

UN statement on the death of development worker, Linda Norgrove

10 October 2010 - It is with great sadness that all of us in the humanitarian and development community, and in particular those of us who worked with her in the United Nations, learnt of the death of Linda Norgrove. Her death is also a tragedy and loss to the people of Afghanistan whom she served with dedication and passion.

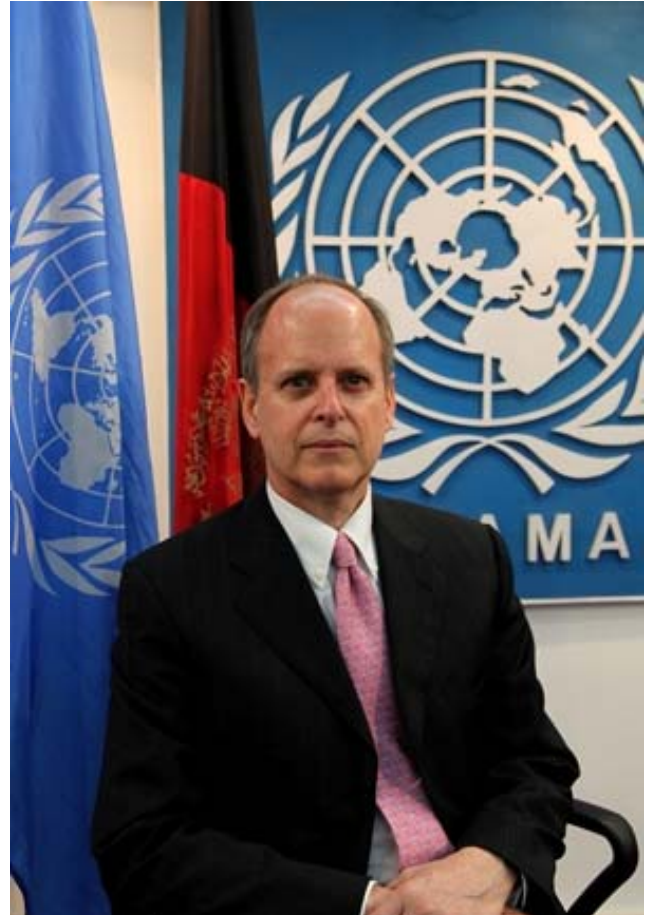
From 2005 to 2008, Linda worked in Afghanistan for the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Office for Project Services on bio-diversity conservation issues and road projects, among others. She worked closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Environmental Protection Agency. However, Linda's commitment to Afghanistan was not limited to her work.

She had a genuine interest in the country, fluent in Dari and learning Pashto, travelling extensively and building lasting friendships with her international and Afghan colleagues alike. She was a true advocate for the people of Afghanistan and was dedicated to bringing improvements to their lives — one of the reasons she chose to return to Afghanistan in January of this year. Her spirit and compassion will be greatly missed.

We condemn the killing of Linda Norgrove. The increasing violence which targets humanitarian and development workers, as well as civilians in Afghanistan, is unacceptable.

Robert Watkins

Humanitarian and United Nations Resident Coordinator, Kabul



Security Council extends ISAF mandate in Afghanistan

13 October 2010 - The Security Council today extended the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan for another year, calling on Governments to increase its current strength of 120,000 troops to counter growing terrorism by the Taliban and Al-Qaida.

In a unanimously adopted resolution, similar to last year's call when the force numbered barely half its current strength at 67,700, the 15-member body recognized "the need to further strengthen ISAF to meet all its operational requirements."

It voiced strong concern at "the increased violent and terrorist activities by the Taliban, Al-Qaida, other illegal armed groups and criminals, including those involved in the narcotics trade, and the increasingly strong links between terrorism activities and illicit drugs."

At the same time it urged ISAF, led by General David Petraeus of the United States which supplies some 80,000 troops, and other partners to speed up training of self-sufficient, accountable and ethnically-balanced national Afghan security forces to ensure security and the rule of law throughout the country.

Recognizing the interconnected nature of the challenges facing Afghanistan and stressing the need for progress on security, governance, human rights, rule of law and development as well as the cross-cutting issues of counter-narcotics, anti-corruption and accountability, the resolution called for further Government efforts to fight corruption, promote transparency and increase its accountability.

It expressed serious concern at the increased high number of civilian casualties, particularly among women and children, the large majority of them caused by Taliban, Al-Qaida and other extremist groups, and urged ISAF and other international forces to continue to undertake enhanced efforts to prevent civilian casualties.

It also voiced strong concern at recruitment and use of children by Taliban forces in Afghanistan as well the killing and maiming of children.

