

Nowruz: The first day of the Afghan New Year – and the beginning of springtime...



Ban Ki-moon's Message for Nowruz

20 March 2010 - The United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon's Message on the International Day of Nowruz, the first time the Day has been recognized by the UN General Assembly.

The General Assembly's decision this year to recognize the International Day of Nowruz is evidence of a growing global awareness of the holiday's significance not only in the regions where it is celebrated but around the world.

For millennia, when the sun crosses the equator and the northern hemisphere enters Spring, peoples in the Balkans, the Black Sea Basin, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and other regions have carried out their own special traditions in celebration of Nowruz.

These rituals, from repainting homes to visiting friends to preparing symbolic meals, are infused with a spirit of renewal and can inspire not only those conducting them but all people.

As we commemorate this first International Day of Nowruz, I hope countries and people around the world will draw on this festival's history and customs to promote harmony with the natural world and foster global peace and goodwill.

Ban Ki-moon

Special Representative's Nowruz Message

20 March 2010 - The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, issues a Message for the Afghan New Year.

Nowruz is a very important moment of festivity that has been celebrated for 2,500 years.

And it is a sign of hope for peace which Afghans need.

We hope that this year will bring peace and also progress.

We will be with you if you want us to be with you.

The United Nations and all its staff wish all Afghans a very happy Nowruz.

Nawe Kall Mubarak Sha, Nowruze tan Mubarak.



Time for shift to greater Afghan responsibility for peace and stability – UN official

18 March 2010 - The time has come to transform the relationship between Afghanistan and its partners to enable greater responsibility on the part of Afghans themselves and an increasingly supporting role for the international community as the country strives to achieve peace and development, a senior United Nations official said today.

“Concrete steps must be taken by the international community to allow Afghans to be in charge of, and lead, processes while providing the capacity-building and support required for Afghan institutions to take on this role, including in civilian areas,” Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Alain Le Roy told a meeting of the Security Council.

“At the same time, the Afghan Government must concretely demonstrate that it can deliver on the accountability required for a real transition process to be sustainable,” added Mr Le Roy, who presented Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s latest report on Afghanistan to the Council.

Mr Ban called in his report for the international community to support the Afghan political process and to respect the people’s own understanding of their country. “There is no sovereignty without capacity and responsibility, and the purpose of the transition is to ensure that the Government of Afghanistan has both sufficient capacity and sufficient responsibility to exercise actual sovereignty,” the Secretary-General stated.

Mr Le Roy noted that, in the midst of a military surge and heightened military tempo, there is a “crowded” political calendar in the months ahead, with National Assembly elections planned for September, the peace jirga announced by President Hamid Karzai in just over a month, and a major international gathering on the way forward for the country that is scheduled to take place later this year in Kabul.

“There is a risk that the concept of transition, on which we have collectively agreed to pin our political and security strategy in Afghanistan, will be overtaken by such events,” he said.

“Our focus must remain firmly on ensuring that ‘Afghanization’ actually becomes more than the slogan it has been thus far.” Mr Le Roy added that an “unprecedented” level of international attention and resources is being invested in Afghanistan, in support of priorities that have been agreed with the Afghan Government and of a strategy of transition to greater Afghan responsibility that has been jointly endorsed at the London Conference of 28 January.

Security Council extends mandate of UN mission in Afghanistan by one year

22 March 2010 - The Security Council voted today to extend the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for another 12 months and to expand its mandate to include support for the parliamentary elections scheduled for September.

In a resolution adopted unanimously, Council members agreed to extend UNAMA through 23 March 2011, following the recommendation of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his latest report on the work of the mission.

The Security Council also requested that UNAMA provide technical and logistical support to the National Assembly and civil society in preparation for the parliamentary poll, as requested in a letter by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, with further assistance from the international community, as appropriate.

UNAMA has been in Afghanistan since March 2002, when following the fall of the Taliban, the Bonn Agreement established an interim Government and prescribed the drafting of a new Constitution and the holding of elections.

The mission is mandated to manage all humanitarian, relief, recovery and reconstruction activities. Today’s resolution reiterated that UNAMA and its new Special Representative Staffan de Mistura continue to lead international civilian efforts in the country.

In addition, the resolution incorporated what had been a growing call from senior UN officials for greater Afghan ownership over its domestic policy and what former Special Representative Kai Eide called “Afghanization of the electoral process.”

