



Security major challenge for Afghanistan in the coming months, says UN envoy

UN News Centre (New York) 30 June 2010 - Security will be a major challenge in what is gearing up as a critical period for Afghanistan, which will be hosting a major international conference in the capital next month and holding parliamentary elections in September, the top United Nations envoy there said today.

"This is indeed a crucial year in Afghanistan," Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), told the Security Council, which last week visited the country to assess for itself the progress made.

"It is a year in which we are all trying, together with the Afghan authorities and the Afghan people, to reach a form of stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan," he noted.

Earlier this month the Government hosted the Consultative Peace Jirga, which brought together 1,600 participants from across the nation and resulted in a communiqué endorsing President Hamid Karzai's initiative to convene a national dialogue on ways to restore peace.

On 20 July the Government will host the Kabul Conference, at which it is expected to present an Afghan-led plan for improving development, governance and security.

Mr de Mistura said the main objective of the conference is to foster confidence in a "public contract between the Afghan Government and the Afghan people" and promote the delivery of social and economic improvements.

The international community, he said, will not be expected to bring new funds to the gathering but to re-align the resources which they have already allocated for Afghanistan with the country's own priorities.

UNAMA, for its part, had decided to adopt a "three-plus-one" strategy with a focus on support to elections, fostering national dialogue and encouraging regional engagement, while also focusing on aid coherence and coordination, he noted.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and many foreign ministers are expected to attend the July meeting, which will be co-chaired by the UN and follows 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.

In his latest report on Afghanistan, Mr Ban noted that although the country has witnessed a number of positive developments recently, the overall security situation has not improved and remains unstable despite the considerable growth and reform plans for the development of the Afghan National Security Forces.

"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," he stated.

Mr de Mistura, in an interview with the UN News Centre, said security should be a major focus for the Afghan Government, and added that another priority should be socio-economic development, particularly job creation and opportunities for young people who make up 40 per cent of the country's population.

"They need to feel that there is a future. Otherwise, they may be tempted to join the wrong side."

Despite the fact that overall security has not improved in recent months, Mr. de Mistura noted that the UN has a continuing presence, with almost 1,000 international staff and 6,000 national staff in 21 locations around the country.

"Our intention is to be, especially in this critical period, close to the Afghans in what is going to be a crucial year," he stated. "Of course, the challenge remains security during this critical period."

Tragic loss of UN staff member

29 June 2010 - The United Nations confirms that a shooting took place late this morning in Kabul, involving one UN vehicle and two United Nations personnel. Tragically, one United Nations staff member, an Afghan national, was killed. The other Afghan staff member was unharmed.

The United Nations offers its sincere condolences to the family of the deceased staff member, whose name cannot be released at this stage.

The circumstances of the shooting are not yet clear. United Nations security teams are working with Afghan security institutions to assist investigations.



UNAMA not reducing international staff: UN chief

24 June 2010 - Staffan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, today told journalists that UNAMA is not reducing its international personnel.

Responding to media queries at a press conference with the visiting UN Security Council, the UN envoy said that media reports on the recently released Secretary-General's report on Afghanistan had misinterpreted details about UNAMA setting up a "back office" in Kuwait.

"What we have done...is that when we have a peak of attention on elections we will bring more people dealing with elections – and those who are working on the computer, on the travel or on the payroll can do it from Kuwait, like any other organization," he told journalists. "This is nothing to do with re-deployment or reduction."

The UN report had highlighted the need to ensure secure accommodation for all UN staff in Afghanistan, following the attack on a UN guest house in October last year. Maintaining an even number of international staff for existing secure accommodation means relocating some administrative support staff to the back office so that more electoral- or humanitarian-related staff can be deployed inside Afghanistan.

"What we have done," said de Mistura, "is actually keep more or less the same number – we are close to 1,000 at present – international staff; (as well as) 6,000 national staff."

UNAMA is a special political mission established in 2002 by the UN Security Council; the Council renewed the mandate on 22 March 2010 with its resolution 1917 (2010).



UN sanctions committee chair clarifies de-listing process

28 June 2010 - With the Security Council visiting Kabul, media attention shifted to the call to de-list names from the so-called "1267 blacklist." Chair of the 1267 committee, Austrian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting, explained the procedures of reviewing the list at a closing press conference on 24 June.

Below are extracts of responses by Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting to media questions on the de-listing process, clearly setting out the procedures as well as the purpose of the list:

"I will briefly explain the procedures under which the Committee operates. The Committee is in the process of conducting a review of all the entries on the list, of all people and all entities linked to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This is a process that is not linked to present-day developments. It is a process that the Security Council asked the Committee to conduct in a decision at the end of 2008, and this is the process that we are now going through..."

