

UN envoy De Mistura urges legal processing of detained Italians

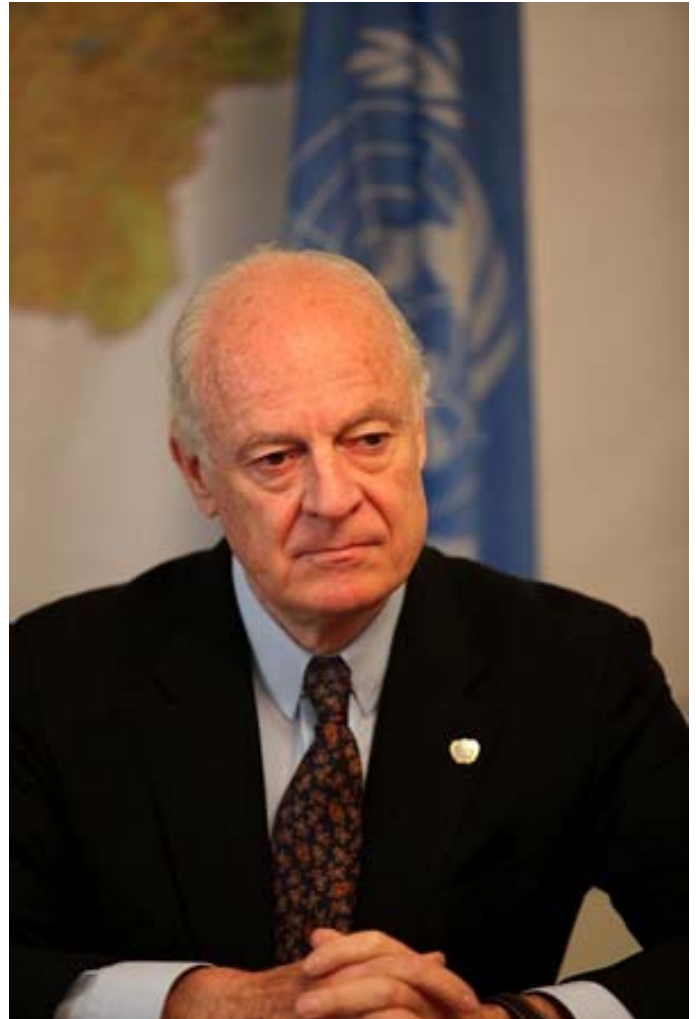
15 April 2010 - United Nations envoy Staffan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, today called on the competent Afghan authorities to ensure a quick and thorough investigation into the case of three Italian medical workers and their six Afghan colleagues who were detained by Afghan authorities on 10 April in Helmand province after weapons were reportedly discovered in a storeroom of the hospital where they were working.

The Italian medical workers belong to the medical NGO Emergency, which has operated in Afghanistan for more than a decade, dispensing critical health care to Afghans in a volatile region. It is the main medical facility in the province with trauma surgery and treatment capability. It currently has 40 patients.

Special Representative de Mistura called on the President and relevant Afghan authorities to ensure that the Italian medical workers receive proper legal assistance and that they be accorded due process, safe conditions and visits from their embassy.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, which SRSG de Mistura leads, has asked the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and the UN Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator to monitor the case.

"I am hopeful that these arrests are due to some serious misunderstanding," he said today. "International medical workers in places like Helmand are risking their lives to treat all who come to them for help."



UN Special Envoy demands renewed efforts to protect civilians

15 April 2010 - On Monday, four civilians were reportedly killed and 18 others injured in the Zhari district of Kandahar province, when international military forces fired at a bus.

The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, said: "I am deeply saddened and seriously concerned by this loss of civilian life and once again call on all parties to the conflict to do their utmost to minimize harm to ordinary Afghans and to take every possible precautionary measure to distinguish between civilians and combatants in their operations."

This incident follows other reports of civilian casualties over recent weeks: On 6 April, international forces killed four civilians in connection with an engagement with insurgents inside a compound in Nahr-e-Saraj.

In February, a night raid on a family compound outside Gardez by international forces resulted in the deaths of three women and two men.

According to the UN Special Envoy, this is a "disturbing trend, and all efforts must be undertaken to ensure it is reversed."

"I appreciate the decision by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to conduct an investigation into Monday's unfortunate incident. I also welcome the new guidelines by General McChrystal on the use of lethal force, and am anxious to see them effectively implemented," he added.

The Special Representative has extended his condolences to the victims and their families.



