



The Secretary-General's Message on World Habitat Day 2010

4 October 2010 - As our world grows predominantly urban, World Habitat Day provides an annual opportunity to reflect on how we can make our towns and cities better places for all. With the theme "Better City, Better Life," this year's observance highlights the actions and policies that can improve well-being for the billion people who live in slums and other sub-standard housing around the world.

Typically living in developing countries, and largely powerless, disenfranchised and under the age of 25, the urban poor are too often condemned to a life without basic rights, hope of an education or decent work. Lacking adequate provision of fresh water, electricity, sanitation or health care, they suffer privations that all too often provide the tinder for the fires of social unrest. Vulnerable to exploitation and corruption, they need and deserve better cities and a better life.

The challenges of urban poverty – from pollution to criminal gang culture – are not insurmountable. Many cities are finding successful solutions. Smart cities recognize the importance of good governance, basic urban services for all, and streets and public spaces where women and children feel safe. They also recognize that better cities can help to mitigate global challenges, such as climate change, by promoting energy conservation and environmental sustainability.

Creating better cities demands the combined efforts of national and local governments, civil society and the private sector, supported by the best efforts of the United Nations system. On World Habitat Day, let us pledge to join hands to make better cities for a better future for all.

Afghanistan to introduce de-worming in major polio campaign

5 October 2010 - Around 7.8 million children across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan will be targeted during a 3-day polio vaccination drive.

Officially launched in Kabul on Sunday, what makes this campaign unique is the introduction of a major de-worming initiative that will target 4.6 million children aged between 2-5 years.

De-worming is used to cure worm infestation, which can lead to serious micronutrient deficiencies, anaemia and malnutrition and consequently hamper physical and mental development affecting overall cognitive performance.

Widely prevalent in developing countries, an estimated 300 million people with heavy worm infestation suffer from severe morbidity and approximately 150,000 deaths occur annually as a result, mostly amongst children.

"This is the first time ever that we are introducing deworming as part of the routine national polio campaign," stressed Her Excellency Dr Suraya Dalil, Acting Minister of Public Health.

The immunization campaign comes shortly after the country's health authorities reported this year's eighteenth polio case in the country's south. Led by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health and supported by UNICEF and World Health Organization, this vaccination drive is part of ongoing large-scale efforts to eradicate polio in Afghanistan, which is one of only four countries in the world where polio remains endemic.

More than 22,402 vaccination teams with 52,251 health workers, including volunteers, will immunize children all over the country including those living in high-risk areas, urban locations, and informal settlements.

Children from nomadic populations are also being targeted. House-to-house visits will be conducted and immunization posts will be established at bus stops, mosques, marketplaces and border areas, to name a few. This mobile approach is essential to ensure that every child in the target age group is reached, as many families remain unable to access health facilities in rural parts of Afghanistan.

"The introduction of deworming into the routine nationwide polio campaign is a smart investment in the country's public health system," noted Peter Graaff, WHO Representative to Afghanistan. "This is because the polio network in Afghanistan is impressively broad, spanning across all administrative levels and various sectors, encompassing a wide variety of social actors. The deworming initiative will capitalize on these existing mechanisms, resources and momentum that the national polio program already enjoys."

UNICEF Representative to Afghanistan Peter Crowley urged families in all the provinces to look out for vaccination teams and make sure their children receive the vaccine.

"Polio immunization is an essential way of safeguarding children's health, and preventing this crippling disease," he said. "The vaccine, which is used all over the world, is safe and easy to administer. It takes just a few seconds to immunize a child."



Afghan children flying kites for peace

3 October 2010 - A kite flying competition was organized in Laghman province in Afghanistan's east, on the occasion of the International Day of Peace.

UNAMA provided more than 100 Peace Day kites to members of the local youth federation and to children of the province's Juvenile Reform Centre (JRC).

"Many youth in Mihtarlam city (capital of Laghman province) climbed to the hill and participated in this competition for peace," said Shujauddin, Manager of the Youth Information and Contact Centre (YICC) in Laghman.

"These kites give us the feeling that we are part of these ongoing peace events, and that we are not forgotten on this important occasion," said Erfanullah, 16, an inmate in the JRC.

The Juvenile Reform Centre in Laghman province is administered by the Ministry of Justice.

"The JRC in Laghman lacks basic facilities that are mandatory for ensuring the respect for human rights for persons temporarily deprived of their freedom. UNAMA is continuously advocating with relevant stakeholders on these issues," said Enayatullah Zia, a Human Rights Assistant at UNAMA.

Afghan opium production nearly halved, UN report finds

1 October 2010 - Afghan opium production has decreased by almost 50 per cent this year, the United Nations said in a new report released today, while cautioning that rising prices on the global market may induce farmers to cultivate more of the lucrative crop.

