



Travel pains: Treating those fleeing the fighting

9 May 2010 - Mohammed Ibrahim thought life would be easier in Kabul after leaving Helmand's insecurity behind. But a new range of challenges, including health, he and his family face as they cling to the fringes of the crowded capital.

We are getting sick because of poor nutrition. We can't buy any meat, fresh fruit and vegetables," says 49-year-old Ibrahim from Helmand's Greshk district, who moved to Kabul with a cousin and their 14 family members more than one year ago. "And the bad hygiene and sanitation is causing our children to get sick with fever, diarrhea and tuberculosis."

To respond to these health needs, WHO, as Afghanistan Health Cluster lead, is working with local NGO, Serve Health Relief and Development Organization, to run health centers at five temporary informal settlements in Kabul province, where 26,000 people live. Doctors give patients check-ups, midwives provide essential obstetric services and counseling to pregnant women, and vaccinators immunize children.

"These are very vulnerable people," says Dr Maria-Luiza Galer, coordinator of the Health Cluster network of healthcare providers which is co-chaired by the Ministry of Public Health and includes NGOs and UN agencies. "Displacement, poverty and poor living conditions impact on their health."

But the WHO-supported health centres provide the only access such people have to essential health services and hospital referrals, including pregnant women for deliveries. Disease outbreaks are also being prevented in both the settlement and neighboring communities.

Since Ibrahim and his relatives arrived in Kabul, they have been sharing a squalid mud-brick dwelling at the Bagrami settlement, home to 390 families. Clouds of flies hover around a small dark room used as a kitchen. Some crawl over cooking utensils.

The smell from the open sewer just outside wafts into the dwelling's compound, where young children sit on the dusty ground.

WHO is working with several NGOs to assess the health needs of the larger of a remaining 23 settlements that have sprung up around the city's edges to house people who have fled the conflict in southern Afghanistan. Most have no or insufficient access to health services and are not serviced by electricity, running water or sewerage systems. NGO water tankers deliver supplies of drinking water just twice a week to some camps.

WHO is advocating with Afghan authorities to consider the health consequences and needs linked to urban planning in general. WHO has also dedicated its 2010 World Health Day theme to this issue, under the banner of "Urban Health Matters."

More than one year ago as conflict raged in parts of southern Afghanistan, Ibrahim telephoned his 38-year-old cousin, Mohammed Wali Khan, from neighboring Kandahar province, and they decided to gather their relatives and belongings and move to the relative safety of Kabul.

"The main reason we left was the insecurity and to have a good life here. But we did not expect to be living this way," Wali Khan said. "Nothing was available. We expected our children to be able to find work, but each day 50-60 of our young people from this settlement go to the bazaar looking for daily work. However they rarely find any. If they did manage to get some money, they would be bringing only bread and we would be eating it only with water."

But the health facility, located in a white tent with areas for male and female patients, has provided some ray of hope.

"We are very happy this NGO came here and we hope they will remain here to help us," Ibrahim said. "Please give them good medicines and more of them so they can keep treating us."

By Paul Garwood, WHO

Afghan prohibition of under-age police recruitment wins UN applause

10 May 2010 - The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) today welcomed a ban on the recruitment of people under the age of 18 into the national police force and called on the defence ministry to adopt a similar prohibition with regard to the army.

"This was one of the issues that the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, pressed the Government on during her visit to Afghanistan in February," UNAMA said in a news release. "Despite a law requiring the age of recruitment to be 18, there has been evidence of under-age recruitment."

An executive order from the Interior Ministry bans the recruitment of such under-age people in the police and provides for any now serving to be demobilized and reintegrated into civil society, with disciplinary action to be taken against the recruiters.

"UNAMA welcomes this order and hopes the Minister of Defence will follow with a similar decree to prevent the recruitment of children into the Afghan National Army," the release added.



Statement by UN Special Representative Staffan de Mistura on mysterious illnesses affecting girls in Afghan schools

12 May 2010 - I am concerned by recent reports from Kunduz, Daikundi and Kabul of girls falling ill in school, allegedly due to the presence of some kind of chemical contaminant.

The UN World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, in support of the Afghan Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Education and provincial authorities, have been investigating these reports, helping to treat the ill children and seeking ways to prevent any possible breach of security in Afghanistan's schools.

Blood samples have been taken sent to laboratories out of the country, as no facilities exist here which can thoroughly test the samples.

At this point the investigations have not revealed any conclusion as to the nature or source of these incidents of illness.

Thankfully I understand the children have recovered relatively quickly from their symptoms.

WHO is supporting the Ministry of Health in its investigations and with technical guidance and information.

WHO is also consulting with technical experts on methods for carrying out environmental investigations and on testing blood samples.

UNICEF has provided necessary medication to the Ministry of Public Health for treatment and is actively pursuing with the Ministry of Education ways to ensure school security.

As the senior UN official in Afghanistan, I have asked all relevant UN entities to remain vigilant in the protection of schools and of all children's rights to education.

Humanitarian aid rushed to flood victims in western Afghanistan

12 May 2010 - A joint mission of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) has brought aid to flood victims in western Afghanistan where heavy flooding has so far claimed the lives of at least 70 people.

Hundreds of houses have also been destroyed and thousands of livestock have perished, according to officials of the National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) who said both food and non-food items are urgently needed in the flood-stricken areas.

