to review progress made by the Government with assistance from the international community, and to demonstrate its continued support for the country's efforts to ensure a sustainable peace.



On World Refugee Day, UN warns that many displaced are unable to return home

UN News Centre (New York) 18 June 2010 - **The United Nations is marking World Refugee Day by urging governments and individuals not to forget the 15 million men, women and children who have been uprooted by conflict or persecution and are unable to return to their homes.**

The theme for this year's observance on 20 June is "Home," and highlights the need to ensure that all refugees can have a place to call home, whether they return to their places of origin, settle in host countries or re-settle in a third country.

"Refugees have been deprived of their homes, but they must not be deprived of their futures," Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a message to mark the Day. He called for working with host Governments to deliver services, and intensifying efforts to resolve conflicts so that refugees can return home.

A recent report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) noted a decline in the number of refugees who are able to go home. In 2005, more than a million people returned to their own country on a voluntary basis.

Last year, only 250,000 did so – the lowest number in two decades. The reasons for this include prolonged instability in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and southern Sudan.

UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador and award-winning actress Angelina Jolie is in Ecuador, where she is highlighting the challenges facing refugees.

"Having a home, a place where we belong, a place where we feel safe is something most of us take for granted," she said on the occasion of World Refugee Day.

"Yet those who flee from conflict and persecution no longer have their homes, and it will be years before they can even return. In fact, many may never go home again."

There are around 51,000 registered Colombian refugees in Ecuador, but UNHCR estimates that about 135,000 people are in need of international protection. This makes Ecuador the country with the largest refugee population in Latin America.

Mr. Guterres and Ms. Jolie are taking part today, along with United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a live video link – "WRD Live" – which will connect with Washington DC, Malaysia, Syria, northern Ecuador and DRC to talk to refugees about their experiences.

For the first time, the 79-year-old Empire State Building in New York will be lit blue on 20 June to honour the world's refugees. Other global landmarks that will turn blue include the ancient Colosseum in Rome and – also for the first time – the bridge across the Ibar River in the divided Kosovo town of Mitrovica.

World Refugee Day activities also include film screenings, photography exhibitions, food bazaars, fashion shows, concerts and sports contests across countries in the Middle East, Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Americas and Africa.

Over 70,000 Afghan refugees return this year

20 June 2010 - **The number of refugees voluntarily returning home to Afghanistan in 2010 reached the 70,000 mark this week.**

With two and a half months of the peak repatriation period still to run, this year's overall figure could reach over 130,000, more than double last year's annual total.

"Despite security constraints and challenging socio-economic conditions in Afghanistan, the voluntary repatriation of 70,000 Afghans demonstrates that many refugees are confident that there are opportunities available to return sustainably to their homeland," said Mr Mengeshe Kebede, the Representative in Pakistan of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The pace of returns has increased markedly in recent weeks averaging 806 individuals per day during June.

Since the resumption of large-scale repatriation operations in March 2002, repatriation trends have generally peaked during the period May to August.

Over the past few months, returning refugees have cited economic factors and the difficult security situation in Pakistan, and local improvements in security and employment opportunities in some provinces of Afghanistan as key reasons for deciding to return.

Speaking on the occasion of World Refugee Day in Kabul, Engineer Abdul Rahim, the Acting Minister for Refugees and Repatriation, said "It's important to recall that there are still 2.7 million refugees registered with the authorities remaining in Iran and Pakistan.

"Continuing donor support for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development programmes is needed to attract more refugees home in future."

Returning Afghans have stated their destinations as the Eastern region (33%), mainly to the provinces of Nangarhar, Laghman; the Central region (32%), mainly to the provinces of Kabul, Logar and Parwan; the Northern and North-eastern regions (18%), mainly to the provinces of Kunduz, Jawzjan, Balkh and Baghlan; and the South-eastern region (7%) mainly to the provinces of Paktya and Khost.

Afghans destined for the Southern, Western and Central Highland regions constitute nine per cent of the total returns to Afghanistan this year.



AIHRC opens human rights centre for students in Herat University

21 June 2010 - The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) opened the first human rights centre for students of Herat University last week.

During the inauguration Dr Sima Samar, AIHRC Country Director, said the Centre would provide basic information on human rights to raise awareness so that students become "our ambassadors, passing our messages to the community."

According to Daud Mohammad Wahidi, who looks after AIHRC's education section, there will be two teachers who will help Afghan students on their research on law and human rights.

Dr Sima Samar also opened the Transitional Justice Museum, which commemorates the death of thousands of Afghans that were killed during the past three decades of war and revolution.

Inside, glass cases display explosive devices, bombs and mines while photographs of young and old men killed in the war are displayed on the walls.

"The purpose is to remember the history of war, to make sure that victims are remembered and that war crimes never happen again," Dr Sima Samar told journalists at the opening, where dozens of human rights activists and officials had gathered.

Dr Samar also insisted that if the names of high-ranking Taliban are removed from the UN's "black list," it would not reduce their crimes, referring to UN Security Council Resolution 1267 which established a sanctions committee for Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda representatives, freezing their bank accounts and prohibiting them from crossing international borders.

By Fraidoon Poya, UNAMA

Two new hospitals under construction in Paktya province

23 June 2010 - Two hospitals with a total bed capacity of 120 are being built in the eastern province of Paktya where health care is gaining ground.