While noting advances in security sector reform, the Council called for further progress by the Government in ending impunity and strengthening judicial institutions, including reconstruction and reform of the prison sector, the rule of law and respect for human rights including for women and girls, and in particular women's rights under the Constitution to fully participate in the political, economic and social spheres of Afghan life.

Women's rights tackled in Zabul

9 October 2010 - Women's rights was the focus of a recent event in Qalat, capital of Zabul province, where speakers talked about women's rights as enshrined in both Islam and the Constitution of Afghanistan.

Hundreds of women and girls listened to the call of speakers for them to be vigilant about their rights to stop being considered as second-class citizens.

"Girls are often forced to get married without their consent and often at young ages. They are not allowed to go to schools or participate in social activities. In remote areas, women are only required to look after household chores and are confined behind four walls," a participant told media who covered the event.

To help women earn a living, the provincial government is providing employment to the womenfolk. "We are ready to provide job opportunities for the women in the government departments. They will be paid salaries up to US\$ 250 and will work shoulder to shoulder with their male colleagues," said Mr Mohammad Rasol Yar, an advisor to the governor of Zabul.

The lead-up activity to the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in November had members of government departments, the Provincial Reconstruction team (PRT), the Department of Women's Affairs, media, civil society and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) attending.

Women continue to suffer in the southern region where insecurity and obedience to strict traditions and customs remain major obstacles in the protection of their rights.

Though the provincial Department of Women Affairs said only three cases of violence have been reported so far this year, Ms Sadiqa Jalali, head of the women's group, Harakate Khwaharan Association, believes that violence against women still prevails at a larger scale in Zabul province.

The speakers stressed that women are an important part of the society and should stand firm in order to protect their rights enshrined both in Islam and in the Constitution of Afghanistan.

By Mujeeb Rahman, UNAMA



Legal and judicial awareness programme launched in Khost

10 October 2010 - A six-month legal and judicial awareness programme has been launched in Khost province to advance the rule of law over traditional tribal conflict resolution systems by making people familiar with the existing government system and prevailing rules and regulations.

The "People Awareness of Legal and Judicial Programme" is a joint project of the non-government organization Mediothec Community Centre Afghanistan (MCCA) and Khost University.

Launched last week, the programme will be implemented throughout Khost province by a six-man council whose members "will be visiting schools and educational institutions to get the students to know the prevailing laws and their positive implications on society," said Mr Najibullah Alokhel, head of MCCA which initiated the project.

"According to this programme, a council of six professional legal experts (four teachers and two distinguished students from the Department of Law and Political Science of Khost University) will be continuously working to raise awareness on the rule of law," Mr Alokehl added.

The MCCA head said "the six-member council will assist and consult elders of the society, mediating the dispute between the conflicting parties in case resolution, in terms of the government-enacted laws."

Muhammadullah Mandozai, director of Khost University's Law and Political Science Department, said the programme seeks "to find permanent solutions for the disputes and avoid contradiction between the decisions of elders of the society and of the prevailing laws – we want to enlighten people mind in this regard."

The launching of the programme was attended by tribal elders, university teachers and students, MCCA members, and representatives from civil society organizations and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

By Dilawar Khan Dilawar, UNAMA



Midwives save lives in Badakhshan

13 October 2010 - Twenty-three trained midwives graduated on Monday from the Badakhshan Community Midwifery Education School, at a ceremony that was attended by Government health officials and donor agencies' representatives.

This is the fourth batch of students to complete the 18-month long course in Faizabad, the capital of the north-eastern Badakhshan province.

In all, 88 professional and educated midwives have graduated from the Badakhshan Community Midwifery Education School since its establishment in 2005.

The object of the programme is to train and recruit community midwives in remote and rural areas and to improve the skills and competence of the midwifery education programme in Badakhshan.

"According to a UNICEF study in 2002, the maternity mortality rate was very high at the country level," said Sayram Sadat, Director of the Community Midwifery Education School in Faizabad. Sadat added that although they do not have specific statistics, indicators now show a 50 per cent reduction in the maternity mortality rate in Badakhshan, as compared to previous years.

"Within 18 months we learned about pre and post-delivery health care, techniques of safe delivery, nutrition, breast feeding, health care in the pregnancy period, birth complications and family planning," said Naseema Hazeem, who topped the examination.

"We also have the responsibility of public health education. We educate our clients at the clinics and also go from house-to-house and spread health information," said Mastoora Khalilii, who came in second.

The Ministry of Public Health with financial support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Health Services Support Project (HSSP) and with technical support from Agha Khan Health Services implements the programme.

