



## Special Representative de Mistura visits southeast Afghanistan

*30 March 2010 - The top United Nations official in Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, flew today to the volatile southeastern provinces of Paktya and Khost to meet with UN staff and local communities and authorities in one of the most challenging regions of the country.*

In his first trip outside Kabul since arriving on 13 March to take up his post as Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, de Mistura said he wanted to acknowledge the courage and commitment of his staff in the towns of Gardez and Khost, who have been working in an increasingly insecure environment.

He also wanted to “pay respect to local communities, as we are their guests in Afghanistan and partners in seeing the stability and development of these provinces,” he explained to members of the Khost Provincial Council.

He told Paktya provincial Governor Juma Khan Hamdard that selecting the southeastern region for his first visit was “not by accident,” as he wanted to assess the situation in a location that was difficult for both UN staff and for Afghans.

“My visit is not only for me to learn but also a sign of support and solidarity for what you are trying to do and what my colleagues are trying to help you to do,” he told the governor. “Strengthening relations with Afghan authorities and communities at all levels will be one of my main priorities over the coming months, not only in Kabul, but throughout Afghanistan.”

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which de Mistura leads, has continued to serve in the region as a coordinator of international aid and an impartial facilitator. UNAMA also engages in capacity building for Afghan institutions.

With movement in the southeastern region increasingly restricted, the UN reaches out to local communities by inviting local and tribal leaders, NGOs and religious figures to gatherings at its premises and other meeting points, where information and support is given on governance, human rights, development, security, electoral processes and other issues.

The Special Representative's visit was also meant to bolster UN staff, concerned by recent attacks, particularly one in Khost on Saturday in which a long-time highly respected German aid worker was severely injured and an Afghan engineer killed. The fact that the UN is valued in the region for its impartiality, its long tenure, institutional knowledge and relationships with Afghan people was a crucial reason to continue their valuable work, he told the largely Afghan staff.

“The role you have to fill is crucial...You are working to help Afghans and the future of Afghanistan.”

Special Representative de Mistura also visited a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Gardez and the brigade headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Khost, where he expressed the UN's interest in supporting sustainable projects that should be Afghan-led.

## Afghanistan a major producer of cannabis, says UNODC

*31 March 2010 - Today UNODC releases its first-ever Afghanistan Cannabis Survey showing that the world's biggest producer of opium is also a major producer of cannabis.*

Way down from the earlier figure of 70,000 hectares circulating, the area of cannabis cultivation in Afghanistan is estimated using converging methodologies at between 10,000 to 24,000 hectares. However, the astonishing yield of 145 kg/ha means that between 1,500 and 3,500 tons of cannabis resin could be produced in Afghanistan a year.

The survey is based on data from 1,634 villages in 20 provinces. It shows that there is large-scale cannabis cultivation in exactly half of Afghanistan's provinces (17 out of 34).

Cannabis reaps a high return. The gross income per hectare of cannabis (US\$ 3,900) is higher than from opium (US\$ 3,600). Cannabis is also cheap to harvest and process: in Afghanistan it is three times cheaper to cultivate a hectare of cannabis than a hectare of opium. As a result, the net income of a hectare of cannabis is US\$ 3,341 compared to US\$ 2,005 per hectare of opium.

Despite the parity, the survey shows opium is still favoured over cannabis among Afghan farmers. Unlike opium, cannabis has a short shelf-life, and is a summer crop (when less water is available for irrigation) with a long vegetation period.

Also at the farm-gate, the average price of cannabis is around US\$ 58/kg (compared to around US\$ 100/kg for dry opium). In 2009 the value of cannabis resin production in Afghanistan is estimated at between US\$ 39-94 million, about 10-20 per cent of the farm-gate value of opium production (which was US\$ 438 million in 2009).

Like opium, cannabis cultivation is concentrated in the south of the country – in regions of instability. Indeed, two-thirds (67 per cent) of cannabis farmers also grew opium in 2009.

This marks a shift away from cultivation in the north of the country which, even five years ago, was the main cannabis-growing region. Illustrative of this trend is the steep increase in cannabis prices in Balkh province – once notorious for its Mazari (Balki) cannabis – due to a governor-led crackdown on drug cultivation since 2007.

