



Reverse negative trends this year or they will become irreversible - Kai Eide

4 March 2010 - The outgoing top United Nations envoy for Afghanistan today stressed the need to reverse the negative trends in the country within the year or they will inevitably become "irreversible."

In his last press conference as head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kai Eide noted that this year has been a most challenging year, faced as the country is with growing insecurity. "It is a year where negative trends have to be reversed or they'll become irreversible," he warned. He stressed that a political strategy should underlie the military strategy – not the reverse – and that "military operations must not be conducted in a way that undermines the political process."

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan said two crucial events this year could help further unify the country and the international community supporting it – the Peace Jirga announced by President Hamid Karzai and the Kabul Conference – which will be the first Afghan-hosted international meeting on the country's transition to peace. Both events were expected to take place in the first half of 2010.

Mr Eide also cautioned that the political calendars of the large donor countries often demand a faster pace of change than Afghanistan can manage: "Decisive success within the year or two is un-achievable," he said. At the same time, the international community has to demonstrate to the Afghan people that the solution to the country's problems is "within reach."

To be successful, he added, the transition strategy depends upon a "change of mindset" on the part of the international community which tends to treat Afghanistan as a "no-man's land" instead of a sovereign country, fuelling "suspicion of unacceptable foreign interference, a sense of humiliation and a feeling that Afghans do not have control of their future."

In related advice, he said donors should not concentrate their contributions on quick-impact projects in conflict areas where their troops are deployed, but to invest in the peaceful areas with projects that create long-term employment, as well as in higher education and vocational training.

And today there are very serious deficiencies in all these areas. We see that in agriculture and infrastructure critical elements that are still seriously under-funded, and where programmes are often designed in foreign capitals outside of Afghanistan, capacity building within Afghan institutions is still fragmented and without an overall plan and the educational system has been a success at the primary and secondary level but little has been done at the university and vocational training levels which potentially can leave millions of students without further possibilities for education and competence building," lamented Mr Eide.

"I emphasize the civilian efforts because there is a trend, of course in particular now, to focus on the military and security issues and the military campaign that is ongoing. I have warned and I warn again against militarization of our overall strategy in Afghanistan.

"And let me mention three reasons: First of all, it creates a focus on short-term requirements rather than critical long term needs; it creates a focus on a limited number of provinces instead of nationwide plans; and it risks enhancing the trend towards substitution of capacity rather than building of capacity. And, of course, during the ongoing operation, we have to keep all these elements firmly in mind," said Mr Eide.

The outgoing envoy also called on the Afghan Government to "assume greater responsibility" in "cleaning up its own house," adding that the Kabul Conference will be a "very important test on whether (the Afghan government) will be able to face the challenges."

The recently signed presidential decree on parliamentary elections was "a special issue of concern to me," Mr. Eide said, adding that he has been consulting regularly with the President on the issue, and in particular on three elements – the functioning and the independence of the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), its composition, and the vetting process.

"I can say we have made some progress regarding the ECC," he said. The UN envoy added: "I believe that the 'Afghanisation' of the election process is the right way to go and only way to go and I believe that the parliamentary elections should be one step in this direction and that full 'Afghanisation' of the process could then follow from a broader review and reform following the Parliamentary elections."

Mr Eide, however, stressed, thus: "Let me underline one thing: This cannot and should not be a discussion only between the international community and the President of Afghanistan. It has to be as much or even more a discussion among Afghans the government, the Parliament and civil society." Accomplishments of his two-year term included "strengthened coordination" among UN agencies in the country and the transition of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) that he co-chaired "from a discussion forum to a decision-making body."

He also pressed hard to convince the international military forces to change their tactical directives to avoid civilian casualties. "I believe that we also played a critical role, a critical role in addressing 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," said Mr Eide.

Under his leadership, UNAMA has "a level of trust and confidence in many quarters that is today unique." He also "strongly advocated political reconciliation" with insurgents, saying, "I think it is high time that we get into this kind of political process. We talked about it for a long time and, to my mind, it is now time to talk."

"I believe the reconciliation and peace process – whatever shape it takes – should get underway as soon as possible," urged the outgoing UNAMA chief.

As testimony of UNAMA's valued role under Mr Eide's leadership, the United Nations had more than tripled UNAMA's budget from US\$ 75 million in 2008 to US\$ 240 million in 2010, an "unprecedented budget in any (UN) political mission." Ambassador Eide of Norway was appointed UNAMA chief on 29 March 2008. His successor, Staffan de Mistura of Sweden, is expected to arrive in Kabul later this month.



