

UN envoy's message on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr

9 September 2010 - On behalf of the United Nations family in Afghanistan I share my heartfelt greetings to the Afghan people in the celebration of the religious festival of Eid-ul-Fitr.

Throughout the month of Ramazan the people of Afghanistan have once again deepened the practice of their faith through fasting and reflection on the values of peace, harmony and cooperation that are at the heart of the Muslim faith. The United Nations has the deepest respect for this faith, and the central role it plays in the fabric of Afghan society.

We are delighted to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr with the Afghan people. This is a time of personal, family and social renewal as families pray and gather together to greet each other over these festive days. The spirit of peace and harmony at the heart of this religious festival can also help renew national efforts to find the path to peace in Afghanistan.

On behalf of the United Nations family in Afghanistan, I wish all Afghan people Eid Mubarak.

SRSO Staffan de Mistura speaks to BBC on threat to burn Quran

9 September 2010 - SRSO Staffan de Mistura appeared on the BBC's programme, The Hub, on Wednesday to call on the religious group to not go ahead with its threat to burn copies of the Quran.

GOWING: The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has added her voice to the Whitehouse condemnation of these plans by a small Evangelical church in Florida, to burn copies of the Quran on Saturday; that's the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in New York City. This echoes the warnings from the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Petraeus that the burning will inflame emotions and endanger US troops abroad. Well the pastor who runs this church says the plan for the burning has not changed. Let's get another view from Afghanistan, live to Kabul and Staffan de Mistura, UN special envoy to Afghanistan, Mr. de Mistura, we've heard from the Whitehouse we've heard from the US Secretary of State and the US military commander. What voice are you adding? And what is your assessment if this burning of the Quran does go ahead?

DE MISTURA: The voice I'm adding is the voice on behalf of all UN staff in Afghanistan, who are 1,000 foreigners and 6,000 Afghans, and thousands and thousands members of the international community; think about it. And I would like to be able, if they were listening to us, to talk to these people who are planning to do this type of thing. Think about this, more than 200,000 foreigners are here in Afghanistan. We're working hand in hand with millions of Afghans, who are moderate, who are believing anyway in a religion that we should be respecting, and the threat of destroying and burning the holy Quran, not only 9/11, but on the very time of the end of Ramadan. That could be terrible. Now this has nothing to do with freedom of expression. Freedom of expression cannot be just the freedom of offending one billion people in the world who believe in Islam.

GOWING: What kind of, dare I say; I know in the United Nations you don't talk about intelligence; but what kind of information from the ground are you getting. Are there people aware of this, who feel deeply upset if this does go ahead?

DE MISTURA: If this goes ahead, particularly in coincidence with this type of very special religious activities, in the whole Islamic world, i.e. the end of the Ramadan, the Eid, well we could have terrible consequences. Now we are here to try to stabilize the country, Afghanistan. We are here to try to show that we respect their culture,



United Nations envoy calls for religious group to cancel threat to burn Quran

8 September 2010 - On behalf of the United Nations and the whole international community present in Afghanistan, I would like to express in the strongest possible terms our concern and indeed outrage at the announcement by a small religious group abroad of their intention to burn copies of the holy book of the Quran.

The exercise of the freedom of expression should not be confused with the intention to offend the religion and beliefs of millions of people. If such an abhorrent act were to be implemented, it would only contribute to fuelling the arguments of those who are indeed against peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

It could also put in jeopardy the efforts of so many Afghans and foreigners who are trying to assist Afghanistan to find its own way to peace and stability within the framework of its own culture, traditions and, indeed, religion. This is particularly true on the eve of the Eid-ul-Fitr festivities.

we respect their tradition and we respect their religion, and we are actually fighting against the extreme side of any part. Now this group of people would be the best allies of the Taliban if they do that, and I hope if they put their hands on their hearts they will not want to do that.

GOWING: How are you handling this given your deep concerns? Here we're talking in English on an international television channel, but of course most people in Afghanistan get their message through radio. Now, what is the balance of judgment you're having to make about mentioning this case, but also reassuring at the same time?