UN envoy De Mistura condemns attack on humanitarian deminers

14 April 2010 - On 11 April, a bus carrying a group of deminers on their way to go to work in Kandahar province's Daman district was struck by a roadside bomb. Five of the deminers were killed, and 16 injured, according to the Demining Agency for Afghanistan, which employs the deminers.

Staffan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, said today, "I am deeply saddened by the loss of lives of our demining workers, and I deplore this attack on these courageous people who for years have devoted their lives to making Afghanistan safer for all."

"Mines are among the biggest problems that have confronted the Afghan people for more than 30 years. Many innocent people have lost their lives or limbs in incidents related to mines or explosive remnants of war.

"Today more than 10,000 Afghans are taking part in demining projects across the country to secure the lives of their families and communities," said Mr de Mistura.

Since 1988, more than 15,000 minefields and battlefields have been cleared throughout the country.

"Mine action is a neutral humanitarian activity which makes land safer for all Afghans regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation. I call on all parties to respect this life-saving work and the neutrality of its practitioners," the SRSG said.

The UN-supported Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan, the umbrella organization for all entities carrying out mine action in the country, maintains that the deminers were attacked and condemned the targeting of humanitarian deminers.

MACCA recorded a total of 51,743 anti-personnel mines, 1,152,738 explosive remnants of war and 746 anti-tank mines were destroyed in 2009 in Afghanistan.

It estimates there are still 2,082 contaminated communities in Afghanistan. Some 600 square kilometres of land containing 5,384 hazardous areas still need to be cleared of mines and explosive remnants of war.

Deminer, life safer, life gambler

15 April 2010 - There are a few types of workers who on the one hand, save people's lives, but on the other sometimes put their own lives in danger as well. Deminers are among them.

In the early morning of 11 April, a group of deminers took a bus to work at a mine field in Kandahar province's Daman district. Two hundred metres away from their regular parking lot, the bus was struck by a possible remote controlled roadside bomb. The huge explosion soon drew other deminers at work in the field to the scene to rescue their colleagues. A second bomb exploded, which unfortunately, left five workers killed and 16 injured.

Staffan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, said yesterday, "I am deeply saddened by the loss of lives of our demining workers, and I deplore this attack on these courageous people, who for years have devoted their lives to making Afghanistan safer for all."

Dr Haider Reza, Programme Director of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), said the day after the attack: "Mine action is a neutral humanitarian activity, which should not be confused with military operations in the country." He appealed to all his fellow Afghans to "support this important humanitarian work to protect Afghan men, women and children from the threat of landmines and other explosive remnants of war."

Two months ago, the United Nations and the humanitarian community called on parties in the conflict to respect humanitarian personnel and humanitarian aid, as increasing numbers of displaced people arrived in Lashkar Gah.

Robert Watkins, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator said: "We are calling on combatants to respect the neutrality of the humanitarian community and humanitarian aid."

The security risk in the country, especially in the south, is a big challenge for deminers. From the beginning of this year, there have been four to five attacks against deminers. The latest attack was the most deadly one. In order to reduce risks for deminers, mine action relies more and more on community-based demining, according to MACCA.

With assistance from partners, local people are recruited and trained as deminers to clear mines in their own communities, mainly in volatile areas. "In community-based demining cases, deminers come from the communities. Villagers all know them and their families, so they will take security on their own shoulders to protect these deminers," said Dr Reza. "Once the minefield is cleared then it becomes the responsibility of the community to look after it. However, we have no other measures in place to safeguard the cleared area," he added.

The 2009 report from the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan shows that 280 communities across Afghanistan were declared free from mines between January to December 2009. Community-based demining is currently operational in Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Ghor, Kandahar and Bamiyan provinces.

By Kangying Guo, UNAMA





Ban Ki-moon in Kabul, November 2009

Students, youths and locals to make Jalalabad cleaner

8 April 2010 - Different stakeholders in Afghanistan's eastern regional hub of Jalalabad today vowed to make the city cleaner by mobilizing students, youths and local denizens.

Observing the World Health Day in the Nangarhar provincial capital, representatives of the provincial government, line departments and civil society said they would do their part to give the city a better look.

About 300 people, including government officials, community elders, university students and representatives from United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and World Health Organization (WHO) joined hands to mark the day in Jalalabad, a day after it was officially observed worldwide with the message of raising awareness on health consequences of rapid urbanization.

