

UN Secretary-General appoints Martin Kobler of Germany Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan

10 March 2010 - United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has announced the appointment of Martin Kobler of Germany as his Deputy Special Representative (Political) for Afghanistan, replacing Peter Galbraith of the United States.

The new Deputy Special Representative will be responsible for political issues, including electoral and parliamentary matters, as well as questions relating to peace and stability, security-sector reform and human rights.

With more than 25 years in his country's foreign service, Mr. Kobler has vast experience in developing policies for conflict areas. He most recently served as Director-General for Culture and Communication in Germany's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and was Ambassador to Iraq and Egypt from 2003 to 2007.

He was Chief of Cabinet to former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer between 2000 and 2003, and Deputy Chief of Cabinet from 1998 to 2000. Mr. Kobler was Deputy Head of the Foreign Ministry's Balkan Task Force from 1997 to 1998, prior to which he established the German representation with the Palestinian Authority in Jericho.

He has also served as an Electoral Observer with United Nations missions in Haiti, Nicaragua and Cambodia.

Mr. Kobler holds an advanced law degree and speaks English, French, German, Indonesian and Arabic.

Born in 1953, he is married and has three children.



'A Strategy for Transition to Afghan Leadership' by Kai Eide

6 March 2010 - On his last day in Afghanistan as the UN's top envoy in the country, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, Kai Eide, releases a major policy paper calling for "a change of mindset" by the Afghan Government and international community.

Introduction from the Special Representative's paper

This year will be the most challenging we have faced since the fall of the Taliban. It is a year when negative trends will have to be reversed or they could become irreversible. Following two years of strong headwinds and a long period of political uncertainty, new political energy must urgently be mobilised. Furthermore, a change of mindset is required by the Afghan Government and the international community. If such changes cannot be produced soon, the overall situation will continue to deteriorate and become irreparable.

The political calendar is crowded and complex, with a national Peace Jirga, an international Kabul Conference and parliamentary elections all taking place in a period of six months. They will take place at the same time as Afghan and international forces are conducting the largest military offensive since 2002. These events will inevitably compete for political and public attention. While two of them – the Peace Jirga and the Kabul Conference – have the potential of becoming important unifying milestones, the other two – the election campaign and the military offensive – while necessary, can produce division and tension and undermine the positive effects of the Peace Jirga and the Kabul Conference. Therefore, the election process must be prepared and conducted in a way that is seen by all as a step forward in comparison with the 2009 election. And the military offensive must not undermine the potential for a political process to solve Afghanistan's conflict.

Furthermore, there is tension between the political calendars of important international partners and the realities of the Afghan context. The clocks in foreign political calendars are too fast for the real pace of change in Afghan society. All have to be aware of this tension; Afghan authorities must be aware of the need to demonstrate determination to reform and the international community must demonstrate realism with regard to the level of expectations. Complete success is unachievable within one or two years in a country marred with conflict and fragmentation. But progress is achievable, and would demonstrate to the Afghan people and the international community that a durable solution to the conflict is within reach. Management of expectations will be demanding and necessary if we are to maintain the long-term partnership we all know is required.

The London Conference on 28 January helped create a more positive atmosphere and a greater sense of determination than what we had experienced in 2009. At the Conference, the Afghan Government and the international community committed themselves to a strategy of transition to enable the Afghan Government to exercise sovereignty over its territory. This does not mean an exit strategy, but reflects a need for greater Afghan leadership long wanted by the Afghan Government and now accepted by all. The Kabul Conference will have to transform this commitment into concrete programmes in strategic areas, such as institution-building and the development of human and economic resources. It must produce a real blueprint for transition and provide a political agenda that can attract attention and support in the middle of a military campaign. A nationwide civilian institution-building programme will cost several hundred million dollars. But that is pocket money compared to what is spent on the security institutions and will be equally important to expand the reach of government across the country. A genuine strategic economic development programme will cost more, but that cost will still be modest compared to the resources invested in security. Such a programme will however determine whether the international community can withdraw in dignity and the Afghan Government can move away from massive dependency to sustainable economic growth.