DE MISTURA: I have just done that two hours ago, I addressed all the radios and televisions in Afghanistan, and issued a press release, both in Dari and in Pashto, telling them that we are outraged at the very idea that the international community the thousands and thousands of people, men and women who are here in Afghanistan, are condemning the very idea of trying to do so. That the culture needs to be respected and that we are feeling that that would be terrible. At the same time we are also believing that our work would be damaged, not only ours but the ones of many Afghans who are working with us. I had a reaction from them that they understood that we feel totally differently and that we are in fact going to be as offended and damaged as the Afghans would be in that took place.

GOWING: Staffan de Mistura, head of the UN mission, thank you very much indeed for joining us live from Kabul in Afghanistan.

SRSG Staffan de Mistura's opening address on the launch of "Art for Peace"

7 September 2010 - Joint United Nations-Turquoise Mountain youth arts exhibition for International Peace Day at Queen's Palace, Babur Garden, Kabul, Afghanistan

Besmillah Rahman Raheem, Ramazan Kareem

Thank you Excellency, thank you dear Director [Turquoise Mountain], also, for the opportunity of being here today. The 21st of September is an important date for the international community, for the United Nations, and Afghanistan is an old, dignified, and respected Member of the United Nations.

I am grateful to your Excellency to want to pay attention to the 21st of September which is the International Peace Day and also to the Turquoise Mountain Foundation and through you, Director, to actually help us to give special attention to this day.

Of course there is not much peace yet in Afghanistan. We all know it. But we also know that this is a crucial year in which we can together try to help Afghans to find their own peace. So the 21st of September can not be a celebration day, but a day of thinking and re-motivating ourselves in order to help Afghans to find peace after so many years, so many years of violence and of difficulties.

The 21st of September will be three days after the national parliamentary elections in Afghanistan – an opportunity for Afghans to actually use democracy and their own free will in order to indicate in what direction they would like this country to go.

We know that some violence takes place in every election, and that it has taken place in the past in Afghanistan. Our prayers and hopes are that in fact these elections will not be violent. And that Afghans will have the right to move from what they have so often, bullets, to the opportunity of casting ballots in order to show their own willingness about the future.

Many years ago, 22 years ago, I was in Afghanistan. That was war time, again. And I remember I was looking for a carpet to bring to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva in order to show the culture and the strength of the culture of Afghanistan. At that time the carpet I found reproduced air planes, war, fighting. I brought that carpet to Geneva to show how war can change culture and can affect art, unfortunately. The contrary is also true. Art can also send a signal when there is a time of non-peace about the wish, the urge, the hope, the prayer for peace. That is why it is so good and so important to see this exhibit today.

Seventy per cent of the Afghan population is young, below 25 years old. A peaceful Afghanistan is going to be their future, should be their future. And having 12 young Afghan artists telling us through their own art a wisdom and a vision of peace is a strong signal, not only to Afghans but to the all of us.

That is why I am grateful for this initiative and to your Excellency, Mr Minister, to you, Director, and to each of the artists for helping us even at a time when there is no peace to celebrate, to be actually able to remind ourselves that young Afghans are, through their own creativity and their own art, telling us what type of vision we should all be having for the future of Afghanistan.

And finally, if you will allow me to change the protocol a little, I think instead of us being seen thanking the artists, we should be having them with us being thanked publically. So I would like, if you allow me, to ask the artists to come here so that we can shake their hands, and thank them publically for their own message to all of us which we can see around us.

Thank you very much.



Young Afghan artists share their vision for peace

7 September 2010 – International Peace Day campaign launched in Kabul in partnership with 12 young artists

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) today launched "Art for Peace" in Kabul as the centerpiece of its 2010 International Day of Peace campaign. UNAMA partnered with the renowned cultural group Turquoise Mountain Foundation to mount the exhibition at Kabul's historic Queen's Palace at Babur Garden.