Dr Baz Muhamad Shirzad, deputy director of public health, said the official ceremony was postponed by a day due to a security incident in the city, which saw the death of a civilian. Dr Shirzad expressed his satisfaction with the work of municipality and the support shown by the local people in keeping the city clean.

Speaking at the ceremony held in Jalalabad, Abuzahid, Acting Director of Education of Nangarhar, said his office would help the municipality in removing dust, a major environment problem, from the city through voluntary mobilization of school students. "We highly appreciate the efforts of Jalalabad Municipality to keep the city clean, but we still need to speed up our work," said Mr Abuzahid.

For the ceremony to mark the World Health Day, the jam-packed hall of Jalalabad municipality was decorated with WHO banners with messages like "walking by foot or using bicycles are not only useful for health but also protect the environment"; "in order to be healthy, you should walk or engage in sports or physical work for at least 30-60 minutes a day"; and "keep your house and environment clean because it may cause different diseases," among others.

According to WHO, the rapid increase in the number of urban dwellers will be among the most important global health issues of the 21st century. In 2007, the world's population living in cities surpassed 50 per cent for the first time in history, and this proportion is growing. Unplanned urbanization has consequences for the health and safety of all citizens in cities.

WHO has an initiative – "1000 cities, 1000 lives" – to engage 1000 cities across the world in a set of activities intended to create physical, mental and environmental health benefits, substantial opportunities for small business, and an overall boost in the well-being of participating cities and their citizens. Jalalabad is one of the 1,000 world cities to be engaged in the campaign. There are five other Afghan cities among the 1,000.

Deputy Provincial Governor Muhamad Alam Esazai said the government would fully support the municipality and the directorate of public health in their endeavours to keep the city clean. Deputy Mayor of Jalalabad, Engineer Hakeem, thanked cleaners and labourers of the city, who have been relentlessly working even during nights. "Enormous dust and garbage will pile up in the city if the municipality stops its work even for a week," said Engr Hakeem, seeking active support of the local people.

Dr Khushal, chairperson of Doctors' Association in Jalalabad, said that more is needed to be done in the health sector and the starting point could be keeping the city cleaner. The ceremony was followed by gymnastics and karate performances by young sportsmen from the Sports Department of Jalalabad.

By Shafiqullah Waak. UNAMA

Recent rhetoric unhelpful for Afghanistan's relations with its partners – Ban

9 April 2010 - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he continues to expect full cooperation between Afghanistan and its global partners, adding that recent comments critical of the international community by the country's President Hamid Karzai are unhelpful.

Mr Karzai was reported in the media last week as having said that foreigners, including former UN deputy envoy Peter Galbraith, were behind the fraud that marred last year's presidential poll, which he eventually won.

He also reportedly threatened to join the Taliban if foreigners did not stop meddling in Afghanistan.

"I am troubled by all this rhetoric, which is not helpful and desirable at this time," Mr Ban told reporters Thursday during his visit to Vienna.

Speaking at a joint news conference with Austrian Federal Minister for European and International Affairs Michael Spindelegger, the Secretary-General noted that Mr Karzai has requested UN technical and administrative support for the country's parliamentary elections, slated for September.

"The international community is now committed and ready to support Afghanistan and we expect that there should be harmonious and full cooperation between the Afghanistan Government and the international community," he stated, adding that the Government should take all measures to enhance good governance, tackle corruption and address various socio-economic issues.

Mr Ban and Mr Spindelegger also discussed a number of other topics, including the future of UN peacekeeping operations, the need to continue to support Middle East peace talks, and the current challenge of nuclear non-proliferation and the specific cases of Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

While in Vienna, the Secretary-General also met with Austrian President Heinz Fischer, as well as Chancellor Werner Faymann, with whom he discussed, among other topics, the Middle East peace process, non-proliferation, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and climate change.

Power, Voice and Rights:

A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific



11 April 2010 - The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Afghanistan today launched in Kabul the UNDP Asia-Pacific Human Development Report identifying three key areas “where policy interventions will produce results for gender equality” – building economic power; promoting political voice; and advancing legal rights.

The launch event at the Government Media Information Centre (GMIC) was attended by UNDP’s Resident Representative Robert Watkins who said that “while East Asia and the Pacific are improving, our region, the South Asian sub-region, is lagging behind on major indicators, such as health, literacy, economic and political participation, and discriminatory social practices and behaviours.”