"It (the Committee) operates the review on a case-by-case basis. The Committee does not treat categories of people or groups of people. It deals with individual cases. And in this process, especially when it comes to the de-listing of people, the Committee bases itself on the following guiding principles: people who are to be delisted have to convincingly renounce violence; they have to lay down arms; have broken all links with al Qaeda; and fully accepted, in the cases of Taliban, the Afghan Constitution. ...

"For any de-listing to happen this requires the censuses of all 15 members of the Security Council. And it is evidently very important to have exact information that these criteria have been fulfilled, and in this instance of course the information that can be provided by the Government of Afghanistan is of paramount importance. ...

"There is no automaticity in this process. In every case in which a de-listing is demanded, by the Afghan Government or by another Member State of the United Nations, the Security Council committee has to evaluate the information before it. It is evident that in this process the information that the country of residence and nationality can provide in these cases, Afghanistan, is of very great importance. So the information we can get from the Afghan authorities is of great importance in this context. ...

"And at the end, of course, this information will be evaluated by each and every of the 15 members of the Security Council. So each of the 15 members has to be convinced by this information, because as I already explained the de-listing can only take place if there is consensus amongst the 15 members. ...

"Let me explain the purpose of the list. It is not of a punitive nature. The purpose of the list is of a preventive nature. And the point of that kind of list is, and its nature, is that it has to be kept up to date. And it has to reflect the actual threat. That means that in cases where the need for this preventive action is no longer there, entities or people can be taken off the list. On the other hand where there is a new threat, new entries should be made to the list. It should always be seen in this balance. Names which are no longer necessary can be taken off and entries which are necessary but are not yet on the list should be put on."

Security Council wraps up visit with pledge of sustained support for Afghanistan

UN News Centre (New York) 24 June 2010 - Members of the Security Council wrapped up their visit to Afghanistan today, voicing their continued support for the country's efforts to build a lasting peace and stressing the need for free and fair elections, improved governance and the upholding of human rights.

"During our contacts we reiterated the United Nations Security Council's support and enduring commitment to the people of Afghanistan and its Government in furthering peace, development and stability," Ambassador Ertugrul Apakan of Turkey, who led the mission, told a news conference in Kabul.

The visit comes during an important period, Mr Apakan noted, taking place as it did soon after the Consultative Peace Jirga held in early June and before the Kabul Conference, slated for 20 July.

The Government is expected to present an Afghan-led plan for improving development, governance and security at the July gathering, which will be co-chaired by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and is a follow-up to the London Conference held in January.

During their visit, Council members were also briefed on various challenges related to the legislative polls scheduled for 18 September. The elections are the first to be completely run by Afghan institutions and the preliminary list of candidates contains the names of more than 400 women.

"Free and fair elections are necessary," said Mr Apakan, adding that the Council welcomed the strong participation of women candidates.

He said the delegation encouraged the Afghan authorities to further their efforts to uphold the rule of law and human rights, in particular the rights of women and children.

It also stressed the importance of combating the narcotics industry and trade, as well as the importance of regional cooperation in political, security and economic areas.

While in Kabul the 15-member body held talks with senior Government officials, including President Hamid Karzai and members of his cabinet, as well as with representatives of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC).

Council members also met with the main international stakeholders, including UN agencies, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union.

The four-day mission also included a visit to Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan, where the delegation met with local authorities, UN staff and Afghan returnees.

A separate UN team has been in Kabul this month to examine the issue of "updating" the Consolidated List of individuals and entities subject to UN sanctions in connection with Al-Qaida and the Taliban.

Individuals on the list, which include 137 Afghan nationals, are subject to the assets freeze, travel ban and arms embargo imposed under Council resolution 1267 of 1999, and related resolutions, by which all UN Member States are required to impose sanctions on Osama bin Laden, the Taliban and those associated with them.

Mr Apakan noted that the Council's 1267 Committee is in the process of finalizing its review of the list, which is conducted on a case-by-case basis.

In January of this year, the Committee approved the de-listing of five men who held senior positions within the Taliban regime following a review of the list.

Road construction in Afghanistan: A woman's story

30 June 2010 - "Dar-e-Zindan" or the "Valley of the Jail", one of the highest valleys in Afghanistan's northern region

At 2,700 metres above sea level the valley stretches throughout the province of Samangan, an isolated and seemingly forgotten place. Subject to extreme climates and frequent natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, the province has a high poverty rate. Nothing grows on the sides of the arid hills, except dried-up grass, yellowing in the summer heat.

In this difficult and challenging environment the Ministries of Public Works and Rural Rehabilitation initiated in late 2007 the Rural Access Improvement Project, funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and with implementation support by United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

The ambitious programme aims to provide year-round accessibility for the population to services and markets, thus reducing poverty and helping to stabilize overall security in the province.

To get the job done UNOPS has hired local workers, men and women, from shura communities.