The Minister for Information and Culture, Dr Sayed Makhdum Raheen, opened the exhibition. Also responsible for youth affairs, Minister Raheen spoke of the tradition of visual arts in Afghanistan, which goes back at least 2,500 years. "Many things have happened to painters and painting in the recent decades, unfortunately," he said, "but our young painters have recreated art in this country after all that has happened to them and to the art of painting."

Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, praised the young artists and thanked the director of Turquoise Mountain, Ms Shoshana Coburn, for the collaboration in presenting the exhibition for peace. "Of course there is not much peace yet in Afghanistan," he said. "We all know it. But we also know that this is a crucial year in which we can together try to help Afghans to find their own peace," said de Mistura.

"The 21st of September cannot be a celebration day, but a day of thinking and re-motivating ourselves in order to help Afghans to find peace after so many years, so many years of violence and of difficulties," he continued.

"The trees are burned, but the future is bright," said young artist, Asadullah Pazhman, speaking of his work.

Shoshana Coburn of Turquoise Mountain spoke of the 150 young Afghan artists who study and work with the organization, which is soon to move into the old city area as part of a refurbishment of old buildings as a cultural centre. "The (artists exhibiting) are a very inspiring group of young people," she said. "They do many things. They are artists obviously. But they have families, some of them work with the government, some of them work with the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, many of them are students and many of them are teachers."

Aged from 18 into their early 30s, the artists gather every week to study and work together.

"Young Afghans are, through their own creativity and their own art, telling us what type of vision we should all be having for the future of Afghanistan," concluded Staffan de Mistura.

The Secretary-General's Message on International Literacy Day

8 September 2010 - This year's observance of International Literacy Day highlights the central role of literacy in the empowerment of women.

Literacy transforms the lives of women, their families, communities and societies.

Literate women are more likely to send their children, especially their girls, to school.

By acquiring literacy, women become more economically self-reliant and more actively engaged in their country's social, political and cultural life.

All evidence shows that investment in literacy for women yields high development dividends.

Women's literacy has gained greater prominence on political agendas over the past decade, ever since the World Education Forum, in Dakar, at which governments set the goal of halving the number of adult illiterates by 2015.

The UN Literacy Decade, running from 2003 to 2012, has given further impetus to reducing illiteracy. Illiteracy rates are dropping, yet approximately one adult in six is still unable to read or write; two out of three illiterate adults are women.

The world needs increased funding and sustained advocacy for quality literacy programmes that empower women and ensure that girls and boys at primary and secondary level do not become a new generation of young illiterates.

The International Literacy Prizes awarded by UNESCO today to programmes in Cape Verde, Egypt, Germany and Nepal are examples of excellence and innovation.

Each is tangible proof of literacy's profound and positive influence on women living in very different circumstances – from rural environments to immigrant urban communities. Such programmes deserve to be widely replicated and expanded.

Every literate woman marks a victory over poverty. On this International Literacy Day I urge governments, donors, non-governmental organizations and all development partners to make literacy accessible to women everywhere.

Literacy is an essential foundation for development and prosperity. Empowering women through literacy empowers us all.



International Literacy Day - 8 September 2010

6 September 2010 - "The Power of Women's Literacy" is this year's International Literacy Day theme. Improving Afghanistan's literacy is a key development goal for the country, which has only 26 per cent literacy among over 15-year-olds, and only 12 per cent among girls and women over 15 years.

UNESCO and UN Habitat work to support the Government of Afghanistan in tackling the country's literacy problem, whose Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) sets the national framework for this task. It is essential that everyone working to improve literacy in Afghanistan reach out to communities that are under-served, are vulnerable to exclusion and those who are living in extreme poverty.

Literacy is a fundamental human right contributing to the improvement of health conditions, socioeconomic standards and the overall quality of life. Literacy can also play a crucial role in building and sustaining a peaceful society.

This year's theme "The Power of Women's Literacy" highlights the importance of women's literacy for participation, citizenship, and the development of the family and the community in terms of their economic situation, education and health.