Mr Watkins, who is also the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), said “Afghanistan witnesses gender inequalities on the three areas targeted in the report – economic, political and legislative – due to many structural and social restrictions.” Mr Watkins pointed out that “this report presents an opportunity to reconsider Afghanistan’s economic and policy opportunities in terms of gender equality.”

Mr Watkins noted, however, that “while lack of data remains a main challenge for representation of Afghanistan on the regional and global human development assessments, contribution from the UNDP-CPHD (Centre for Policy and Human Development) project has been very valuable as, for the first time, Afghanistan is studied in the regional context from a human development gender-related lens.”

“In conflict settings and post-conflict countries, women’s roles are largely ignored. Women’s inclusion can bring better insights in studying conflicts and reconciliation potentials. Furthermore, post-conflict countries cannot achieve peace, reform and rehabilitation with the exclusion of women from peace agreements and post-conflict development,” said Mr Watkins.

Mr Watkins said the UNDP Report “is an opportunity for Afghanistan to draw lessons learnt from the regional context and address its local gender-related issues presented in the report.”

“The UN family stands ready to support the Government of Afghanistan in this regard. We are firmly committed to working together with the Government and people of Afghanistan as well as the international community to ensure that we are successful,” he concluded.

The launching of the UNDP report sub-titled “Power, Voice and Rights – A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific” was also attended by the Deputy Minister of Women Affairs, Mushgan Mustafwee, and Afghanistan’s Independent Human Rights Commission head, Sima Samar.

By Aurora Verceles Alambra, UNAMA



UNFPA and MoWA sign Annual Work Plan 2010 towards women empowerment

11 April 2010 - The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Afghan Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) have signed the Annual Work Plan on Gender as they renewed their commitment to reduce gender-based violence and empower women in Afghanistan.

The Annual Work Plan (AWP) 2010 – consisting of women-empowering projects worth almost half-million US dollars – was signed on Thursday by MoWA Minister Husun Banu Ghazanfar and UNFPA Country Representative for Afghanistan Mr Arie Hoekman at the MoWA Conference Room in Kabul.

AWP 2010 “focuses on elimination of violence against women with emphases on awareness campaigns through religious leaders, capacity building of health service providers and community health workers in psychosocial counselling, and engendering police academy curriculum and training.”

“Providing information to communities on the legal/formal system of justice is another element of this AWP that will be executed through justice institutions on the sub-national levels,” added the UNFPA press release on the event.

AWP 2010 – which will cost US\$ 424,202 – “continues to put special emphasis on promoting women’s participation in decision-makings pertaining to their household and community issues.” It will be implemented by Afghan government institutions and civil society, with technical and financial assistance from UNFPA.

By Aurora V Alambra, UNAMA



WFP distributes 60 metric tons of food to Khosan workers

11 April 2010 - Mohamed Yacoub, 60 years old, collects a bag full of wheat and peas, a can containing cooking oil, a small portion of salt. His hands are thick from working the land; his face burnt spending days under the sun. The wind blows on the outskirts of Khosan district centre, Mohamed Yacoub's home town, covering him with dust.

"I have worked for 60 days cleaning the canal," says Mr Yacoub, "and today we have enough water to irrigate our land." He remembers the past year, when he had to stop working for 10 days in order to clean the Herai Rud canal, damaged by floods. It took a toll on his already-sparse resources.

This year, at the request of the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Food Programme (WFP) compensated the workers by distributing daily rations to those who rehabilitated the community's common asset, the lifeline of the district – the water canal.



Around Mohamed Yacoub, people from nearby villages have assembled. In all, 700 workers received close to 60 metric tons of food from the United Nations agency. All have contributed work time to one of two livelihood projects organized in coordination with UNODC.

To ensure that the improvement lasts, the UNODC simultaneously planned an ambitious land-stabilisation program. The agency expects to counter the effect of the past years of drought and the ensuing deforestation as farmers cut the already-meagre vegetation for cooking and for animal fodder, aggravating the precarious condition of their environment. As a result, sand had blown onto the fields and into the canal.

Despite the presence of the main border post with Iran, the population of Khosan district is poor. Most rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Though the district is considered poppy-free, drug trafficking remains a problem. Those who can't find work travel to Farah or Helmand, where they receive 500 Afghanis a day for harvesting the poppy.

Khosan District Governor Noor Ahmad Haftballah welcomes visitors to his office with courtesy. He has received many, and few have come back to fulfil their promises. Satisfied with the current initiative, he calls for more development in his area.