Bibi Gul is 43-years-old. She has been working for UNOPS in Samangan for the last six months, along with her husband, Sadullah. While Sadullah breaks stones, Bibi Gul sorts the gravel, paves the roads, and opens flood passages—what some consider a man's work, handled by a woman.

"I had seven children and couldn't afford their expenses," says Bibi Gul. "I had to sell two of them to someone who could take care of them. Another son of mine has left the country to look for work. I don't know where he is," she continues, as she stares into space.

Working on the construction site was her only option. The same for her husband who is unqualified even in farming. "Our economic conditions were disastrous before this project," explains Bibi Gul. "I was weaving woolen string. Our current salary (US \$5 for every cubic metre of gravel produced) is very low, but it is still better than nothing."

A few metres away, Sadullah, who has a shovel in his hand, encourages his wife. "The most important thing is to produce more cubic metres of gravel and to get more income," he says.

And what about working with women? "It is not a problem", he responds. "We work together and we don't even see the difference. The most important thing is to produce as much as we can," he adds.

Bibi Gul feels the same. Working with men is just normal for her. "Sometimes people in the village laugh when they see us taking women to work in the field," adds Sadullah. "But I don't care, because Sharia (Islamic law) fully supports everyone who works with honesty and wisdom. I am proud of what we're doing."

This pride is also shared by his wife, Bibi Gul. Despite the difficult working conditions, she fully understands the vision of the project. "This road improvement has given us much better access to the city. In the past, sick people frequently died on their way to the clinic as we had to travel by mules, for many hours. Now we can go by car. It makes all the difference." At last, a discreet smile appears on Bibi Gul's face.

The project is to continue until December 2010. "To be honest, I don't know what I am going to do after this project. We'll see," Bibi Gul concludes.

Maybe the newly improved accessibility to the province will bring her a new work opportunities, by linking the "Valley of the Jail" to the rest of the world.

By Alexandre Brecher-Dolivet, UNAMA



Parliamentary poll voter registration in full swing in Afghanistan's east

30 June 2010 - About 50 staff members, including women, of Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) began registering voters in the country's east for the parliamentary elections to be held in September.

Sulimanzai, Head of the Eastern Regional Election Coordination unit, said "nine teams of the IEC have been assigned for voter registration in the eastern provinces."

A total of 274 candidates – 62 from Laghman, 27 from Kunar, 20 from Nuristan and 165 from Nangarhar, including females and kuchis – are contesting for 24 Lower House seats allocated for the four eastern provinces.

Dr Ahmad Wali Amin, 32, an electoral officer, said three teams have been deployed to Jalalabad to issue voter registration cards. "More than 200 voters are being registered on a daily basis in Jalalabad. The voter registration will continue until 12 August 2010," added Dr Amin.

The IEC's public outreach officers are using multiple resources to make the public aware of the commencement of voter registration, which is an opportunity for new voters or those who have moved to new areas or lost documents to be registered and enfranchised to cast their ballot.

"Our messages and spots are being broadcast by local media sources and we have also sent letters to local officials in the districts to convey these messages to the people through tribal elders and local councils," added Ruhullah Mumand, Public Outreach Officer.

Jamila Sa-Adat Jabarkhil, leader of a female voter registration team in Jalalabad, who has been working for the electoral office since 2005, is one of the most experienced staff members of the IEC. "During last few days, we have registered hundreds of female voters from different segments of the society, such as teachers, students, and government employees," said Jamila.

Raihana Safi, 25, who recently returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan regrets she was unable to participate in the Afghan elections of the past. While standing near the voter registration desk at Bibi Zainab school, she said "this year I will enthusiastically participate in the parliamentary elections. That is why I came here today to get my voter registration card."

Soon two teams – one female and one male – will also be assigned to register voters in prisons.

The elections are scheduled to be held on 18 September. The Independent Electoral Commission is responsible for conducting the September parliamentary elections. The role of the United Nations is to promote and assist existing Afghan capacity. UNAMA is mandated to coordinate international electoral assistance to support the Commission and ensure operational coherence and effectiveness in the provision of electoral aid. UNDP will take the lead in coordinating activities that are essential to supporting the preparation and conduct of the electoral operations.

By Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA

Women in Herat and Paktya call for stronger role in peace and reconciliation

28 June 2010 - Sahadat Karimi walks to the stage, past the sofas where officials are seated, and retrieves a large colorful parcel from the hands of Herat's director of the Department of Women Affairs (DWA). She pauses, briefly smiles to the cameras, and returns to her seat. The ceremony lasted for just a few seconds but the religion teacher is proud to be acknowledged by her community.

To celebrate mother's day recently, Herat's DWA gathered government officials, religious leaders, influential community members and international actors to the governor's office in the center of Herat city. The opportunity is seized to further advance sensitivity to gender equality, and draw attention to the achievements of women leaders from Herat.