The Afghan Government's national plans aim to reduce the rate of illiteracy by 50 per cent by 2015. This target is clearly set by the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), and National Literacy Action Plan.

UNESCO and UN-Habitat programmes give practical support to achieving this goal, through UNESCO's Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan Programme (ELA) and UN Habitat's Learning for Community Empowerment Programme (LCEP-2).

UNESCO's ELA programme, funded by the Government of Japan, aims at providing quality literacy education to 600,000 beneficiaries, 60 per cent of them women, in 18 provinces of Afghanistan by 2013. The ELA programme will also provide skills development to some graduates of the 9-month literacy class.

UN-Habitat is implementing the LCEP-2 Programme, funded by USAID, which is an integrated approach combining literacy, community banking and the acquisition of productive skills. This will lead to improved livelihoods for more than 250,000 people (60 per cent female) in 20 provinces of Afghanistan.

Everyone in Afghanistan has a role to play to help reduce illiteracy. UNESCO and UN Habitat strongly urge all government ministries, NGOs, civil society groups and the local communities themselves, as well as the international community, to celebrate International Literacy Day's message of the power of women's literacy and to continue their commitment towards eradicating illiteracy in the country.



Afghan youths go house-to-house raising HIV awareness

9 September 2010 - HIV/AIDS is the focus of a door-to-door campaign carried out by young people in the south-eastern province of Nangarhar.

Youth groups have recently conducted nearly 400 awareness-raising sessions across six districts, including the provincial capital, Jalalabad.

Azizullah Noor, UNICEF's child protection officer who works to support this initiative of the Department of Youth and the Department of Public Health, said that the campaign had been conducted in Momandara, Durbaba, Lalpura, Kama, Surkhrod and Behsud districts.

In the Kampona neighbourhood of Jalalabad city youth educators met people in the streets and shared information about the HIV virus and AIDS, handing out flyers and pasting posters on walls.

Nur Agha Zwak, director of the Nangarhar Department of Youth said his department trained young people to conduct this community-based awareness-raising.

"The message was conveyed, and people who were covered by the campaign are now aware of the danger of HIV and the safeguards needed to protect themselves from its infection," he said.

According to Afghanistan's National AIDS Control Programme, 504 individuals have been documented as HIV-positive as of November 2008. But UNAIDS has reported that the actual number of cases is likely significantly higher.

Low levels of surveillance and testing – and a heightened sense of taboo and stigma – has made it almost impossible to document the reality of the epidemic, said UNICEF in its website.

UNICEF added that it has been working since 2003 with the Ministry of Public Health to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and its contributing factors and risks.

By Tilak Pokharel, UNAMA

UNAMA supports IEC decision reaffirming final list of polling centres

5 September 2010 - The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) fully supports the reaffirmation today by Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) of its definitive decision that it will conduct the 18 September Wolesi Jirga elections based on the final list of polling centres it published on 18 August this year.

Implementing the election according to this final, published list of polling centres is essential for the effective conduct and transparency of the elections.

The IEC has made significant progress in its operational and logistical preparations for the election based on this final list of polling centres.

Polling materials, including sensitive materials such as ballot papers, have been securely packed and transported to the provinces according to this list.

The IEC has recruited and trained staff to work in these polling centres. And independent elections observers and monitors have made their plans according to this list.

Security of the sensitive polling materials, including ballot papers, depends on maintaining this list so that the IEC can keep track of all materials at all times.

This is a significant improvement on fraud control mechanisms compared to the 2009 elections.

We are aware of the efforts of the IEC and the Afghan security forces to establish as many secure polling centres as possible, to ensure that voters are able to vote.

While it is a difficult decision not to open polling centres in certain locations, we agree with the decision of the IEC to protect the security of voters, electoral workers and the secure and effective scrutiny of polling centres and voting procedures, including at all times the sensitive polling materials.

The 18 September Wolesi Jirga elections can and must be an important step in strengthening democratic institutions in Afghanistan and an opportunity for the people of Afghanistan to exercise their democratic rights.