



Next Afghan elections must show improvement over previous polls: UN envoy

19 April 2010 - The upcoming parliamentary elections in Afghanistan must be an improvement over last year's presidential polls, the top United Nations envoy there told the new head of the country's national electoral body, urging that the process be as transparent as possible.

Today's meeting follows a news conference in Kabul on Saturday, in which Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), welcomed President Hamid Karzai's decision to adopt the agreed election guidelines for 2010.

It is hoped that these implementation guidelines will ensure more credible and transparent elections than those held last August, which were marred by fraud.

The Special Representative congratulated Fazel Ahmad Manawi on his appointment as the new Chairperson of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), and pledged the full technical and logistical support of the UN to the upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled to be held on 18 September.

"Mr. de Mistura added that these elections must be an improvement on the previous elections of last year and the purpose of the agreed guidelines is to provide the IEC with the clarity that it will need in order to move forward with electoral preparations," according to a statement issued by UNAMA.

With the appointment of Mr. Manawi and the endorsement of the implementation guidelines, the Special Representative has recommended that the international community release funds as soon as feasible to allow electoral operations to begin.



United Nations recommends to international community to release funds for parliamentary elections

17 April 2010 - The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, in a meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai today, agreed to recommend the commencement of technical and logistical assistance by the international community for parliamentary elections to be held on 18 September 2010.

Mr de Mistura noted that President Karzai had now appointed a chairman of the Independent Election Commission, Fazel Ahmed Manawi.

In addition, the President confirmed the appointment of two international members to the five-member Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), as proposed by the UN envoy. The two nominated Commissioners are Judge Johann Kriegler of South Africa, former Chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa and former member of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, and Mr Safwat Sidqi from Iraq, former member of the Independent Electoral Commission for Iraq.

Mr de Mistura noted with satisfaction that decisions by the ECC will be taken with the endorsement of at least one of these two members. This clarification of the ECC membership is consistent with the spirit of the wishes of Afghan leadership as expressed during the London Conference of January 2010 and with full respect for all Afghan institutions.

Special Representative Mr de Mistura said he was pleased to note that an article regarding women's seats in the Parliament has been clarified, in order to ensure that the minimum number of women parliamentarians will be guaranteed in accordance with the Constitution.

"I want to congratulate President Karzai for his wise decision to agree to guidelines aimed at ensuring more credible and transparent elections. I am satisfied that I can now recommend to the donor community that plans for the upcoming elections merit their release of funds so that technical and logistical support to the elections can begin," Mr de Mistura said following the meeting



Afghanistan's first Provincial Council newspaper fights corruption

20 April 2010 - The Nangarhar Provincial Council has started publishing a six-page newspaper for effective information dissemination in successfully fighting corruption and in promoting development.

Nasratullah Nasrat Arsalayee, chairman of the 19-member Council, said the main objectives of publishing the newspaper – *Wolesi Hindara* or the *Mirror of People* – are to encourage good governance, reconciliation and infrastructure development and to fight corruption.

"The main focus (of the newspaper) at the moment will be to inform government staff and communities about our efforts to curb rampant corruption," said Arsalayee, who is "100 per cent sure" he will achieve his objectives.

The Council, which gets Afs 30,000 (US\$ 600) for per quarter from the Government to publish just four issues annually, already plans to increase its publication to a monthly basis with additional funding from Council members.

"It costs us Afs 20,000 (US\$ 400) to bring out an issue with 1,000 copies," he said.

The 30-year-old Council Chair, possibly the youngest elected Provincial Council chief in the country, also claimed that Nangarhar is the only province in Afghanistan to publish such a newspaper.

The previous Provincial Council of Nangarhar did publish a few issues of the magazine with the same name, but only intermittently.

The first issue of this tabloid-size newspaper that prints in Pashto language in colour, has on its first page the profile of all 19 Council members (including five female members). The second page has a poem on honesty and serving people by the popular Pashtun poet Qiamuddin Khadim.

One of the articles by a Council member is also critical of foreign troops, claiming "they don't obey Afghan and international laws." Another article on women's rights has tips for daughters-in-law to deal with – and maintain good relations – their mothers-in-law.

Since the election of the Council was announced in December last year, following the August 2009 polls, it has been engaging with the local media and the communities, through elders, so as to disseminate information about its works.

During a UNAMA-organized workshop last year, the previous Council members had prepared a handover note for the new Council, advising the latter to engage more with the media and to stay united.