Sahadat Karimi was not aware of her impending recognition. Ill prepared for happy events, she tells her life of violence and hardship: "I lost my husband when he fought the Russian occupation. My four children and I then migrated to Iran as refugees. I started teaching to support my family. At the time, I did four shifts a day to increase my income."

After the Russians left, Ms Karimi returned to Afghanistan. "During the Taliban government, I could not teach. I had to return to Iran as a refugee," explains the 41-year-old mother. After the fall of the Taliban, she returned to Herat and started teaching again, this time at Tajrobawi high school, one of the best institutes in town.

If the hardships Sahadat Karimi had faced are too commonly shared in the Afghan society, her strength remains an example. Before leaving the gathering, she merely declared: "I worked really hard in the past to raise my children. Now I know our situation is better since we can all stand on our own feet."

Herat DWA head Manijah Saddiq calls for a wider role for women: "Peace, security, reconstruction; the welfare of the Afghan nation cannot be reached only with hard work by our brothers. To reach peace and stability will also require tireless effort by mothers and sisters."

A similar ceremony was held in Gardez City by the Paktya DWA, with department head Haleema Khazan urging the Government and non-government organizations to provide mothers with employment opportunities, saying that economic self-sufficiency can greatly contribute in better living conditions.

At the same event, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) representative Zarmina Shams stressed that "a society cannot develop where women have not been provided opportunity to work side by side with their men."

By Fraidoon Poya and Dilawar Khan Dilawar, UNAMA

UN agencies work toward educating girls in Herat

28 June 2010 - For the last four months, 15-year-old Firouzan has been learning to read and write with 20 other women from Khale Jan, a small village on the outskirts of Herat city.

This is the second time Firouzan has received basic education. Two years ago, she also took a four month-long course organized by Herat's education department.

All other participants are learning basic literacy skills for the first time under a programme sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The women gather in the house of a fellow community member where, seated on cushions and carpets and with small chalkboards or notebooks in their hands, they study under the supervision of Nuria, 18, their teacher who graduated from 10th grade.

Firouzan explains that her family would not let her go to school. Her uncle, Arbab (chief) Mohammad Nadir, confirms that "after a certain age, we don't let girls go to school, it is not good."

The Arbab is hinting at a custom, widely shared among Afghanistan's rural population, that families with strong moral principles should take all possible measures to protect their female children. Too often this leads to a near confinement to the house or, at best, the village.

But Mohammad Nadir, the Arbab, is conscious of the benefits that minimal education will bring to the family. He describes the difficulties illiterate women may face otherwise. "A woman who cannot read the street signs or the doctor's name on a door might come back home with a sick child, without having him or her treated," he says. Mohamed Nadir also explains that women may be able to bargain better at the market, or help their sons who study at school. They may also be able to read the clock and send the child to school on time.

Despite these practical gains, villagers still required another incentive to overcome their ingrained reluctance to send women to school. When the project was launched earlier, it obtained little support until the World Food Program (WFP) offered to donate food to the students and teachers.

Students now receive basic essentials such as rice, flour or oil, while the teacher receives twice the student's amount. In this specific case Nuria, the school teacher, is the Arbab's daughter.

Her father explains that she was pulled out of school before the completion of Grade 12 as a kind of punishment. Nuria appears obedient to her father's decision. But she expresses hope that she may complete her education one day and start teaching in a proper school.

In all over 650 students, mostly female, are being taught literacy and vocational courses in Guzara and Karoukh districts of Herat province under a programme called the "community-based initiative." During the vocational courses, women learn carpet weaving or embroidery, while the men are taught to weld or work metal.

Under the same programme, WHO also offers small grants for villagers to create income-generation activities. In all, 250 projects in seven villages have been sponsored. In addition to Guzara and Karoukh the programme also covers Injil district, where literacy is carried out by another United Nations agency, UN-Habitat.

Applicants request grants of US\$5,000 to US\$17,000 to set up a small shop, buy a cow to sell the milk or purchase sheep to start a flock. A committee (shura) of villagers manages a fund of approximately US\$ 80,000 and it reviews projects and decides whether to support a decision that must be endorsed by the district governor. The grant is then paid back in instalments – without interest – taking into account the situation of the villager.

In some villages, the community organizes a common grant to build bigger projects such as a public bath. WHO does not encourage such projects since the whole community is penalised if the project fails.

Doctor Rasooli, Head of WHO in western Afghanistan, recalls the beginning of the programme: "We started this programme during the Taliban regime. At the time, you could not find any such initiative." Dr Rasooli is nevertheless proud of the system in place. He admits that "since 2005, we have not received any money from our headquarters to add to the fund."

He wishes to see the initiative spread to other districts and villages, as it did in the past: "We started in Injil to be able to properly monitor the programme and we now cover three districts".

By Fraidoon Poya and Henri Burgard, UNAMA