Mullahs and religious elders tapped to promote women's rights

1 March 2010 - The Government of Afghanistan has initiated a programme tapping Mullahs and religious elders in making people aware of women's rights in accordance with Islamic laws, the Afghan institutional law and international human rights law.

The Afghan government programme titled 'The Role of Spiritual Leaders for Promotion of Women Rights' – which is implemented by the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs (MoHRA) and the Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) – is supported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) through its Gender Equality Program (GEP).

Afghanistan's population is almost entirely comprised of traditional communities which are strictly attached to their local cultures and customs. Followed for generations, some of these traditions and local cultures deprived women of many of their rights. Islamic values of women are not very well understood and international laws, including the human rights law, are still unheard of in most rural areas in Afghanistan.

Religious scholars and Mullahs have always been the only ones people trust. They are respected, believed and highly welcomed as elders while the latter, on their part, do their best to keep their values as wise and honest leaders of the community. The programme started in Balkh province in late 2009 when 250 Mullahs from five districts came together and went through a series of trainings, knowledge-building and participatory discussions on women's rights according to Islam. The programme aimed to disseminate awareness mainly to men in the communities through their Mullahs and religious leaders. The four key issues identified as priorities to be promoted were early marriage, forced marriage, gender-based violence, and inheritance.

"In Afghanistan, when people are given instructions based on their religious values, they will easily listen and accept them. It is highly believed that such programmes will reduce domestic violence through involving religious leaders. This has been identified as a key strategy," said Mawalwi Abdul Hanan, a participant.

When Mullahs preach avoidance of violence against women during the Friday sermons in mosques, their listeners are the men who become the promoters of the advice of their religious leaders as extracted from the Holy Quran. The men, therefore, help shape their communities accordingly.

"The programme was really successful. It is a very wise approach to rural areas. Replication of this initiative in the other provinces has been proposed by the respective governmental authorities and we are hoping to be able to do the same in other provinces in the future," said Ahmaduddin Sahibi, Provincial Coordinator of UNDP/Gender Equality Project in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Afghanistan's rural population, who have been hit hard by the continuous Afghan war, do not always believe everything they hear except when it comes from elders whom they know and believe.

By Sayed Barez, UNAMA

It's cricket versus narcotics in Jalalabad

3 March 2010 - For Bashir Ahmad, who runs a sports shop in downtown Jalalabad, the last three weeks have probably been the busiest since he opened his business nine years ago.

An unexpected rise in the sale of cricket gear has come as a windfall, earning shopkeepers huge profits, thanks to Afghanistan's cricket-frenzied youth. Since Afghanistan beat USA on 11 February to qualify for the Twenty20 Cricket World Cup to be held in the West Indies in April-May this year, the excitement among the youth is quickly growing in this part of Afghanistan. Even days after the famous victory, jubilant young men continued to spill on to the streets, dancing, singing nationalistic songs and hoisting Afghan flags.

"Compared to last month, sales have more than doubled," said Mr Ahmad. In Jalalabad, a social organization called Youth in Action Association (YIAA), which is "dedicated to enhance peace and sustainable development in Afghanistan," has tapped the growing interest among the local youth in cricket to raise public awareness against narcotics. The owner of the Riaz Ahmad Sports shop at Amanzada Market in Jalalabad, Ahmad, said he only sold 15 sets of cricket equipment (bat, ball and stumps) a day before Afghanistan beat USA in Dubai. "Now, we receive up to 40 customers on a given day," he told UNAMA, while his hands continued to pack a cricket bat and a ball to a new customer named Mahirullah.

Mr Mahirullah, who recently graduated from the political science faculty of Nangarhar University, said the interest among the youth for cricket has dramatically increased in recent days. On 27 February, YIAA, in collaboration with Afghanistan Municipality Strengthening Program (AMSP), started a cricket tournament against narcotics with themes such as 'Cricket Against Narcotics' and 'Fighting Narcotics Through Sports.' Four teams – namely YIAA, Ghawchako, Etihad and Cricket Academy – of 15 players each from Nangarhar province are participating in the eight-day tournament, according to a press release issued by YIAA in Jalalabad. On the first day, YIAA beat Cricket Academy by 38 runs.