This paper presents the key elements of that transition, and the changes required to make it happen. It is not an all-embracing review of every challenge facing Afghanistan. Rather, it suggests an approach based on the building of real Afghan capacity to deal with these challenges. However, even if this paper is focused on a limited number of priority topics, progress in these areas would have a profound and positive impact on other critical areas, and in particular respect for human rights and the rule of law.

To read the full paper go to: unama.unmissions.org

UNAMA NEWS

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Website: www.unama.unmissions.org

Compiled by the Strategic
Communication and Spokespersons Unit
Kabul, Afghanistan

4 - 11 March 2010



World must enhance understanding of Afghanistan, says outgoing UN envoy

4 March 2010 - Success in Afghanistan hinges on a better understanding of Afghan society by the world and the assumption of greater responsibility by its authorities, the outgoing United Nations envoy there said today.

The international community's tendency to make decisions with inadequate Afghan involvement has been considered "disrespectful and sometimes humiliating," Kai Eide told reporters in the capital, Kabul, in his last press conference as the Secretary-General's Special Representative.

"Afghanistan is sometimes seen as and treated as a 'no-man's land' and not as a sovereign State and that has to come to an end because it has fuelled suspicion of unacceptable foreign interference, a sense of humiliation and a feeling that Afghans do not have any control of their future," he said.

As a result, Mr. Eide pointed out, a successful transition strategy depends on the international community's ability to pay greater attention to Afghanistan's needs. "We need to understand the pulse of Afghan society better than we do today."

For their part, Afghan authorities must step up their determination to assume responsibility, he stressed.

"There is today still a tendency to push responsibility for difficult decisions on the international community and to avoid the main political challenges that face this society," he underscored. "Afghan authorities have to fully assume responsibility for cleaning up their own house and for shaping their own future."

The world must temper their expectations with the reality on the ground, said Mr. Eide, who will be succeeded by Staffan de Mistura.

"The clocks in foreign countries tick faster than real change in Afghanistan can perhaps cope with."

Although achieving success in the next year or two in a country mired in conflict is impossible, it is vital that the Afghan people and the international community both understand that a durable solution is within striking distance, the official said.

2010 is a critical year for Afghanistan, the most challenging since the fall of the Taliban, he said, with many key events set to take place this year, including peace talks and a major international gathering in Kabul.

September will witness parliamentary elections, and Mr. Eide today voiced hope that the ground will be laid so that they will be seen as better than last year's presidential polls, which were marred by accusations of fraud.

The Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said that he has shared his concerns – particularly over the Independent Election Commission, the composition of the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) and the vetting process – with President Hamid Karzai in recent weeks.

"We are not yet where I believe we need to be, and we have to reach an agreement on all these elements before we can say we have reached an agreement," he underlined.

Last week, the UN said it was reviewing a legislative decree that would give Mr. Karzai the power to appoint all five members of the ECC, 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.

The remaining two members are nationals, one appointed by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the other by the Supreme Court.

In his most recent report on Afghanistan, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wrote that there is "an emerging consensus among both local and international experts on the need for reform of the electoral system before the 2010 elections (parliamentary, district and mayoral) and future electoral processes in Afghanistan."

For the 18 September polls to be successful, "Afghanization" of the electoral process is essential, Mr. Eide said today.

On the military campaign under way in the country, he highlighted that it must not impede the political process. Looking back on the two years he has served as Special Representative, the envoy said that he has seen stepped-up political unity within the international community, with the consolidation of the UN's role as the main interlocutor with the Afghan Government.

The world body has also helped to address the issue of civilian casualties and "this has had a radical impact in the international military and led to tactical directives and operational modalities today that are very different from what we saw a year and a half ago," he noted.

In spite of this and other successes, "I think we all have to admit that we should have and could have achieved more: that goes for the Afghan Government; it goes for the international community, including the UN; and the international military forces," Mr. Eide said, voicing hope that this year will be a turning point for the South Asian nation.



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Kai Eide's last event: Women empowerment conference

6 March 2010 - On the eve of Women's Day and his departure as outgoing top envoy for Afghanistan, Kai Eide today challenged the country's political leadership to empower women constantly and not just on the annual celebration of Women's Day.

