

UNHCR marks 30 years of helping Afghan refugees

14 December 2009 - The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will enter its fourth decade of engagement with the refugee crisis in Afghanistan this month.

The Soviet occupation of the country, which began in 1979, caused one of the largest movements of refugees in history with as many as six million Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan and Iran at one point.

UNHCR has been involved with the refugee movements throughout this period.

"Our organization is a non-political, humanitarian agency," said Ewen MacLeod, UNHCR's Representative in Afghanistan. "We have worked in Afghanistan under every Government in Afghanistan – during the Soviet period, during the mujahideen period, during the Taliban period, and since 2002 during the present administration."

According to the UN refugee agency, over five million Afghans have returned home since 2002, which represents an increase of around 20 per cent in the estimated population.

"This year some 54,000 Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran. This is still a very large number. But it is the lowest return figure to Afghanistan for more than 10 years," added Mr MacLeod.

The fall in number of returnees to Afghanistan can be attributed to the growing insecurity in the south of the country, difficulty for humanitarian agencies in gaining access to many provinces, and the concern among refugees about the political and economic prospects in the country.

However, to assist families returning to Afghanistan, UNHCR has built more than 200,000 houses since 2002.

"Next year we anticipate building a further housing 10,000 units," Mr MacLeod announced.

UNHCR cautions that not all Afghans who cross international borders into Pakistan and Iran are refugees. The Agency says that a vast majority of them leave the country to look for work or to maintain a family.

Mr MacLeod also warned that there are many young Afghans are "undertaking very dangerous and risky journeys" to reach a foreign country, under the false belief that they will be automatically accepted as a refugee.

"But this is not the case. We believe that it is very important that the Afghan population also understands that there is a difference between someone who crosses the border as a refugee to escape violence and somebody who crosses the border to do business or trade to visit relatives or look for work," he clarified.

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA



Italy supports disaster management in western Afghanistan

14 December 2009 - The Government of the Italian Republic is to provide EUR 1.8 million to support the Government of Afghanistan's disaster management efforts in western Afghanistan, increasing the country's capacity to cope with natural disasters.

UNOPS has signed an agreement with the Government of the Italian Republic to implement the 18-month Enhancing Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response project.

Afghanistan is prone to natural disasters causing the loss of lives, livelihoods and property. Despite the cyclical occurrence of natural disasters, most of the external assistance to Afghanistan has focused on humanitarian relief, while long-term capacity development for risk and vulnerability reduction has not been adequately addressed.

Recognizing the significant capacity development needs of the existing institutions, the project will assist the Government of Afghanistan, through the Afghan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA), in managing natural disaster prevention, preparedness and response in the western provinces of Herat, Farah, and Badghis.

The activities will be carried out in the areas of information management; disaster management strategies development at provincial and district levels; the support to ANDMA Provincial Office in Herat as well as the establishment of satellite offices. The project will also address the critical infrastructure needs, by implementing risk reduction pilot projects in communities that are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters.

Specifically identified as a priority in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), this initiative reflects the commitment of both the Government of Afghanistan and international donors and development agencies to improve the conditions of life for the Afghan people.

"Despite the deteriorating security situation and challenging operating environment for the UN, we will continue to work with our Government partners to address the critical humanitarian and development needs of the people of Afghanistan," says Bruce McCarron, UNOPS Director.



UNICEF launches new polio vaccine

14 December 2009 - Afghanistan is the first country ever to use bivalent oral polio vaccine during the Sub National Immunization Campaign on 15-17 December 2009.

The campaign targets a total of 2.8 million Children less than 5 years of age in the South, Southeast and Eastern regions and Farah province (Western Region) of the country. Four million doses of bivalent vaccine are being procured by UNICEF with the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

The use of bivalent Oral Polio vaccine (bOPV) in house to house mass vaccination campaigns constitutes an important and powerful tool to achieve the target of Polio eradication globally. The new vaccine is much more effective than the trivalent Oral Polio Vaccine which is currently being used by the program.

"Use of bivalent OPV will certainly add a new dimension to our Polio eradication efforts in effectively eradicating P1 and P3 virus strains, which are circulating in Afghanistan, and will complement the use of trivalent OPV and monovalent OPV" said representatives of WHO and UNICEF.



In Afghanistan, the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) management team, which is led by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health with the partnership of UNICEF and WHO, agreed to use the new vaccine in the four National and eight sub-national immunization campaigns (NID/SNID) planned for 2010.

In areas like Afghanistan, where the wild polio virus types 1 and 3 co-exist, bivalent OPV will accelerate the interruption of both serotypes simultaneously. The introduction of this new vaccine will allow the managers to rationalize the number of Polio Campaigns, while concentrating on campaign quality to ensure high levels of vaccination coverage among the communities and reach every single child under five years.

To ensure that all children under five years old in the selected districts are reached, 21,000 health workers will go from house to house in 14 provinces. As many families are unable to access health facilities in the rural parts of Afghanistan this approach is essential to ensure that every child in the target group is reached. In parallel a massive social mobilisation campaign is being conducted to orient and motivate parents in the target communities about the immunization drive.

Six rounds of nation-wide house to house vaccination campaign, targeting almost 7.5 million children, have been implemented in 2009. In addition four rounds of sub-national campaigns were conducted for South, Southeast and Eastern regions and Farah province (western region) to stop and prevent the virus from spreading to other parts of the country. As of December 1, 2009 Afghanistan has reported 31 confirmed cases of Poliomyelitis, mostly concentrated in the southern region.