“Afghanistan's drug problem is even more complex than just the opium trade”, said UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa. “Yet the remedy remains the same. By improving governance and development in Afghanistan's drug-producing regions, we can knock out the world's biggest supplies of both hash and heroin”, said Mr. Costa.

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## Top UN human rights official in Afghanistan calls for repeal of amnesty law

**25 March 2010 - The United Nations human rights office in Afghanistan today called for the repeal of a controversial amnesty law in the Asian country, saying that it green-lights impunity for serious crimes and continued rights violations.**

"This law relieves Afghan authorities of their obligation to investigate and prosecute, on their own initiative, those allegedly responsible for gross violations of human rights," Norah Niland, the Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told journalists today in Kabul.

"The law is likely to undermine efforts to secure genuine reconciliation, which is of course about bringing together different elements of a fractured society," Ms Niland added.

In 2007, Afghanistan's Parliament approved the Reconciliation and General Amnesty Law, which provides blanket immunity and pardons former members of Afghanistan's armed factions for actions committed prior to December 2001.

The UN has a global position that blanket amnesties are troubling, Ms Niland said, because they prevent a country from dealing with the past and moving out of a crisis.

Asked if she supported repealing the law, Ms Niland said: "The answer is the High Commissioner for Human Rights and Afghan civil society and human rights NGOs [non-governmental organizations] in and outside of the country have asked that the law be repealed."

Ms Niland also criticized the Shi'a personal status law – parts of which appear to sanction rape within the marriage – saying it "legitimized discriminatory practices against women."

Meanwhile, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, met today with representatives from Hezb-e-Islami, a political party in Afghanistan.

The meeting was held in consultation with President Hamid Karzai and in accordance with the expanded mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which gives the operation a wider supporting role in preparation for parliamentary elections slated for September.

Mr de Mistura indicated that the ongoing discussions with Afghan authorities further underscored the importance of Afghan-led dialogue to bring stability to this country.

UNAMA said in a press release following the visit that the UN, as per its traditional role and expertise, will always be available to assist Afghans to find proper avenues for pursuing constructive political dialogue.

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## UN welcomes Pakistan's move to extend validity of Afghan registration cards

**25 March 2010 - The top United Nations officials for refugees today welcomed Pakistan's decision to extend the validity of official identification cards for 1.7 million registered Afghans whose cards had expired at the end of December 2009.**

"This is clearly welcome. Pakistan remains host to the largest refugee population in the world and its continuing generosity in response to the uprooted is vital," said António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The Pakistani Government yesterday endorsed a new Strategy for the Management of Afghans in Pakistan, which includes the extension until the end of 2012 of Proof of Registration (PoR) cards.

Pakistan has registered Afghan citizens living in Pakistan since 2006, providing them with official identification.

The existing PoR cards, which expired on 31 December last year, will be replaced with new cards with enhanced identification features.

Special arrangements will be made for unregistered Afghans, and for business people, students and families headed by women who have lost male breadwinners.

The new strategy also extends the Tripartite Commission Agreement between UNHCR, Pakistan and Afghanistan for another three years, which outlines the gradual repatriation of Afghans.

More than 3.5 million Afghans have returned home from Pakistan with UNHCR's help since 2002.

Noting longer-term problems such as environmental degradation and the rehabilitation of infrastructure and social services, Mr. Guterres called on the international community for financial support of its strained resources.

"Funding needs to be commensurate with the generosity shown by Pakistan over the past three decades," Mr. Guterres said.

He added that UNHCR would remain committed to continuing its work with the Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan to find lasting solutions for Afghan refugees.



## More than 110,000 explosive devices destroyed in Afghanistan this year – UN

*29 March 2010* - The United Nations-supported mine action centre in Afghanistan destroyed nearly 112,000 different types of explosives in the first two months of this year and could do much more with additional funding, one of its top officials said today ahead of next week's International Mine Action Day.

"Although mine action may look expensive, the cost of clearance is very expensive, but the remaining number of communities, or impacted areas in terms of kilometres, and the number of people living in these areas, it only takes US\$ 277 per person to clear all the rest of the contaminated area, so in reality it is not very expensive," Haider Reza, Programme Director of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), told reporters in Kabul.