Total opium production is estimated at 3,600 metric tons, down 48 per cent from 2009, according to the 2010 Afghan Opium Survey, produced by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

The agency says the sharp drop is mainly due to plant infection that took a heavy toll on the major poppy-growing provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. As a result, yield fell 48 per cent to 29.2 kilogrammes per hectare, from 56.1 kilogrammes per hectare compared with the previous year.

"This is good news but there is no room for false optimism; the market may again become lucrative for poppy-crop growers so we have to monitor the situation closely," said Yury Fedotov, Executive Director of UNODC.

The report also notes that much of the cultivation continued to take place in the southern and western provinces of the country.

"These regions are dominated by insurgency and organized crime networks. This underscores the link between opium poppy cultivation and insecurity in Afghanistan, a trend we have observed since 2007," said Mr. Fedotov.

At the same time, all 20 poppy-free provinces remained so in 2010 and four other provinces – Kunar, Laghman, Zabul and Herat – were almost poppy-free.

According to UNODC, surveys carried out last year showed that farmers were willing to consider abandoning opium cultivation due to the low price it fetched.

But while prices were on the decline from 2005 to 2009, they are again rising, with the gross income for farmers per hectare having increased by 36 per cent to \$4,900.

The problem is made worse by the low price of wheat, which is an important alternative crop. "We are concerned that in combination with the high price of opium, a low wheat price may also drive farmers back to opium cultivation," said Mr. Fedotov.

The Executive Director called for a comprehensive strategy to tackle the Afghan opium threat, including by strengthening the rule of law and security, spurring development efforts, boosting regional cooperation to contain the illicit drug trade, and curbing demand.

"Unless we reduce the demand for opium and heroin, our interventions against supply will not be effective," he stated. "As long as demand drives this market, there will always be another farmer to replace one we convince to stop cultivating, and another trafficker to replace one we catch."



WHO to increase health services for remote population in under-resourced Bamyan

5 October 2010 - The World Health Organization (WHO) pledged its commitment to work with health authorities in the under-resourced province of Bamyan to reach remote populations with increased health services.

Several districts of Bamyan including Yakawlang, Panjab, Waras and Kahmard remain inaccessible for long durations during the year due to harsh winter conditions. This hampers health service delivery and puts the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghans at risk.

"There is a real need to turn the spotlight on the good quality humanitarian work that is able to take place in Bamyan given its relatively secure situation in a country that is otherwise conflict-affected," said Peter Graaff, WHO Representative to Afghanistan.

WHO intensified the coverage and quality of its work with a view to strengthening this partnership.

The interventions include: *Reaching women and children with life-saving vaccination in difficult-to-reach areas.

*Prepositioning emergency medical supplies in district hospitals to cover basic health needs of at least 50,000 people.

*Reviving local income-generating activities that will empower the local population and in turn enable them to lead a healthy life.

*Raising awareness and addressing stigma surrounding leprosy and Tuberculosis by talking to patients and their families, donating treatment drugs to the TB and Leprosy Centre and building a STOP TB partnership with the Government of Bamyan.

*Local media reporters will be administering polio drops to children with an aim to involving them directly in polio eradication efforts.

*Introducing a major de-worming initiative targeting all children aged between 2-5 years as part of the nationwide polio campaign. De-worming is used to cure worm infestation, which can lead to serious micronutrient deficiencies, anaemia and malnutrition and consequently hamper physical and mental development.

*Later this month, 200,000 school children in grades 1-9 in all Bamyan schools will also be given deworming tablets.

*Strengthening the local Disease Early Warning System so that diseases are detected and treated early.

In addition to these interventions, WHO paid tribute to its polio staff member, Dr Afsar Khan Shinwari, who died in a road accident while on duty in rural Bamyan during a polio campaign earlier in this year. "His efforts did not go to waste and our team hopes to be back at the site where the tragedy occurred to commemorate his commitment to polio eradication efforts in Afghanistan," said Graaff.

Afghanistan speeds medical assistance to flood-hit Pakistan

4 October 2010 - As survivors of Pakistan's floods continue to face growing health problems, the World Health Organization in Afghanistan rushed emergency medical aid earlier today targeted for Pakistanis living in the worst-affected areas of the country.

The over 1200 kilogram-weighting dispatch airlifted on a UN charter aircraft bound for Islamabad contained 160,000 Rapid Diagnostic Tests that will be used to diagnose malaria - a potentially lethal disease - in flood victims on-site.

Receding flood waters, especially in endemic areas, provide a breeding ground for malaria at a time when diagnostic capacity is affected.