The ever deteriorating security situation is limiting access to many children in conflict-ridden areas. Over 100,000 children could consistently not be reached by the vaccination teams during the last several campaigns. With continued population movements from polio endemic areas to polio free areas and vice-versa, the eradication of polio remains challenging. The new bivalent vaccine will be a vital tool in the fight against this crippling disease.

By Alexandre Brecher-Dolivet, UNAMA

UNESCO-Italy agree to support US\$ 1 million media project

10 December 2009 - UNESCO and the Government of Italy signed a US\$ 1 million agreement to develop the capacity of Educational Radio and Television of Afghanistan.

Following the agreement signed between Italian authorities and UNESCO on 08 December 09 in Paris, the new project will focus on development of ERTV capacity for audio visual support to teacher training in Afghanistan.

Considering the physical burdens and lack of accessibility to most remote areas in Afghanistan, raising the capacity of the teachers through audio-visual medium, is a priority area for Ministry of Education which is also highlighted in five year National Education Strategic Plan (2006-2010).

The project plans to develop the capacity of ERTV using private sector collaboration and according to communication for development media-development internationally recognized best-practices, to enhance the production quality of technical and educational aspects of audio-visual support programmes in teacher training both in formal education and literacy.

UNESCO and the Government of Italy have supported ERTV since 2003. The first phase which finished in December 2008, has led to the creation of a fully operational educational radio and TV production house with broadcasting capabilities. The newly renovated ERTV started broadcasting 24 hours radio program and 3 hours television program on daily basis since April 2008.

UNESCO is working in Afghanistan since 2003 to support the education, culture, communication and information sectors. Technical assistance on developing the Ministry of Education's five year strategic plan, conserving the World Heritage Sites of Bamiyan and Jam Minaret and assisting in the process of fair and transparent flow of information are among key UNESCO's activities in the country.



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Human Rights Day in Afghanistan

10 December 2009 - Among many events across Afghanistan on Human Rights Day, more than three hundred people gathered in the eastern Laghman province to mark the day.

Officials, members of civil society groups, religious scholars, provincial council members, teachers, shuras and community elders from different districts of the province participated in the gathering in Mihtarlam, the capital of the province.

Lutfullah Mashal, the governor of Laghman delivered speech and said that during the last five to six years, human rights activists had played a vital role in the protection and promotion of human rights in the province.

"I highly appreciate the role of all those who involved in the protection and promotion of human rights in the province such as UNAMA, AIHRC, national and international non-governmental organizations working for promoting human rights and governmental entities such as the police, prosecution office and court," he added.

"The conflicts and the number of cases of self-immolation by women has drastically decreased. During last two years, we have only one case," he said.

Ms Karima, one of the participants at the gathering said: "Every year, I participate in the celebration ceremony of the International Day of Human Rights and Women's Day, with a special enthusiasm, because this regime gave us a lot. I still remember the dark days during the Taliban regime. I will never forget the Taliban's oppression regarding women."

"During the Taliban time, I left my province, even my country, and migrated to Pakistan, because here in Afghanistan, we had no chance to work, and even, go out from our residence. I returned back to my province after the fall of Taliban," she added.

Mr Sayeed Jan, a government employee said: "If we compare the human rights and women's rights condition four to five years ago with the current condition, we will see a lot of positive changes and differences, not only in Laghman but throughout the country."

By Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA



Statement attributable to the UNAMA Spokesperson Dan McNorton

11 December 2009 - A new When Kai Eide started this job he had a two-year horizon - as had his predecessors.

Kai Eide has asked the United Nations Secretary-General to start the process to identify his successor.

This is not a question of resignation. Kai Eide is sticking to the timetable that he outlined when he took the job in March 2008.

This confirms his intention not to renew his contract.



A new road between Sar-i-Pul and Sosma Qala

10 December 2009 - For decades, the only link between Sar-i-Pul and Sosma Qala, where more than 300 returnees from Iran are about to recover their homelands, has been a dusty bumpy road.

Since the Government of Afghanistan, supported by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) started to relocate these returnees in their villages, the need for a new road became obvious.

In order to complete this project, the Swedish Embassy has chosen the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) as its implementing partner, as a part of a global project called the Rural Access Improvement Project (RAIP) that started in December 2007 and will end by 31 December 2009

This week the new road was inaugurated.

"The benefits of this new road are countless," said Karma Jimba, the head of UNOPS in the northern region.

"This new road will be used to provide the people of Sosma Qala with medical assistance and all the different kind of supplies they need," he added.

The total cost of the 34 km road is about US\$ 2,000,000 with the initial 20 km constructed with a bituminous seal coat surface, the first of its kind ever built in Afghanistan.

The inhabitants of the returnees' camp of Sosma Qala also welcome this initiative. "We are now linked to the city," said a community leader. "This road will help us to find jobs and become active in the society."

Out of seven districts in Sar-i-Pul province, the road provides a key link to six districts: Sar-i-Pul, Sosma Qala, Sangcharak, Gospnadi, Balkhab and Kohistanat.

The total population of these districts is estimated at 569,600.

Despite the arriving snow UNOPS is due to complete the project by the end of December and to start new projects next year such as the rehabilitation of over 30 km of roads across the northern region.

By Alexandre Brecher-Dolivet, UNAMA