He added an area of around 600 square kilometres still needs to be cleared of mines and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW). At a rate of 120 kilometres annually, that would take up to six years at a cost of \$500,000.

In January and February this year, the centre cleared 1,727 anti-personnel mines, 135 anti-tank mines and more than 110,000 different types of ERW in 19 communities. In addition, 150,000 people, including women and children, received mine risk education.

The majority of the mines are from the former Soviet Union, but some originated in Italy, Iran and the United Kingdom. Mr. Reza said he also noted that incidents involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have been on the rise, especially in the south and in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, where the Taliban has strong ties.

In the first months of the year, 74 people were either killed or injured by explosions. Mr. Reza said his office's priority for this year is to expand its community-based mine clearance operations throughout the country.

"By training the youth from the community, by providing a small salary and by hiring vehicles from the community, we are actually injecting cash into the community and that's of course a kind of encouragement and incentive so the youth will not turn to the opposition."

The International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, is marked around the world on 4 April.

## UNEP conducts series of environmental journalism workshops

*27 March 2010* - The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Afghanistan has just conducted a series of environmental journalism workshops in the country "to facilitate initiatives to raise the capacity of journalists to report on environmental issues and to play a role in Afghanistan's development."

The two-day Introduction to Environmental Journalism Workshops – under UNEP's Capacity Building Programme for Afghanistan – were held in Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat and Kabul.

UNEP conducted the workshops for some 50 Afghan journalists from both government and private media as it noted that "two decades of war and a lack of civil governance, compounded with drought and population movements, have contributed to widespread environmental problems throughout Afghanistan."

"The combined pressures of warfare, civil disorder, lack of governance and drought have taken a major toll on Afghanistan's natural and human resources. As the country's natural resource base has declined, its vulnerability to natural disasters and food shortages has increased," added a UNEP statement on the project.

The workshops covered the following main topics: State of Afghanistan's Environment; Islam and Environment; Environmental Laws and Legislations; Environmental Journalism; Story Ideas and Sources; Challenges of Environmental Reporting; and Producing Good Environmental Stories.

UNEP experts facilitated the trainings in Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat in February; while the Afghan Centre for International Journalism (CIJ) cooperated with UNEP in the conduct of the training in Kabul this month, with UNEP Programme Manager Belinda Bowling welcoming the participants to the workshop that was also graced by National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) Director-General Mustapha Zaher, Senior Environmental Law Program Officer Abdul Qadeer Karyab, and CIJ Director Rahimullah Samadar.

Three years ago in 2006, UNEP conducted a series of Training of Trainers (ToT) on environmental journalism and photo-journalism in cooperation with the CIJ.

Graduates of the previous workshops are tapped by UNEP for its continuing environmental journalism trainings for Afghan journalists.

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA

## UN chief in Afghanistan deplores attack on German aid agency

*31 March 2010* - The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, has expressed his condolences over and condemned an attack on the office of the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) in Khost, Afghanistan on 27 March, which severely injured a long-time highly respected German aid worker and killed an Afghan engineer.

Visiting the offices of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan in Gardez yesterday, Mr de Mistura thanked the local UN staff who assisted in the rescue of the German aid worker Wolfgang Herdt and recovered the body of the Afghan engineer Said Anwar, of Wardak who worked for the GTZ implementing partner.

Mr Herdt had worked in the region for nearly seven years and was a close and very appreciated partner of the UN in Khost, as well as of the local Afghan community.

"I am moved by the outpouring of grief from local Afghans over this attack on a foreign aid worker," Special Representative de Mistura said.

"The intent of such an act of violence against someone who devoted his life to bettering the situation of Afghan people is inexplicable. My Afghan colleagues have said they want to continue working and working hard for the development of this province. That is a sign of courage and of hope for the country. We all wish Wolfgang a speedy and complete recovery."

Mr Herdt has been flown to Germany for further medical care.

