

UNAMA calls for safety first, as civilian casualties rise by 14% in 2009

13 January 2010 - The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) today called on all sides of Afghanistan's conflict to minimize the impact of fighting on civilians.

New statistics released by the UN Mission showed 2009 proved to be the deadliest year yet for civilians, since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.

However, 2009 saw a reduction in the number of civilian casualties caused by pro-Government forces.

In its latest report, the UN Mission recorded 2,412 civilian casualties during 2009, which represents an increase of 14 per cent from 2008, when 2,118 civilian deaths were recorded.

Norah Niland, UNAMA's Chief Human Rights Officer, indicated: "Civilian deaths caused by the armed opposition increased by 41 per cent between 2008 and 2009 from 1,160 to 1,630."

Ms Niland specified: "Suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices caused more civilian casualties than any other tactic killing 1,054 civilians last year. Civilians are also being deliberately assassinated, abducted and executed if they are perceived as being associated with the Government or the international community."

The report points at anti-Government elements as being responsible for the largest proportion of civilian deaths, killing three times as many civilians as pro-Government forces.

Ms Niland is adamant: "It is vital that determined efforts are now made by the insurgency to put into effect the Taliban "Code of Conduct" that calls on them to protect the lives of civilians."

The findings of UNAMA's human rights team also indicate that 2009 saw a reduction of 28 per cent compared with 2008 in the number of civilian casualties caused by pro-Government forces.

This decrease reflects measures taken by international military forces to reduce the risk posed by military operations on the civilian population.

In his quarterly report to the United Nations on Afghanistan, released at the beginning of January, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said: "The increased reliance of anti-Government elements on improvised explosive device attacks has demonstrated an apparent disregard for the loss of civilian life. However, it is encouraging to see that certain positive steps have continued to be taken by the Government and its international military partners to reduce the impact of military operations on the civilian population."

Norah Niland deplores that despite positive trends, actions by pro-Government forces continued to take an adverse toll on civilians.

She said: "We recorded 359 civilians killed during aerial attacks, which constitute 61 per cent of the number of civilian deaths attributed to pro-Government forces. International and Afghan security forces also conducted a large number of search and seizure operations. These often involved excessive use of force, destruction of property and cultural insensitivity, particularly toward women."

The UN Mission also expressed concern on the location of military bases that are situated within, or close to, areas where civilians are concentrated, saying that such bases increased the risks faced by civilians.



Ms Niland underlined that all parties to the conflict have an obligation to avoid locating military assets, including personnel, in areas that put civilians at risk.

Ms Niland insists: "2009 has proven to be the worst year since the fall of the Taliban regime for civilians caught up in the armed conflict. The conflict has intensified and spread into areas that were previously considered safe."

"Ensuring the safety and welfare of the civilian population must come first. Anti-Government elements must realize that they too have obligations under international law while pro-Government forces must step up efforts to ensure that every measure is taken to protect civilians during the conduct of military operations. The United Nations calls for international law to be respected to minimize the impact of the conflict on civilians as we begin 2010."

To this effect, UNAMA human rights officers undertake a range of activities aimed at minimizing the impact of the conflict on civilians; this includes independent and impartial monitoring of incidents involving loss of life or injury to civilians and analysis of trends to identify the circumstances in which loss of life occurs.

On the last day of 2009 the Special Representative for Afghanistan Kai Eide issued a statement in response to an incident in Kunar where he appealed to all armed actors "to make every effort to minimize harm to civilians and want to underline the importance of taking all precautionary measures to distinguish between civilians and combatants. Greater efforts must be made to reverse current trends so that civilians are spared the worst effects of armed conflict in the coming year."

By Henri Burgard, UNAMA





UNAMA-trained Afghan photographers shine

11 January 2010 - Two Afghan photographers trained by world-renowned British photo-journalist Tim Page and UNAMA are already beginning to make their mark on the journalism scene in the country.

Barat Ali Batoor, 26, who attended the 10-week-long photography Master Class along with five other students, has been awarded a prestigious grant with the Open Society Institute in New York.