In such cases, RDTs (sometimes called "dipsticks") are an alternative to diagnosis based on clinical grounds or microscopy, particularly where good quality microscopy services cannot be readily provided.

"These life-saving medical supplies are meant to reach communities - especially children and (pregnant) women - worst-hit by the continuing crisis in neighboring Pakistan," said Peter Graaff, Representative of WHO in Afghanistan.

"In addition, we deployed a number of our health experts specializing in early detection and response to disease outbreaks, among other areas of public health expertise that are most urgently needed by our colleagues in Pakistan."

"This act of solidarity will not hinder our ability to respond to potential and ongoing disasters on home soil. We stand ready to address health needs of not only the Afghan people but also those of our flood-stricken neighbors," he added.

Urgent health needs

"The cross-border assistance extended to us by the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Public Health in Afghanistan has been crucial in this critical moment of emergency and proved to be very timely and effective in addressing the ever-growing risk of communicable diseases, particularly malaria," said Guido Sabatinelli, WHO Representative in Pakistan.

"Colleagues and emergency medical supplies sent across from Kabul are now operating in some of the most vulnerable districts of Sindh and Punjab."

Pressing health needs in Pakistan include improving access to health care for the more than 18 million people affected by the flood emergency, including the 8 million in direct need of humanitarian assistance, monitoring and controlling water-borne and vector-borne diseases, providing enough medicines and related supplies are available to meet health demands, and ensuring coordination of the health sector response is strong and effective.

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Government, partners pledge to promote child education and celebrate World Teachers Day

5 October 2010 - The Afghan Ministry of Education, with the technical support of UNESCO and financial support from the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), organized the first National Conference on Inclusive and Child-Friendly Education.

More than 120 delegates from Ministry of Education, other government ministries, Universities, NGOs, the donor community and UN agencies reaffirmed their commitment to promote the right to education for all children regardless on their gender, abilities, disabilities, health conditions and circumstances. The Ministry of Education adopted the Afghanistan Declaration on Inclusive and Child-Friendly Education developed by the delegates, stressing the importance of promoting non-discrimination in education and providing future generations with values, basic literacy skills and life skills.

Inclusive and child-friendly education should be seen as an educational and developmental approach that seeks to address the learning needs of all children and youth, with special focus on those who are most vulnerable to exclusion from and within the education system. As stated in the Afghanistan Declaration "The education system should contribute to the peaceful development of Afghanistan, enabling children, families and communities to develop".

The UNESCO representative reiterated that "the role of the education system in combating poverty and social exclusion is pivotal for successful development, and that we will not be able to reach the Education for All (EFA) goals unless all schools become inclusive to all children".

On 5th October, the national conference was also an opportunity to celebrate the World Teacher Day 2010 under the slogan "Recovery begins with teachers" and to pay homage to all Afghan teachers. In countries affected by conflict, teachers are instrumental to reconstruction and peace-building. On this occasion, the Ministry of Education honored the children and teachers from their inclusive pilot schools, supported by MACCA, UNESCO and UNICEF.

During the closing ceremony of the conference, the Deputy Minister for Academic Affairs, Mr. Mohammad Sediq Patman, requested all national and international partners to work towards one common goal: providing quality education for boys and girls all over Afghanistan.

Gardez's citizens pledge to work toward peace

30 September 2010 - A large gathering of people, including the governor of Paktya, senior Government officials, UN agencies, civil society, and school children and teachers, pledged to work towards bringing peace to Afghanistan, at a function to mark Peace Day 2010 in Gardez.

"Today we are observing Peace Day, even as many people continue to die. Due to the absence of peace, our youth are being killed, our women have become widows...and the Afghan people are becoming deprived from leading a prosperous life," said Zarghona Himmat, a member of the Provincial Council.

Himmat also called on tribal elders and the youth to do their best in bringing peace to the country. Religious scholars such as Maulavi Mirajuddin, a member of the Ulema's Council, who also spoke at the event, said Islam teaches the lessons of peace and harmony.

"The Holy Prophet says those who promote reconciliation between two people will go to paradise," he informed the gathering about the significance of peace from an Islamic point of view.

"Of course, we are all aware there is no peace yet in Afghanistan. So 21 September can not be a day of celebration, but a day of reflection and re-motivation so that we may continue to play our part in the important effort to find peace for Afghanistan, after so many years of violence and difficulty," Christophe Svillon, from UNAMA, added.

Peace Day memorabilia, including kites, were distributed to participants and doves were set free in the air to end the function. Meanwhile, with the close cooperation of the Gardez municipality, UNAMA fixed Peace Day banners and posters in different parts of the city.