"People's expectations are very high. There are a lot of people with problems visiting our office everyday. They think I am the Government and I can do everything," said Arsalayee, adding that the Council's intervention in resolving land disputes has been successful.

He, however, admits there are enormous obstacles in dealing with corruption.

By Tilak Pokharel and Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA





Led by UN, donors meet to strengthen Farah province

18 April 2010 - Irrigation, access, trade and energy were at the heart of talks between Farah provincial authorities and Government representatives and the donor community.

Early morning, at Farah airport, a long line of vehicles stretched towards Syad camp, the newly built base of the 207 corps of the Afghan National Army, in Qafar Qala area.

Under heavily armed escort, representatives of agencies, diplomats and Government officials were taken 8 km outside Farah city to discuss the development of one of Afghanistan's poorest provinces.

Spearheaded by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the initiative aims at presenting donors with a comprehensive view of the challenges which the province faces.

Farah's Governor, Rohul Al Amin, and his team expressed their feelings about being left aside by the central Government and the international community.

Rohul Al Amin sums up: "It is very important that provinces are treated equally when it comes to development and security," he told the audience. "The majority of Farah's population is very poor. Some cannot send their youth to neighbouring countries or even find work internally. This is a very good opportunity for insurgents to offer an incentive to join the fight against the Government."

To give an example of the imbalance, the Governor stressed that only five tractors were sent for poppy eradication from Iran to Farah, with only four actually operating. In stark contrast, 100 tractors were sent to Helmand, which borders the province.

Dr Zafar, Deputy Minister for Counter-Narcotics, first addressed the local representatives: "We expect Farah not to cultivate [poppy]! Drug money destabilizes our communities; it fuels corruption and destroys our young generation."

He then called on donors to support the province: "Farah needs to be supported. If not, it will be difficult for it to develop by itself."

The provincial authorities identified the strategic priorities for the central Government and its international partners to focus on.

First, they said, complete the construction of the Baksh Abad dam, with its network of irrigation canals. Such a project would provide employment and allow the population, of which 80 per cent rely on agriculture, to cultivate more land.

The sector is crucial to Farah's recovery after 30 years of war. The director of the agriculture department stressed: "80 per cent of the population left the province during the Soviet era, and the same amount of farming land is yet to be cultivated." Farah exported 48,000 tons of watermelon to bordering provinces the past year, and requires assistance in storage equipment to provide producers with a steady income.

Another challenge facing the province is the construction of roads, whether to the border for business trade with Iran, or to the districts to market their production.

Currently, the province is in such dire needs of roads that the Governor confesses he hasn't been able to visit all districts.

Commending the work achieved by the Provincial Reconstruction Team and other development partners, the Governor called for much more to be done.

Finally, he warned: "My concern is, if you ignore this province, the situation may deteriorate."

By Fraidoon Poya and Henri Burgard, UNAMA



Herat lives up to title that puts it among world's 1,000 cleanest cities

19 April 2010 - Citizens and officials from Herat, in western Afghanistan, joined hands to clean up the provincial capital, at an event organized by the Department of Public Works and the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO).

Upon completion of the project, Herat's Mayor, Mohamed Salim Taraki, announced that "700 metric tons of garbage, three times more than in normal days" was collected.

Herat recently became a member of '1,000 cities-1,000 lives' network, and the municipality vows to uphold the title by keeping the city clean.

The activity kick-started the global '1,000 cities-1,000 lives' initiative by WHO, which aims at promoting a healthier lifestyle in urban areas. Other events are already planned for this year-round campaign.

To follow up on their commitment to improve the living environment of the population, city officials, UN staff and the public assembled the following day at the Governor's office and walked east to the National Recreation Park.

Dr Rasooli, WHO's head for the western region, explained the agency is building "a strong coordination with Herat government officials" to launch such events on a weekly basis.

The initiative aims at engaging citizens in activities that produce physical, mental and environmental health benefits; it also attempts to build a network of cities in the region, which will be selected as health-friendly cities.

Mazar, Kunduz and Jalalabad have already joined the initiative, to be a part of this network.

Mayor Taraki stressed that his office will strive to enhance public awareness and safeguard hygiene and sanitation. He also announced that the city would attempt to diminish any polluting and contaminating activity.

Taraki indicated that, in the future, polluting old cars will be collected, and brick factories will be relocated further away from the city. To underscore his commitment, the Mayor announced that anyone not following rules and policies would be prosecuted.