## Five ways how the international community can help preserve Afghanistan's cultural heritage

*29 March 2010 - Whether you sit down and have a cup of tea with Omara Khan Massoudi, the Director of the National Museum, or Nancy Hatch Dupree, Afghanistan's grandmother, every one of the country's cultural experts has an informed opinion about how the international community can help preserve Afghanistan's cultural heritage.*

For more than twenty years of civil war, a group of these dedicated Afghans and expatriates found ways great and small to protect the country's extraordinary heritage against depredation and destruction – when international assistance was sporadic and geared towards restoration as opposed to prevention.

Today the country's cultural heritage continues to be plagued by clandestine excavations. Unguarded archaeological sites are consistently ravaged by impoverished villagers who are struggling to meet their basic needs and are uninformed about their rich heritage. After years of ongoing warfare, it is this loss of knowledge that is the greatest threat of all to Afghanistan's heritage.

What should the international community do about it? Helping Afghans preserve their heritage during the continued instability has become an integral part of the reconstruction effort. Many policymakers want to throw millions more into aid for bold, immediate-impact projects, which will help win the insurgency within the coming year. However, lessons learned from the past decades of devastation suggest that this won't work. Instead, we need to find innovative ways to support sustainable, Afghan-led projects, which will benefit the present and future of the country. A sound strategy would focus on several vital points.

### **Ask: how can we help?**

It is essential to take the time to learn the local culture, establish relationships, and listen - with endless humility – to what people have to say. Talk with the National Museum Director and you will discover that the museum needs more training for personnel. With adequate long-term training, museum staff could work towards running the National Museum at full capacity and developing museums in the provinces such as Bamyan, Ghazni, Herat, Kapisa, and Khost. Giving Afghans access to their local museums is critical for educating them about the country's cultural heritage and slowing the clandestine excavations. But only by asking the basic questions will we be able to help Afghans tackle the complex issues.

### **Coordinate**

Our efforts to provide aid will be more effective if we coordinate amongst each other and with the Afghan government. There has been dramatic progress towards the preservation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage since 2001. Take, for instance, the rejuvenation of Babur's Garden and the Timur Shah Mausoleum. Yet many projects are completed in fragments, and some are left abandoned. Future plans should assess need, assign responsibility, and ensure follow through. We should feel obligated to do that which we began.

### **Invest Afghan**

Funding projects that are run by Afghans is essential to strengthening capacity, though many international funders would rather contribute to expat-led ventures. Yet examples prove that it works best to involve Afghans in the shaping of their own future. The Central Asia Institute has successfully built more than a hundred schools for girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan because it recognizes the importance of promoting self-sustainable schools in the villages. At Kabul University, the Afghanistan Centre is founded on the idea of preserving and broadening knowledge about the country's history and culture. Visit the centre any day of the week and you will find students – the next generation of Afghanistan's leaders – busily reading and sharing ideas. It is clear that our investment will go further by investing Afghan.

### **Think long-term**

The key to preserving Afghanistan's cultural heritage is in planning ahead. We should focus on promoting education and skill development, and finding innovative ways to encourage Afghans to take responsibility for the preservation of their cultural heritage. As a good example, the Turquoise Mountain Foundation has been regenerating the historic district of Kabul and developing sustainable skills in Afghanistan's arts and crafts. If we concentrate on teaching a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime.

### **Be involved abroad**

Even from overseas, take the opportunity to learn the culture. Since 2006, Afghanistan: National Treasures, an exhibition of some of Afghanistan's rarest antiquities, has been touring Europe and North America. The exhibition, sponsored by the National Geographic Society, drew hundreds of thousands of visitors to museums in the United States in 2008-09 alone. The collection will travel to Germany in late 2010 and the United Kingdom in 2011. It's an opportunity for people to be introduced to the country's ancient history and to understand the importance of preserving its heritage. In doing so, we can help Afghans create a more promising future for Afghanistan's culture.

**Joanie Meharry is a scholar in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. She lived in Kabul in 2009 while recording the recent history of the National Museum of Afghanistan for The Aga Khan Trust for Culture and her MSc with the University of Edinburgh. She now divides her time between Afghanistan and the United States.**

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UNAMA's latest quarterly magazine **Afghan Update**  
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