Herat, Ghor and Badghis provinces are the worst affected by the flood, according to local officials.

The joint UNAMA-ANDMA mission was conducted just hours after the flood to rush emergency food and non-food assistance to thousands of flood-affected individuals in the three western provinces.

Assistance came in the form of children's kits, jerry cans, blankets, biscuits, tarpaulin packs and tents.

United Nations relief teams also sent assistance to affected families in dire need of help in Ghor and Badghis provinces.

The Bala-Morqhab district of Badghis province is one of the worst-affected areas.

However, the area is inaccessible to both government and humanitarian agencies.

Assessment is now being conducted by community elders led by UNAMA and ANDMA on how to deliver humanitarian assistance to the remote district.

By Fraidoon Poya, UNAMA

UN agencies rush assistance to flood-affected areas of Herat

6 May 2010 - United Nations agencies are rushing emergency food and non-food assistance to hundreds of flood affected families in Afghanistan's western province of Herat.

Rainfall and torrential flooding has devastated many areas, killing some 14 people, including seven children, injuring 30 others and damaging more than 250 houses and destroying around 300 hectares of agricultural land.

In a joint effort, the United Nations has provided humanitarian food and non-food assistance to vulnerable families affected by the rainfall and flooding.

Local officials in Herat claim that three districts were affected by flooding and the largest part of damage covered the Obbeh District of Herat province.

Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) officials in Herat said that the assistance provided by the United Nations agencies, NGOs and Afghan National Army have played a vital role in recent days for the flood affected families.

The assistance provided is in the form of children's kits, jerry cans, blankets, biscuits, pucks of tarpaulins, and tents.

Assiluddin Jami Herat's Provincial Executive Director said that Obbeh, Pashtun-Zarghoon and Chesht-e-Sharif districts have been affected by the rainfall and flooding. He also expressed gratitude for the efforts of the United Nations and NGOs and their timely assistance.

Mr Jami added that the flood was so heavy that it even entered the district compound and damaged the district's administration building.

In the meantime, teams from the local Department of Health are searching to find missing people.

By Fraidoon Poya, UNAMA

Art as a tool for peace building

12 May 2010 - Art in Afghanistan received a harsh blow during the Taliban time with music banned, sculptures broken, any paintings with human and animal facial expressions covered up or destroyed and archaeology looted.

"We called a famous painter during the Taliban time to redraw with water ink on top of the old oil paintings to hide human faces of art effects at the Art Gallery of Afghanistan in order to save them from destruction by the Taliban," said Mir Ahmad Joyenda, a Member of Afghanistan's Parliament from Kabul and the head of the board of directors for the Afghan Foundation for Culture and Civil Society (FCC).

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 brought a new breath of life to Afghan art.

Artists who were still inside the country restarted their activities and those refugees in other countries slowly started to come back.

Older institutions reopened like the Kharabat Music School, Kabul's Fine Arts Faculty and many new organizations were created.

The media scene has also been transformed in the last eight years and now there are more than 700 television and radio stations, newspapers, magazines and news agencies across Afghanistan; there's even the Afghan version of "Pop Idol".

Music has captured the imagination and interest of Afghans and older traditions have reappeared.

Only last week an extraordinary concert took place with several tenors of the Afghan music scene coming together to perform in a small private concert hall situated in the heart of the old Kabul.

The atmosphere was unusual in the small hundred-year old domed hall where dozens of Afghan musicians and singers from the Kharabat Music School came together for a special event organized by the Forum for Culture and Civil Society (FCCS) and supported by the Swiss Development Corporation.

Special participants included: Ustad Mahwash, the first and only female maestro of music in Afghanistan with hundreds of songs in her repertory; Ustad Hamahng perhaps the most experienced singer of his style; the brothers Qassem Bakhsh and Salim Bakhsh; Ustad Gul Zaman the trainer and composer for dozens of Pashto singers; and Safdar Tawakolee the Hazara maestro with his amazing voice who sings for national unity.

"Culture is the only tool to stop war and to strengthen national unity," said parliamentarian Mr Joyenda.

The Afghan Foundation for Culture and Civil Society was established in March 2003 and is concerned with the fate of Afghan culture and the strengthening of Afghan civil society.

Last year alone the Foundation organized around eighty cultural events mainly with the support of the Swiss Development Corporation.

"The Swiss Development Corporation believes in the power of culture as a connector within every society. When it comes to Afghanistan, its long history of culture and arts represent a unique wealth in a most difficult context," said Marie-Thérèse Karlen, the Deputy Country Director of the Swiss Cooperation Office in Kabul.

Music in Afghanistan, rich for several thousand years, is based on Indian classical music.

For more than one hundred years the Kharabat Music School in Kabul has passed on knowledge to its students through a Master's of Art or Ustad.

The School is a traditional institution, not registered anywhere, but existing in the hearts of the people.

Weakened during the civil war of the 1990s and almost silent during the Taliban regime the institution is reviving itself again and finding a new life.

Kharabat was also a neighbourhood where hundreds of musicians were living and playing; it can be described as an atmosphere of art within the old city of Kabul under the shadow of the city's famous Bala Hissar fortress.

By Nilab Mobarez, UNAMA