Already home to three hospitals with a total bed capacity of 110, Paktya is about to more than double its hospital bed capacity with the ongoing construction of the two hospitals.

Under construction are the 100-bed provincial hospital funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) at a cost of US\$ 7 million; and the 20-bed hospital in Gardez city funded by the Bayat Foundation, a national humanitarian organization.

A 50-bed regional eye care hospital for Gardez city is also in the pipeline with funds committed by the Government of Pakistan.

At present, Paktya has a 50-bed hospital in Gardez, a 30-bed hospital in Chamkani district, and another 30-bed hospital in Zazi Aryoub district.

The provincial capital is also home to a regional tuberculosis centre supported by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Since 2001, with support from the international health care, there has been steady development of health facilities for the estimated provincial population of 390,000.

In 2001, there was only a single Mother Health Centre (MCH) funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). A child maternity centre was established in 2002; followed by the civilian hospital established in Gardez in 2003. Between 2004 and 2005, 18 district clinics were established across the province to provide basic health services to the people.

Recently, the Paktya Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) provided ten ambulances to the Paktya Department of Public Health.

A community midwife education programme had also been launched in Paktya as Afghanistan suffers from one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, with one in six women dying during childbirth.

Over the last four years, 100 students have graduated from the midwife education programme, coming from Paktya and its two neighbouring provinces, Ghazni and Paktika.

The national midwifery programme prepares competent and qualified midwives who return to their respective districts and provinces to provide the much-needed care to women in the villages.

By Dilawar Khan Dilawar, UNAMA

UNODC reports major drug abuse in Afghanistan

UN News Centre (New York) 21 June 2010 - A survey on Drug Use in Afghanistan, issued today by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, shows that around one million Afghans (age 15-64) suffer from drug addiction.

At eight per cent of the population, this rate is twice the global average. "After three decades of war-related trauma, unlimited availability of cheap narcotics and limited access to treatment have created a major, and growing, addiction problem in Afghanistan," said UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa.

"The human face of Afghanistan's drug problem is not only seen on the streets of Moscow, London or Paris. It is in the eyes of its own citizens, dependent on a daily dose of opium and heroin above all - but also cannabis, painkillers and tranquilizers," said Mr Costa.

"Many Afghans are taking drugs as a kind of self-medication against the hardships of life. Significantly, many of them began taking drugs as migrants or refugees in camps in Iran and Pakistan," noted Mr Costa.

Yet, instead of easing pain, opiate use is causing even greater misery: it creates behavioural, social and health problems, crime, accidents, and loss of productivity in the workplace.

Injecting drug use, as well as sex traded for drugs or money, spread HIV and other blood-borne diseases.

During the past five years (in 2005 a similar survey was done), in Afghanistan the number of regular opium users has jumped 53 per cent, from 150,000 to 230,000 while the number of heroin users has increased from 50,000 to 120,000, a leap of 140 per cent. "In Afghanistan the growth of addiction to narcotics has followed the same hyperbolic pattern of opium production," observed Mr Costa.

One of the most shocking statistics in this report is the number of parents who give opium to their children; as high as 50 per cent of drug users in the north and south of the country. "This risks condemning the next generation of Afghans to a life of addiction," said Mr Costa.

The report reveals a major shortage of drug treatment. Only ten per cent of drug users surveyed had received any form of drug treatment, although 90 per cent of them felt that they were in need of it.

"More than 700,000 Afghans have no access to drug treatment. I invite the nations that support Afghanistan's efforts to curb drug cultivation to help it as well overcome its drug-related health crisis," said Mr Costa.

He called for much greater resources for drug prevention and treatment in Afghanistan, as part of mainstream healthcare and development programmes.

"Much has been said, and written, about Afghanistan as a leading producer of drugs, causing health havoc in the world. It is time to recognize that the same tragedy is taking place in Afghanistan, that has now become a leading consumer of its own opium," said Mr Costa.

AIHRC urges vigilance in human rights monitoring

17 June 2010 - The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in the northeast region recorded a total of 58 complaints during the first quarter of the Afghan year, and urged journalists to be vigilant in monitoring human rights violations.

"During the last three months, 58 complaints have been recorded by our office, and 17 complaints out of them (are) human rights cases, (of) which seven cases have already been solved," said Sayed Karim Talash in a recent press conference in Kunduz. The AIHRC acting manager for the region told media that the human rights group also went on 43 monitoring missions of detention centres and prisons in the region comprising Kunduz, Talhar and Baghlan, and that the visits resulted in the release of 20 prisoners who have been illegally detained.

Mr Talash urged media to monitor the plight of Afghan citizens in the region in terms of their economic, social and cultural rights, even as he reported that the kidnapping of children has declined by 70 per cent during the period as compared to the same period last year emphasizing the importance of media's role in promoting human rights he encouraged the journalists to help protect and promote Afghans' human rights.

AIHRC's outreach programmes have also educated more than 400 people on human rights principles, national laws and international treaties in the three provinces during the period, said Mr Talash. "Since its establishment in 2002, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission constantly tried to observe, protect and promote the rights of Afghan citizens and had great achievements," he added.

By Shamsuddin Hamed, UNAMA