The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) donated 52 midwifery kits at the cost of US \$260,000 to the graduated midwives so far.

By Shamsuddin Hamed, UNAMA



UN helps increase health services in Bamyan's remotest districts

11 Oct 2010 - United Nations health agency World Health Organization (WHO) pledged to continue working with the Government so as to reach remote populations with increased health services in the under-resourced province of Bamyan in central Afghanistan.

A delegation of WHO staff, led by WHO Country Representative Peter Graaff, traveled to Bamyan province to monitor the quality and effectiveness of their work. Most parts of the mountainous regions of this province remain inaccessible for long periods during the year because of harsh winter conditions. "This hampers health service delivery and puts the lives of hundreds of thousand of Afghans at risk," said a WHO press release. "There is a real need to turn the spotlight on the good quality humanitarian work that is able to take place in Bamyan, given the relatively secure situation in a country that is otherwise conflict-affected," said Graaff.

WHO's health interventions in Bamyan include the pre-positioning of emergency medical supplies to district hospitals to cover the basic health needs of people living in the province's remotest districts. "We want to make sure the areas cut off by winter should also have access to medical services," Peter Graaff said.

Ewaz Ali, a resident of Qarghanato village in the west of Bamyan city, shared his story with UNAMA: two years ago during the winter he had to take his pregnant wife to the clinic near his village because of some pregnancy complications. He says that because of the lack of medicines, doctor referred his wife to the provincial hospital. "My wife was sitting on a donkey and then we walked for 3 hours in snowfall to reach the nearest point where a car could pick us up. The roads were blocked because of snow," Ewaz said.

WHO officials say that the pre-positioned medicines will be enough to serve the basic health needs of 50,000 people for the duration of the coming winter months. Meanwhile, WHO also supports local income-generating activities that aim to economically empower local communities and in turn enable them to lead healthy lives.

The Basic Development Need (BDN) programme runs in two districts of Bamyan province for 1,600 families. Mohammad Yasin is a farmer in Hyderabad village who has benefited from this programme. "I have nine children and it was very hard for me to earn enough from my land to afford daily expenses, I also had to stop my sons for going to school so they could help me in farming," Mohammad said. "But now after this (BDN) programme, I have opened a shop and bought cattle for my family. I am happy and have enough money to buy school books for my children," he added.

According to Graaff, the BDN programme is a pilot project in Bamyan to show the world that with very little money the local communities can be economically supported and "that is what the Afghans need."

By Jaffar Rahim, UNAMA

UN-supported school brings smiles in eastern Afghanistan

14 October 2010 - The locals and their children were all smiles on Tuesday as senior United Nations officials reached a small village in eastern Afghanistan called Nala Bidak, an arid desert until a few years back.

The occasion was to inaugurate the only school in the village that the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) helped build with funding from the Government of Japan.

UNICEF Country Representative Peter Crowley inaugurated the "cost-effective" primary school that now has 250 students, with an impressive enrolment of 124 girls, in Nangarhar's Surkhrod district which has about 300 returnee families.

When the school was established in 2007, it started with just 30 students (16 boys and 14 girls) from 28 families who returned from Pakistan, leaving behind their life as refugees.

"When we first came here, there was nothing – no water, no school and no other facilities," said Haji Abdul Gaffar, a local elder. "UNICEF dug wells and also constructed this school, calling on all the families living there to send all their children to school," he added.

Over the years, humanitarian agencies helped develop the desert into a thriving hamlet with school, running water and roads, among others.

While inaugurating the school, Mr Crowley said he was impressed by the high number of girls enrolled in school, but noted that it was not 50 per cent yet. "Next time, I would like to see all the girls and boys of this village in school," he said.

Before the construction of the 12-room school at the total cost of US\$ 86,281 (about 4 million Afs), the children used to take classes under the sun.

The occasion of the school inauguration was also seized to spread the message on children's rights. Members of the Kabul-based Parwaz Theatre, contracted by UNICEF, entertained the children through their puppet shows on five themes of child rights – identity, protection, participation, education, health and hygiene.

UNICEF has been supporting children's education, among other activities, in Afghanistan through Government bodies and civil society organizations.

By Tilak Pokharel, UNAMA



Afghan cricket team trains enthusiasts in Jalalabad

13 October 2010 - About 130 cricket-frenzied girls in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province gathered on Monday in Jalalabad to play a UN-funded cricket match, something unthinkable for girls until recent years in this part of the country.