In 2007, the world's population living in urban areas exceeded 50 per cent and it is projected that by 2030 two-thirds of the world's population will be living in cities.

WHO endeavours to sensitize government officials and citizens to the significant increase in the number of urban residents. A rapid reaction is required to adapt to the already pressing challenges.

Mohammad Omar, 62, participated in the cleaning activity along with six of his neighbours.

He explained that "day by day, newcomers settle in the city. This is the modern way of life. The Government is not able to clean the city by itself. It requires a strong public effort."

For citizens like Omar, public awareness campaigns are important for urban culture enhancement and he says he will strive to play an exemplary role in his city's cleaning programmes in order to better face today the challenges of tomorrow.

By Fraidoon Poya, UNAMA



One hundred school buildings constructed in Paktya over past two years

21 April 2010 - Some 100 school have been constructed in Paktya province over the past two years, with 70 more to be completed this year.

This progress in the education sector in the south-eastern province was revealed by Paktya Governor Juma Khan Hamdard, while addressing the opening ceremony for a middle school building in the Shakar Khel area of Gardez, where he urged parents to ensure education for their children.

"The parents have responsibility to send their children to school, and building schools is mine and (that of) the Government of Afghanistan," the Governor said.

With only 70 schools throughout the province in 2001, Paktya now has 259 government and six private high schools, and one madrassa (religious school) in each district of the province, according to Director of Education Mihrabuddin Shafaq who said this "means 65 per cent development has occurred in the education sector."

"Considering the significance of education, tremendous improvement has taken place in the education sector since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. There are now 259 schools for 120,000 students in Paktya province, out of which 54 are high schools, 62 are middle schools, and 126 are primary schools, while the remaining are madrasas," added Mr Shafaq.

Beside the schools, there is also a university with two faculties – Agriculture and Education – as well as a centre for higher Islamic studies in the province. Paktya also has two female Islamic learning centres, where more than 550 female students are enrolled. There are around 130 literacy training courses going on in different districts with a total number of 2,100 enrolled students.

Recently, a high school for technical education was established in Gardez centre where students will receive education on welding, carpentry and motor-engine fixing.

Around 30 high school graduates have so far been sent to India, Pakistan and Turkey for higher education despite socio-economic and security challenges.

"Education...improves the capacity of individuals to live a decent life and to escape from the hunger trap and the circle of poverty," said Shaista Jan Ahady, Deputy Head of the Provincial Council.

"Based on Articles 26 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights, literacy is a basic human right guaranteeing and specifying the right of everyone to education. This is the responsibility of the present government to make education accessible to all the people without any discrimination," said Dr Abdul Hadi Hamas, a civil society representative.

By Dilawar Khan Dilawar, UNAMA

Afghanistan's most famous theatre star passes away

22 April 2010 - Anisa Wahab, the famous theatre star of the country, quietly us inaudibly on the night of 18 April in Kabul.

She was born in the Shash Darak area of Kabul 53 years ago, of which she spent 46 years in the service of theatre in the country. She was married to a cinema actor and had no children.

Ms Wahab was a little kid of seven years, when she began coming to the corridors of Radio Kabul or to the theatre to play, cry, and work.

After her tragic death on Sunday, the Minister for Information and Culture, Sayed Makhdoom Raheen, said that Anissa Wahab dedicated her life to the service of theatre.

"In this field, she came across a lot of difficulties and challenges, but with an unbelievable resistance that was clear from her delicate and short stature, as she smilingly tolerated them. Alas! She is not with us anymore, but her memories will never be forgotten," he added.

Ms Wahab gave thousands of performances during her 46 years of work in different roles for which she won several artistic awards. She made people laugh and cry. She spread, through her work, messages of human rights and women's rights. She proved that even in the middle of a traditional war-torn society, a woman in the arts can achieve great things.

She also worked towards promoting the culture of peace, as a participant in UNAMA's campaign for International Peace Day 2007 with Peace Ambassador and Hollywood actor Jude Law.

Shoresh Kalantari, head of UNAMA's multimedia unit, who worked with her on multiple occasions said "she was a great human being who never worked for money."

Qader Farokh, Afghanistan's most famous living tenor, said: "this is a huge artistic loss that is irreplaceable. She starred in five disciplines such as theater, radio, television, children's theatre and cinema. Her immense artistic repertoire includes thousands of irrepressible performances."

By Nilab Mobarez, UNAMA