Speaking before the Security Council on 18 March, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Alain Le Roy said the international community must take concrete steps to allow Afghans to be in charge of their country, while providing the necessary capacity-building and support to let them manage this role, including in civilian areas.

In addition to the September elections, Mr. Karzai has announced a peace jirga, or gathering of elders, to be held in Afghanistan next month.

The Security Council said it welcomed efforts by the Government to promote dialogue with the opposition who is ready to “renounce violence, break ties with Al-Qaida and other terrorism organizations, denounce terrorism and accept the Afghan Constitution.”

The resolution also stressed the importance of strengthening and expanding the presence of UNAMA and other UN agencies, funds and programmes in the provinces.

Security for UNAMA activities in the country remains a challenge. The mission temporarily relocated part of its staff out of Afghanistan in October 2009, after five UN staff members were killed in an attack on a guesthouse used by UN workers in Kabul.

Later in the year, a major conference on the way forward for Afghanistan will be held in Kabul.

“We must work together and with determination to take advantage of the opportunity to make a difference that this alignment of unity of effort, strategies, priorities and resources presents.”

Last month Mr. Karzai signed a decree giving him the power to appoint all five members of the Commission, which is supposed to be an independent body.

According to Afghanistan’s Electoral Law, three of the five members of the Commission – mandated to investigate fraud, as well as provide guidance, technical assistance and support – are internationals appointed by the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan.



Afghans top global list of asylum applicants in 2009 – UN agency

23 March 2010 - Afghans overtook Iraqis as the nationality with the largest number of asylum applicants in 2009, according to a report issued today by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Last year, 26,800 Afghans submitted asylum applications, a jump of 45 per cent from 2008 figures. Iraqis submitted some 24,000 claims in 2009, with Somalis coming at third with 22,600 applications. Russians, Chinese, Serbians and Nigerians also submitted large numbers of applications.

UNHCR defines an asylum-seeker as an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not been determined. A person is considered a refugee, the agency said, if he or she fulfils criteria set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

In its annual report, UNHCR analyzes asylum levels and trends in the 27 European Union (EU) member States and more than one dozen other countries, including the United States, Canada, Turkey, Australia and Japan.

It found that the overall number of asylum-seekers in industrialized nations remained constant in 2009, with 377,000 applications, with most originating from Asia and the Middle East.

“The notion that there is a flood of asylum-seekers into richer countries is a myth,” said High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres. “Despite what some populists claim, our data shows that the numbers have remained stable.”

The number of asylum applications rose in 19 countries, but fell in 25 others.

The Nordic region saw a 13 per cent spike, receiving 51,000 requests, the highest in six years. By contrast, the number from Southern Europe dropped one third, down to 50,100 claims, with the greatest decreases recorded in Italy, Turkey and Greece.

The US remained the main destination for the fourth year running, with 13 per cent of the claims, or 49,000 people, mostly from China.

France came in second with 42,000 new applications, representing a 19 per cent increase from the previous year, due mainly to increasing claims from Serbian citizens originating mostly from Kosovo.

Canada, the United Kingdom and Germany rounded out the top five destination countries, which together received nearly half of the total claims recorded in 2009.

UN to select two international experts for Afghanistan’s poll complaints body – De Mistura

23 March 2010 - The United Nations will select two international experts to serve in Afghanistan’s election complaints commission ahead of legislative polls scheduled in September, the newly-appointed head of the UN mission in the country said today.

“I had had a meeting with President [Hamid] Karzai a few days ago. The President told me that the international experts who will be a part of the Complaints Commission are confirmed to be international. And he announced to me his decision that, I as SRSG of UNAMA, will be selecting them,” Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative to Afghanistan, told a news conference in Kabul.

“So we are working actively in identifying two very senior, highly credible personalities above all sides who will be, we believe, reassuring to all Afghans. And that, in fact, they have enough understanding of the Afghan culture, tradition and mentality and, at the same time, sufficient gravitas to be able to assert justice and a fair approach,” said Mr. de Mistura, who is also the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

The two experts would have “a very strong say inside the commission” to reassure Afghans of their impartiality, Mr. de Mistura said.

Afghanistan’s legislative elections are scheduled 18 September, according to Mr. de Mistura, adding that UNAMA was striving to ensure that the initial technical and logistical electoral preparations are in place by mid-April.

He stressed that it was the responsibility of the Afghan people to ensure that the elections are creditable.

“All of us, including the UN, will be supporting. But the final responsibility for their outcome and their credibility will lie with the Afghan authorities because these are and should be Afghan elections,” the UN envoy added.