Speaking at the opening event, YIAA President Sayed Ikram Afzali emphasized the role played by the youth in fighting social ills such as substance abuse and narcotics peddling. "Sports like cricket can play an important role in personal and social development of youth," Mr Afzali told the event, which saw a gathering of a large number of locals, youth leaders and government representatives. The cricket venue is full of banners with anti-narcotics messages and the organisers have been distributing brochures carrying similar messages to the audience.

AMSP Manager Saad Malook Sherzad said the youth have the power to bring about positive changes in society. According to Alam Ghalib, Provincial Coordinator of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the number of people involved in substance abuse is on the rise.

"Even doctors in the 20-bed ward of Public Health Hospital can't treat all the patients," said Mr Ghalib.

By Tilak Pokharel and Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA

Afghanistan officially protects “world's least known bird” and 47 other threatened species

28 February 2010 - Afghanistan's National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA) announced today that it would strengthen its Protected Species List by adding an additional 15 species, including the elusive large-billed reed warbler only recently discovered in Afghanistan by researchers working for the USAID-funded Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS).

There are now a total of 48 protected species in Afghanistan.

NEPA, in cooperation with WCS, took immediate steps to protect the large-billed reed warbler, cited by Birdlife International as the world's least known bird species, because by law, newly discovered species receive automatic legal protection in Afghanistan.

Such protection is crucial since Afghanistan may constitute one of the only known principal breeding habitats for this rare species. The first specimen was discovered in India in 1867, with more than a century elapsing before a second discovery of a single bird in Thailand in 2006. Threats to the Large-billed Reed Warbler in Afghanistan include habitat loss and degradation from fuel wood collection and agricultural practices.

In addition to the large-billed reed warbler, Afghanistan listed 14 other species (seven mammals, a tree, and six birds) including two bat species and the striped hyena. The additional species were evaluated by the Afghanistan Wildlife Executive Committee (AWEC), which was created in 2008 to recommend species for Afghanistan's Protected List. The Committee is composed of representatives from NEPA, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, and Kabul University and contains advisors from WCS and the Biodiversity Support Program/Ecodit.



The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) which provided close support to the drafting of the 2007 Afghan Environment Law, under which wildlife conservation is regulated, is also a lead agency for assisting Afghanistan meet its global commitments in Biodiversity, Desertification, Climate Change and Wetlands legislation and building protected areas and conservation into the national development strategy.

Photos: Courtesy WCS.

UN studying proposed Afghan electoral decree

27 February 2010 - The United Nations is currently studying a legislative decree that would give Afghan President Hamid Karzai the power to appoint all five members of the country's Electoral Complaints Commission (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.

“We hope that this decree is in line with the Constitution and with what Parliament and civil society has called for regarding reforms of the electoral system,” UN spokesperson Martin Nesirky told reporters.

The Commission played a key role in last year's polls – which were marred by fraud in the first round and by the withdrawal of Mr. Karzai's main opponent Abdullah Abdullah in the second – having received some 2,500 complaints.

The proposed decree comes ahead of parliamentary elections slated for 18 September.

Mr. Nesirky noted that at the London Conference held last month, the Afghan Government and the international community jointly committed to ensuring the integrity of the 2010 parliamentary elections.

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.”

This includes a review of the appointment mechanism for the commissioners of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to ensure its impartiality, he added.



Afghanistan's cultural heritage and national integrity: Nancy Dupree

2 March 2010 - A nation's integrity is best assured when its members hold fast to the cultural values that fortify their sense of identity, and societies that live in harmony by welcoming the new while treasuring the past maintain their vibrancy.

Cultural heritage embraces those shared ideas, beliefs, emotions and customs that mold behaviour and place value on creative artistic expressions. Over several decades the Afghan people have walked a rocky path on which they were buffeted by a bewildering variety of contrasting, contradicting and competing ideologies introduced in rapid succession. A growing sense of disruption was then intensified by war and years of life in exile as refugees when many customs and components of the intangible culture were challenged and numbers of natural cultural wonders were threatened.

Afghanistan's tangible cultural properties speak of its pivotal position in the region and of notable periods of creativity. In the 4th century BCE, at Ai Khanoum east of Kunduz, the Bactrians built a gymnasium and a theatre reflecting their Greek origins. West of Balkh, at Telya Tapa, over 20,000 excavated gold ornaments acclaim the sophistication of the Central Asian nomadic dynasty that rose at the end of the BCE era and under the Kushan King Kanishka held sway as far as the borders of China. The spectacular luxury trade items from Rome, Egypt, India and China excavated at Kanishka's capital at Begram north of Kabul illuminate the sybaritic life enjoyed by its inhabitants in the 2nd century CE.