During the internship, Barat will use his generous US\$ 3,500 funding to work on a project on the tendentious issue of child trafficking in Afghanistan.

"I will mainly be focusing on the north of the country. During the civil war, the warlords used to use young boys for sex and dress them up as girls. In fact, this still sometimes happens in the north at wedding parties. My purpose is to highlight this issue and make the public aware of this problem," he said, adding that the project will be completed with six months.

Barat, who recently returned from a workshop in Turkey, intends to highlight cross-border trafficking and cases of rape of minors by warlords. He will also open his first photo-exhibition on Afghanistan later this year in Melbourne, Australia.

Eighteen-year-old Ahmad Massoud, Page's youngest student, currently works with the wire agency, the Associated Press.

"This class was very useful to me. I am lucky to have got such an opportunity at such a young age. During the elections, for example, I got to travel to Jalalabad and Bamyan. It was a wonderful experience," exclaimed Ahmad.

Ahmad and Barat and four others, who were selected by UNAMA from over a 100 applicants, worked with Tim Page and travelled across the country as they covered the Presidential race last year.

"The knowledge that I got while working with Tim in those three months ... I would not have got anywhere else in three years. Projects like these are very helpful to young photographers like us. I learnt a lot of things from Tim. Among them was the understanding of the international photography market - how people work and what the market expects from us," said Barat.

According to Shores Mustafa Kalantri, UNAMA's Multimedia Chief, the "tools and skills taught to these budding photographers during the Master Class and the experience they've gained while working with the international community, will strengthen their foundations and open new opportunities for them."

Ahmad believes the time is ripe for young photographers in Afghanistan to flourish and convey the correct images of Afghanistan to the outside world.

"We could not do this during the Taliban ... when photography was banned. Things have changed now. I want to be a good photographer and show the world our problems, as well as the beauty of Afghanistan," he added.

The best photographs from the Afghan Master Class will be compiled into a book and released to the public this year.

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA

New UNAMA radio programme on the rule of law

9 January 2010 - Not many ordinary Afghans are aware of their basic rights after years of war and instability and even the most simple of privileges are not realized by some.

A middle class citizen may not be able to tell you how he would argue with a police officer for his rights; people have forgotten their rights.

Now the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in the north of the country has started a radio programme up with the local station in Mazar-i-Sharif, Radio Nehad, 90.4 FM.

The programme includes drama and technical expertise on the rule of law and aims to deliver a clear and simple explanation about basic rights for people in Afghanistan.

The script of the programme is written by the legal unit of the Balkh Provincial Department of Justice.

The subject of the first episode "The Rights of Detainees", explained what rights a suspected detainee has while in police custody, such as the right to a lawyer, the right to be silent, the right to know about the charges, the limited amount of time the detainee can be kept in custody, the process of the case and other issues.

Each programme varies in length from 15 to 30 minutes and next week's programme on Tuesday will be a series of three episodes on engagement, marriage and divorce, explaining the rights of men and women in married life.

Radio Nehad, an independent commercial radio station in Mazar-i-Sharif, founded in 2007, covers the entire territory of Balkh province and some areas of neighbouring Jawzjan province.

"The reason behind the conflicts and hostility in the world is a lack of knowledge about the rights of other people and your own - that is why people fight" said Dr Najeeb Paykan, the manager of Radio Nehad.

By Sayed Barez, UNAMA





Countdown: London Conference on Afghanistan

11 January 2010 - At the end of this month more than sixty countries and international organizations will gather for the London Conference on Afghanistan.

Four years ago this month another conference in London cemented the Afghanistan Compact as the way forward for Afghanistan and the international community.

The 2006 London Conference on Afghanistan had three co-chairs: Britain's then Prime Minister Tony Blair, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, and then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The Conference produced the Afghanistan Compact dated 1 February 2006 and aimed at guiding development efforts in Afghanistan for the next five years until 2011.