The Security Council yesterday extended UNAMA’s mandate until 23 March 2011, realigning it to assist the Government in the transition to national leadership of the country’s recovery efforts.

“We are going to be very attentive to the reconciliation process and whenever we can help through suggesting, facilitating confidence-building measures or even beyond that, bearing in mind that this is and must be an Afghan-led initiative. We are ready, we have expertise, and we will help,” Mr. de Mistura said.

The UN will continue to monitor humanitarian aid delivery to ensure that assistance from both the Government and the international community was reaching all those in need.

The world body will also continue to speak out whenever human rights are violated.

“I continue reminding all concerned that civilian casualties are to be avoided because Afghans have suffered enough,” said Mr. de Mistura, a veteran diplomat who has worked in the UN system for 39 years.

Thousands celebrate Nowruz in Mazar-i-Sharif

22 March 2010 - From various parts of the country, including the remotest of locations, they came in thousands.

There weren't half as many people as last year, still, enough crowds thronged to the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif to celebrate Nowruz, the Afghan New Year.

As usual, the meeting point was the blue mosque of Mazar at the shrine of Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, which is one of the main Shia sanctuaries, along with Mecca (in Saudi Arabia) and Karbala (in Iraq).

"I came from Tajikistan," said Zabiullah, an Afghan expatriate now based in Dushanbe.

"It was a long way, but I felt it to be really important to be here with my family to celebrate this particular day. I wish this New Year will see peace and reconstruction efforts moving towards success," he added, before joining the crowds of pilgrims gathered behind the fences of the shrine.

"Around 350,000 people have come this year," according to Raffi, one of the organizers of the event.

"The crowds are not as much this year, because of insecurity, threats and bad weather conditions.

"We had two tragic events in the Salang Pass, the avalanche, in the recent past, and also a road incident yesterday. Maybe this discouraged people to come from Kabul. But, hopefully everything will take place in peace and fraternity," he added.

On a cold and rainy morning yesterday, in the compound of the Blue Mosque which was decorated for this particular event, the ceremony started with a long and intense prayer dedicated to peace.

Around the mosque, the crowds were silent and watchful. Some courageous pilgrims even climbed up trees so as not miss the ceremony.

Then, after a peace song offered to the audience by schoolgirls of Balkh, and a vibrant Afghan national anthem that echoed across the city of Mazar, Fayaz Mehareen, Cultural Advisor to the Balkh governor spoke to the guests.



"Nowruz is the identity of Mazar-i-Sharif since centuries," he said. "People from all across South East Asia usually come to celebrate this event here."

Then Noor Mohammad Atta, Governor of Balkh province, addressed the crowd and called for sustainable development and security. "The security of Balkh province is my number one priority. Enemies of Afghanistan have tried several times to disrupt Nowruz, but, fortunately, the police and security forces have prevented any major incident," he said.

Marshall Qasim Fahim, Afghanistan's First Vice President was also present at the event. "Nowruz was only an Afghan festival, but now that the United Nations has recognized it, it will appear in the international calendar of special days and will be known worldwide, which is a pride for us," he said.

After these speeches, the usual ceremony of Janda Bala – the rising of the holy flag in honour of Hazrat Ali – was welcomed by the crowd.

When the gates of the compound were finally opened to the public, thousands of people rushed in and touched the flag, which is a symbol of luck for the New Year.

Meantime, some Chopandaz (Buzkashi horsemen) rushed to the old Russian silo to participate in one of the most important matches of the year for Afghanistan's national sport. More than 200 horsemen eventually contested in a stunning battle on Mazar's muddy earth.

By the end of the afternoon, the rain began to fall. Nazir, an old man from Maimana, the capital of Faryab province, smiled when he was asked about his hopes for this New Year.

"Peace, security, development...these are hazy concepts. Progress in Afghanistan has to be made day after day. We need some concrete achievements," he responded.

"Look, it is raining today," he said pointing to the sky, "This will be good for agriculture. It is already a good sign, isn't it?" he asked.

Late in the night, loud explosions shook the city of Mazar. The crowd, still making merry in the streets, looked skywards at the fireworks that illuminated the dark sky and marked a stunning closure to this important day.

Following Nowruz, the Gul-e-Surkh (red roses) festival starts for 40 days. Over the next few days, the shy spring sun will allow red flowers to bloom all over the green hills of the region making the north even more beautiful.

By Alexandre Brecher-Dolivet, UNAMA