Gracing the International Conference on the Empowerment of Legislation for Women in Afghanistan as his last official event as head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Mr Eide lamented thus: "Yes, I have heard prominent politicians speak about the rights of women, and the need to end violence, abuse and discrimination, but they are sporadic references at great occasions."

"I challenge the President and other political leaders to make this a cause that they will promote and fight for everyday in the year and not one day in a year – on 8 March... to gradually translate to a stronger voice of women in politics," urged Mr Eide in his widely applauded speech at the conference organized by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) headed by Dr Sima Samar.

"I am pleased that my last appearance takes place in a conference dedicated to the rights of women," said the outgoing envoy as he expressed admiration for "the growing strength of civil society and women's networks in Afghanistan." The main objectives of the two-day conference are "to overview the effective grounds in legislation regarding women in Afghanistan using the experiences of different countries" and the "recognition of civil society's role in the process of compilation and drafting of laws on women, and the implementation of laws in favour of women."

"But to avoid the marginalization of women in this country will need the constant engagement of men – the President, members of Government, prominent leaders or other state institutions and opinion leaders in the society as such," added Mr Eide.

While recognizing the progress so far achieved in the area of women empowerment in Afghanistan, the outgoing UNAMA chief called on the assemblage not to "underestimate the tremendous work that needs to be done and the fact – because it is a fact – that women are still marginalized in Afghan society."

"And those who dare play a role often face serious risks as we saw nearly a year ago when Sitara Achakzai – a member of the Provincial Council in Kandahar – was murdered because she was a woman exercising her political rights under the Constitution," recalled Mr Eide as he lamented the fact that nobody has been punished for the murder, and that "she is only one in a vast number of anonymous, unknown cases of women who suffer from the culture of impunity."

"This is a conference on legislation and legislation is fundamental. But we need more than the law – we need the rule of law," Mr Eide

"The legal framework must be developed through a wide and inclusive consultation process. That was the case for the Constitution and the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women," said the top UN envoy who pointed out thus: "I am concerned when laws and decrees with far-reaching implications are adopted without such a process – two months ago, we discovered that an Amnesty Law had been gazetted and apparently kept away from the attention of the public for over a year."

"The process in itself gives reason for serious concerns. So does the content. In my experience, amnesty is one way of healing the wounds of a country – but those wounds cannot be healed if there is no accountability, if it means the sanctioning of impunity and atrocities committed."

The UNAMA head also voiced his concern about the recent decree on elections. "It would be much better if an electoral process is the result of an inclusive process where Parliament and civil society are involved."

Mr Eide also delved on reconciliation, saying it is an "indispensable part of a strategy to end the conflict in this country," but stressed that "any reconciliation policy must be based on the Constitution and the progress made – it must take us forward – not backwards."

"On the day of my departure from Afghanistan, I cannot hide that I am deeply concerned," revealed the UNAMA chief, pointing out that "this year can become a year where negative trends are turned but it will require tremendous efforts – a mobilization of political energy – not more of the same."

"There must be an end to the fragmentation in the political establishment, a sense of understanding of how serious the situation is and a call for unity of effort. If this does not happen, then negative trends can again become unmanageable," he reiterated.

"We must see positive changes this year," he urged, calling for "unity around serious political reforms in critical sectors," including the "weak" judicial system.

To the conference organizers and participants, Mr Eide reiterated the support of the United Nations "for what you are undertaking, for your work and your struggle," concluding thus:

"I again appeal to the political leadership of this country to give you stronger, constant and visible support."

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA



Outgoing UN envoy awarded Presidential Medal following address to international conference on women.

Photo: Presidential Palace

Slow, but promising: the women's rights situation in Afghanistan

8 March 2010 - On International Women's Day, UNAMA brings you stories of women who have not just beaten the odds, but triumphed and are, now, making a difference for their gender across the country.

Meet Mahgul Yamam, a 56-year-old successful lawyer and a rights activist.

After graduating from Kabul University's law faculty in 1980, she took up an internship with the country's Supreme Court and then joined a governmental urban development sector where she worked for 10 years as a contracts officer.