To him, only such programmes may help preserve a fragile stability in his area: "During their stay, 200 to 300 workers will establish contact with anti-governmental elements. They know everything about this district and can create a significant problem."

Three years will be needed to stabilize the land. Aziz Ahmad, an agronomist for the non-government organization Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR), was selected to implement the project. He appears oblivious to the immensity of the task ahead of him; and is proud of DACAAR's recent achievements: "To this day, 40,000 saplings have already been planted. Meanwhile, 70,000 seeds have been sown on one jerrib (2,000 square meters) of land." Once grown, they will be transported to the desert.

WFP also distributed food to those who planted the bushes and those who will be watering them during the coming year. The sapling bushes, selected for their resistance to drought, will grow and scatter their seeds to generate the new vegetation of this land.

Meanwhile, the population of the district centre collects the assistance provided by the UN agencies. Before sunset, the streets of Khosan are still alive with people carrying home their bags of food – some of them riding on their donkeys, their wheel carts or motorbikes.

By Fraidoon Poya and Henri Burgard, UNAMA

Mine action centre condemns attacks on deminers in Afghanistan

13 April 2010 - A centre coordinating the detection and removal of landmines in Afghanistan on Monday condemned an attack on deminers in the country.

The attack, which happened on a team working for the Demining Agency for Afghanistan in Kandahar on 11 April, killed four deminers and injured 17 others.

The Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA) says mine action is a neutral humanitarian activity which should not be confused with military operations in the country. It also strongly condemns the use of all anti-personnel and other improvised explosive devices which have led to a high number of civilian deaths in Afghanistan.

It warns that civilians will continue to die for many years to come if humanitarian deminers are prevented from carrying out this life-saving work.

The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan – the collective name for all organizations carrying out mine action in the country – has been active since 1988. It has been responsible for the removal of over 15,000 hazard areas, which include minefields and battlefields in the last 20 years.

The programme is the largest in the world and employs over 10,000 Afghans in various capacities.



Afghanistan's marble industry boosts economy and brings peace

15 April 2010 - The Balkhi hall, in the centre of Herat is adorned for the occasion: Huge blocks of raw marble have been set outside the venue.

Inside, statue, tiles, mantelpieces and fountains in the shape of birds, which are all made out of marble, are proudly on display everywhere.

For three days, Herat is hosting the second Afghan marble conference, following the one held last year in Kabul.

Entrepreneurs, ministers and diplomats from Afghanistan, Turkey, Italy and the United States have gathered in the regional capital of western Afghanistan to support the growing industry.

The initiative comes with the highest support from the international community.

The presence of US Deputy Secretary of State Jack Lew and US Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, is a clear sign of the importance Afghanistan's Western partner attaches to the development of the marble economy in Herat and all over Afghanistan.

Ahmad Farad Majidi, whose company was established in 1992, extracts marble from Chest-i-Sharif, a district of Herat province which has the reputation of producing some of the finest marbles in Afghanistan.

He expanded his business during the political turmoil his country experienced, and today has an office in the United Arab Emirates.

Majidi explains what he expects from such a forum: "Today, you cannot really compare the quality Afghanistan produces with Europe or the UAE.

"First, we need to start from the quarries, then the production. We need new technology, an investment that may bring us up to that quality."

To help entrepreneurs, government representatives seized the opportunity to stimulate a partnership between investors and Afghan companies.

Wahidula Sharani, the newly-appointed Minister of Mines, announced: "When I took over, Afghan entrepreneurs alerted me on the high tariffs that slow Afghan entrepreneurship: 12 per cent on the export of marble stone.

"A few days back, I discussed the issue with the Ministers of Finance and Revenues and they accepted to suppress all tariffs on the export of processed marble stone."

Mr Majidi currently exports 10 per cent of his production. Such measures taken by the Government may excite investors to offer him the technology he needs.

New extraction and production techniques would enhance the production's quality and quantity, while opening new markets, thus increasing significantly economic activity in the country.

However, the results expected also go beyond mere economic gains. Mr Eikenberry says there is a clear link between the lack of economic opportunities and instability in Afghanistan.

"With its promise of generating jobs, increasing incomes and improving the livelihoods of the Afghan people, the marble industry is poised to become a leading force not only in Afghanistan's economic recovery, but in the restoration of peace and security as well," he adds.

While the annual export of marble has reached US\$ 15 million statistics, from the Ministry of Mines and Industries reveals marble deposits in the country are worth US\$ 150 billion.

Fraidoon Poya and Henri Burgard, UNAMA