The schoolgirls and another 200 boys spent three days in Jalalabad with members of the Afghan national cricket team and a female trainer specially brought from Pakistan, to learn how to bat, bowl and field, according to UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), which funded the event co-organized by the Department of Youth and an NGO called Afghan Youth Cricket Support Organization (AYCSO).

The event is a part of several youth-related programmes designed and implemented by various UN agencies to mark the International Year of the Youth in Afghanistan. This is the second such event to be organized in the country.

Aziz Noor of UNICEF-Jalalabad said the UN body would continue to support youth-focused activities like this "because healthy youth can do something for themselves and the country."

The Jalalabad event was witnessed by UNICEF Country Representative Peter Crowley, Provincial Governor Gul Agha Sherzai and senior UNAMA staff, among others.

Raees Ahmadzai, the tournament organizer and founder of the implementing NGO – AYCSO – said he learnt cricket in refugee camps in nearby Pakistan.

"It is our duty to share our skills and help build the future of Afghanistan," said Ahmadzai in a UNICEF statement.

Crowley said a greater focus on sport can promote the development of important skills and attitudes that are key to the future of Afghanistan's youth.

"Sports brings people together on an equal playing field that transcends social, ethnic and cultural divides," he said.

Over the years, cricket has fast become one of the most popular sports among Afghan. Earlier this year, for the first time, Afghanistan qualified for the cricket world cup.

By Tilak Pokharel, UNAMA





Afghanistan appeals for increased, improved care for people with mental and neurological disorders

10 October 2010 - On the occasion of World Mental Health Day, Afghan government officials, the World Health Organization and the European Commission reinforced the need to take action and make progress against mental, neurological and substance use disorders amongst Afghans.

More than 50 per cent of Afghans, most of whom are women, suffer from psychosocial problems or mental disorders. Yet only a fraction of the health budget is spent on mental health. As a result of this lack of investment, which has also led to a chronic shortage of trained mental health specialists, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, psychiatric social workers and counsellors mainly in rural areas, a large majority of people with these disorders receive no care at all.

Her Excellency Dr Suraya Dalil, Acting Minister of Public Health urged the donor community to rapidly increase funding that will afford the Afghan health system to, inter alia, achieve a higher coverage of mental health services and close the treatment gap.

This year's theme, 'Mental health and long term illness: the need for continued and integrated care' underscores the message that improvement in mental health services does not require sophisticated and expensive technologies. What is required is increasing the capacity of the primary health care system for delivery of an integrated package of care.

"Placing the ability to diagnose and treat mental health patients into the primary health care system will significantly increase the number of people who can access care," stressed Peter Graaff, WHO Representative to Afghanistan." WHO stands ready to provide technical support to Afghan health authorities to implement and further develop basic mental health services."

An estimated one in four people globally will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. People with mental, neurological and substance use disorders are often stigmatized and subject to neglect and abuse. "Mental wellbeing of Afghans is important for peace and development in Afghanistan. In addition to treatment, what is required is improving social services for people with mental and psychosocial disabilities," said Dr Dalil.

"Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness, a sense of purpose and well being is vital to individuals, families and the community at large. Openly addressing mental health as a key issue for the country by the highest authorities lends itself to advocacy, and should result in increased fund raising, awareness, community mobilization, better services, better compliance, and improved quality of life. This will reduce stigma and improve human rights of people with psychiatric disorder. People will feel that the authorities are concerned about their psychosocial well being." added Graaff.

UN and civil society develop mechanism to enhance delivery of government services in Herat

7 October 2010 - Over twenty representatives from various civil society organizations gathered in Herat on Wednesday at the initiative of the United Nations to discuss how to improve the delivery and monitoring of government services to the population of Herat province.

"We received strong support from the governor to organize this meeting," stressed Edgardo Buscaglia, chief advisor for the United Nations Development Programme's Accountability and Transparency Project (UNDP-ACT).

"We intend to train civil society organizations to travel to the remote areas and monitor services in such areas as health, education, infrastructure. Those organizations will then report to the Provincial Council which will raise the issue with the Governor's Office and with the line departments," added Mr Buscaglia.

To implement UNDP-ACT, the UNDP's Afghan Sub-National Governance Project (UNDP-ASGP) will finance the training and the activities of the monitors, while the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) will act as trainer and facilitator.

Atul Sekhar, regional project manager for UNDP-ASGP, explains: "Our goal is to have the civil society actors, the Provincial Council members and the Governor's Office to agree on a framework to monitor and evaluate the delivery of services, and eventually to improve the capacity of the local government."

This pilot activity will be replicated in Jalalabad, Mazar and Kabul.

By Fraidoon Poya & Henri Burgard,
UNAMA