With the eruption of chaos caused by Kabul's long and deadly civil war, she fled to Mazar-i-Sharif with her family, where she has now continued to stay for 18 years.

Ms Yamam then joined the Balkh Court and worked in different positions – such as defence lawyer, appellate prosecutor, juvenile prosecutor, civil prosecutor and special prosecutor for counter-narcotics – during the first 14 years of her stay in Mazar-i-Sharif.

In 2006, she quit her prosecutor's job due to "widespread corruption" in the legal system.

"It was outrageous. I just couldn't take it anymore. But even as a defence lawyer I had to resist against corrupt officials. I had almost no support," she said.

After quitting her job in the court, she decided to become a legal advisor to the Balkh Provincial Department of Women Affairs.

"Women are more vulnerable in court than men are. They are mistreated and are not listened to. In the legal advisor's job I could do so much more, I could play a more effective role and help women in court" she added.

Among her other achievements, Ms Yamam was also appointed as team leader for the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) in the northern region during the last presidential and provincial council elections.

Despite all the difficulties she has faced, Mahgul Yamam is still very optimistic about the situation of women in Afghanistan, which she describes as "developing, although very slowly, but still very promising."

Ms Yamam also manages to balance her professional life successfully with her private life. She's married and has four children. Her eldest son, who is 20-years-old, is also on his way to becoming a lawyer.

Among her future plans, she wants to focus her efforts on spreading awareness about women's rights and educating women in the community.

"It is not easy, but we have to start somewhere. It will definitely take a lot to achieve the goal of building a community (that is) free of gender based violence," she tells other women's rights activists on International Women's Day.

By Sayed Barez, UNAMA



Women call for protection of their rights in the reconciliation process

8 March 2010 - On International Women's Day in Bamyan, women and men gathered to pray for peace in Afghanistan and to discuss the role of women and their place in the country during the ongoing peace and reconciliation efforts.

A group of women's rights activists in Bamyan said they feared Afghanistan's ongoing reconciliation process, as it may undermine their rights and the progress made in the last few years.

As a part of this event, school and university students took part in a poetry and debates competition to highlight women's rights and their role in Afghan society.

The competition was followed by discussions on issues affecting women in Afghanistan today.

"We have gathered to mark International Women's Day and pray for peace in our country. We use this opportunity we ask the Government of Afghanistan and the international community to include us in the agenda during negotiations for peace," said Fatima Kazimi, head of Bamyan Women's Business Association.

The Government of Afghanistan, with support from its international partners, has increased efforts to bring the Taliban and other anti-Government elements to the table for talks to end the country's eight year old conflict.

"Our rights and freedom must not be the victim of the settlement for peace, and women should have equal participation in these negotiations," said Ms Kazimi.

Participants also spoke about the vulnerability of women in Afghan society and how men can help empower women. "If we want our country to progress, men should give women equal rights and involve them in all affairs of daily life," said Naseem Gul, a student of the Shirin Hazara Girls' High School.

Participants also got an opportunity to watch a short documentary film, produced by Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), which underscored the hardships faced by Afghan women every day.

The movie was filmed on the daily life of a woman, who works in a government department and also does household chores.

"We can see in this film and in our surroundings how women are treated. They are isolated from the family from the day they are born," Juma Mahdawi, head of RTA Bamyan later told the audience.

Mr Mahdawi said that women are treated as outsiders in an Afghan family. First, when she is a child her family thinks that she is the property of the man she will marry, and then her husband's family treats her like a stranger.

"Even giving birth to a girl is a fault in our society," Mr Mahdawi added.

International Women's Day is observed every year on 8 March. The day gives an opportunity to the women of the world, especially the women of Afghanistan, to gather and discuss their problems.

By Jaffar Rahim, UNAMA

New journalism training hub in Jalalabad swings into action

9 March 2010 - Barely a month into its existence, a regional journalism training hub in Jalalabad has already trained 13 broadcast journalists from four provinces of eastern Afghanistan as of last week.

The training hub, one of just two in the country, is run by a local media development organization called Nai.

Nai conducted a series of trainings for local journalists in the lead up to last year's presidential elections with support from international media development organization, Internews whose mission is "to empower local media worldwide."

"We want practical training for journalists," said Parisa Saadatmand of Internews who has been advising the Jalalabad office of Nai. "We just hope for the success," she added.

The other hub dedicated to training journalists is being set up in Mazar-i-Sharif.

The topics covered in the six-day-long training were, among others, news values and ethics, working for radio, interview skills, technical writing, reading and producing a radio story.

A needs assessment was conducted prior to the establishment of the training hub so as to know how best "we can cater to the people's needs," said Ms Saadatmand.

Nai and Internews are working together to develop modules for specialized and basic journalism training.

Also, the hub is going to have a multimedia studio for training soon.

Ziar Samim, 18, one of the youngest journalists to receive the first training at the hub, said he learned in the training that journalism is a "fact job."

"We learned how radio journalism is different from print journalism," said Mr Samim, who works for local Spinghar Radio as a reporter covering social and development issues.

Another participant, Hamidullah Hashimi of Jala Radio, said interview techniques and handling equipment were some of the new skills he has learned from the training.

Nai's two "experienced trainers" – Nazibullah Nayel and Shama Ahmadzai – gave the training to the first batch.

Mr Nayel said the training he gives at the hub is "more focused and in-depth," adding that the participants are asking for more and more advanced form of training.

"The trainers are amazing and the participants are passionate about their work," said Ms Saadatmand.

Talking about the participants' absorption in the training, she said: "I was observing (a practical exercise) on ethical conundrum. They were discussing. One was saying 'this' and the other said, 'No, we should do that.' And the first one said, 'Oh, I had never thought about that.'"

Journalists of eastern Afghanistan's budding media industry – which is much needed in Afghanistan's transition -- are also upbeat about the newly established training hub.

"Journalists here just have basic skills," said Abdul Moid Hashimi, vice president of a journalists association in Jalalabad.

Mr Hashimi, who works as a reporter for the Pajhwok Afghan News, said the local journalists need rigorous and in-depth training to hone their skills.

Ahmad Zia Abdulzai, the spokesperson of the Nangarhar provincial governor, hopes that the new training hub will provide "comprehensive" training to local journalists.

"It's so important to have a training hub for journalists. Some journalists need training on report writing while others need photojournalism and video training," he said.

One year down the line after the hub trains local journalists, Ms Saadatmand expects to see the media persons do their job "more professionally and with more understanding," and with more inclusion of women in the media field.

"We also want to see journalists from different regions meet and discuss ethical concerns, challenges and success," she added.

By Tilak Pokharel, UNAMA



Emergency supplies increased by UN agencies in wake of Operation Moshtarak

7 March 2010 - Latest figures from the United Nations in Afghanistan show about 27,700 individuals have been displaced in Helmand in the last month.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that according to the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, 4,275 families (about 27,700 individuals) have been displaced from Marjah town and Nad Ali district in Helmand since 8 February.

Partners of United Nations agencies report that 88 per cent of the displaced families have received humanitarian assistance such as food from the World Food Programme.

Additional supplies have been increased by WFP and UNHCR in Lashkar Gah and the World Health Organization has mobilized additional emergency kits and medical supplies.

Shelter, medical kits and other materials are also available in Kandahar.

UNHCR has also noted that some families are returning with more returns reported Marjah than Nad Ali.

The latest OCHA update notes: "Although returns have started, the conditions for return are not ideal as armed clashes are reported to continue in a number of villages and IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) are still present."

OCHA says it continues to advocate with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force for humanitarian access to the conflict area and for freedom of movement by civilians, especially the wounded.

A recent inter-agency mission to Lashkar Gah on 28 February, including the UN and non-governmental organizations, met with the provincial governor, the Emergency and Disaster Committee for Marjah, the Department of Public Health and representatives of internally displaced persons.

OCHA notes: "It is anticipated that protection issues will need continued attention, including civilian casualties, access to basic services and humanitarian assistance by the civilian population, and neutral evacuation of the injured."

By Dominic Medley, UNAMA