Imposing Islamic ruins dotting the Afghan landscape epitomize periods of high artistic intensity during the brilliant reigns of the Samanids (9th c.), Ghaznavids (11-12th c.), and Ghorids (12th c.). Timurid (15th c.) influence, emanating from Herat, stretched from the Tigris River to the borders of China, and the Moghuls (16th c.), ruling from north India, laid out romantic gardens and built glittering palaces and shopping malls in Kabul. During these stellar periods the Afghan area was seen as the focal point of political and economic power and the centre of cultural brilliance.

This abundant heritage has been rocketed, looted, pillaged, destroyed or allowed to deteriorate. Creative expression in the arts, music and literature has languished. That war and economic distress combined to threaten the cultural heritage is not unique to Afghanistan, but employing the wilful destruction of the heritage as a political instrument was deplorable.

As Sayed Ishaq Deljo Hussaini, Minister of Information and Culture in 1996, succinctly remarked: Men have laboured all their lives to create beauty, men have devoted their lives to preserve that beauty, but today men despoil the source of creativity for their own selfish gain. It is our responsibility to rescue the museum, to revive it so that future generations may once again be inspired by the ingenuity of past generations.

The Kabul Museum is one of the world's richest museums. It is distinctive in that a majority of its exhibits were scientifically excavated in Afghanistan and thereby provide a stunning testimony to Afghanistan's cultural heritage. The looting of the museum, not by a marauding army intent on the spoils of war, and not by riotous mobs, but by the very guards appointed for its protection, began in 1992 when priceless pieces disappeared into stolen art networks for shipment to other lands.

Unique pieces that had been on display, however, had already been packed and stored in safe havens by the museum staff before the looting began. Thanks to the courage of these and a few other Afghans who endured many threats to their personal safety because of their loyalty and concern for their heritage, these locations were never disclosed until the objects were publicly unveiled in 2004. A new inventory confirmed that everything had survived, including the Telya Tapa Golden Hoard that forms part of an exhibit travelling the world since 2006.

Archaeological sites, however, were not so fortunate. Many have been systematically ravished by bulldozers and deep tunnels probing far below the surface. We shall never know what has been lost. The loss of knowledge about the societies that inhabited these desecrated sites is as tragic as the loss of whatever beautiful objects that have vanished. Works of art are never produced in a vacuum, and artefacts must be studied in situ if the dynamics of ancient cultures are to be understood.

The looters and plunderers evidence scant feelings of guilt or remorse. This disregard for the national heritage stems largely from the paucity of literature describing the meaning of this peerless heritage. Afghan institutions seldom encourage ordinary citizens to take pride in their heritage; scholars rarely share their knowledge with the general public; school children are nowhere taught about the richness of their past; few mature adults ever thought of visiting the Kabul Museum before the war, and now a whole generation has grown up in exile without the slightest conception of the wonders that once existed in their country.

This is a serious failing for no national strategies, nor any number of trained professionals can hope to stem this cultural haemorrhage without an understanding and sympathetic public. Policy planning that includes cultural data reflecting the society's values can enhance cultural awareness by bringing local residents together with building, planning and environment professionals, as well as government officials, education professionals, NGOs, civil society groups, experts and donors. If awareness translates into action, trained personnel must be ready to keep up the momentum.

The key lies in making sure a wide segment of the Afghan population has access to knowledge about the importance of protecting sites near where they live. Gazar Gah in Herat survived the war with minimal damage because it is a living part of the community in which it stands. Other sites will need deeper persuading for knowledge must grow before awareness can develop. Radio, TV, public lectures, school programmes, and, above all, the wide distribution of attractive written materials couched in simple, persuasive language would be an effective start. The goal should be to impart feelings of ownership and mobilize protective networks community by community. This approach to planting the seed of cultural awareness is feasible, practical, and economic. All it really needs are innovative minds and a lot of energy and determination.

Nancy Hatch Dupree is one of the foremost authorities on Afghanistan's cultural heritage. Ms Dupree has published numerous books and articles about the country and spends her time between Kabul and Peshawar, where she continues to remain engaged in saving Afghanistan's priceless history. Today, Ms Dupree ensures the sustainability of the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University.

This exclusive article is the first of a series that are being published in March to coincide with the publication of the latest quarterly UNAMA Afghan Update magazine. The special issue recognizes Afghanistan's rich past and the need to preserve it for future generations.