Also known as the London Agreement, the Afghanistan Compact had the Government of Afghanistan and the international community affirming "their shared commitment to continue, in the spirit of the Bonn, Tokyo and Berlin conferences, to work toward a stable and prosperous Afghanistan, with good governance and human rights protection for all under the rule of law, and to maintain and strengthen that commitment over the term of this Compact and beyond."

The Compact would govern the second phase of Afghanistan's rise from the ruins of war, with the first phase under the Bonn Agreement of 2001 having been implemented through the adoption of Afghanistan's new Constitution in January 2004, the holding of presidential elections in October 2004, and the holding of the National Assembly and Provincial Council elections in September 2005.

The Compact participants "resolved to overcome the legacy of conflict in Afghanistan by setting conditions for sustainable economic growth and development; strengthening state institutions and civil society; removing remaining terrorist threats; meeting the challenge of counter-narcotics; rebuilding capacity and infrastructure; reducing poverty; and meeting basic human needs."

During the two-day conference, the Afghan Government presented its "Afghanistan Millennium Development Goals Country Report 2005 – Vision 2020".

Consistent with those goals, the Compact identified three "critical and interdependent areas or pillars of activity for the five years from the adoption of this Compact."

The three areas or pillars that serve as a basis for the international community's development efforts in the country from 2006 to 2011 are: Security; Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights; and Economic and Social Development.

And to coordinate and monitor the progress of joint development efforts, especially in the implementation of political commitments, the Compact provided for the establishment of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board to be co-chaired by the Afghan Government and the United Nations.

The Compact said the JCMB "will ensure greater coherence of efforts by the Afghan Government and international community to implement the Compact and provide regular and timely public reports on its execution."

The next meeting of the JCMB is scheduled to take place in Kabul on 20 January 2010.

The London Compact laid out nine "principles of cooperation" for the Afghan Government and the international community as they embarked on the implementation of the Compact, "with a central and impartial coordinating role for the United Nations."

Also among the cooperation principles was ensuring the "balanced and fair allocation of domestic and international resources in order to offer all parts of the country tangible prospects of well-being."

Through the Compact, the Afghan Government committed itself to "realising this shared vision of the future" while the international community committed to "provide resources and support to realise that vision."

This year the one day London Conference at Lancaster House on 28 January will be focussing on three key agenda items: security, economic development and governance, and regional relations.

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA

United Nations provides safe water for the people of Afghanistan

12 January 2010 - The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) is in the process of providing safe piped water to the residents of Jalalabad, the capital of the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar.

Following a request from the water supply department of Nangarhar and the urgency for safe water, UN-HABITAT, with the financial support of the Japan Community Empowerment and Development for Peace and Building organization, led the construction of a unique reservoir on a high hill in the city's vicinity.

The total cost of the project is expected to be US\$ 1,800,000.

The taps run dry at Karimullah's house, which is why the 38-year-old teacher from Jalalabad, needs to bring water from his neighbour's well. The water is often not clean and safe.

"My residence is not very far from the centre of the city, but I have no access to piped water because of shortages and the lack of electricity," said Karimullah.

"This reservoir construction project is a vital and unique project. It is the only hope for us to have access to safe pipe water in our houses ... and schools," he added.

Nazar Muhamad, 30, a site engineer for UN-HABITAT's Water Supply Project in Nangarhar, says they are working hard to complete the construction work of the water reservoir by March 2010.

"This is the first safe drinking water reservoir in Afghanistan, being constructed with a new design. It will have a capacity of 5,000 cubic metres," added engineer Nazar.

Engineer Abdul Khalil Ahmadi, National Project Manager for UN-HABITAT in Nangarhar said the project includes a total of 18 sub-projects, such as six Tube/Deep wells, 3,800 metres of pipeline network, installation of water pumps, electricity supply, construction of a guard room and an administrative building.

Afghanistan has witnessed a major building boom in the last eight years. Beside roads, schools and clinics and intakes, safe drinking water is being provided by UN agencies and international organizations working in Afghanistan, a country where only 23 per cent of the population has access to the safe drinking water, and 12 per cent to safe sanitation.

By Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA