



Top UN envoy calls for sustaining momentum of recent Afghan peace forum

UN News Centre (New York) 12 June 2010 - It is essential that the momentum of the recent peace jirga held in Afghanistan is maintained and utilized to advance dialogue towards development and stability in the country, the top United Nations official there said today.

The Consultative Peace Jirga, held from 2 to 4 June in a large tent located outside Kabul, brought together some 1,600 participants, including 300 women, to chart the way forward in the country's peace process.

"The Peace Jirga was a step forward in the right direction. It was also a sign of unity among those who were inside the tent, and a message to those who are outside the tent to come inside," noted Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

"The bottom line is that the momentum on the Peace Jirga, which was a success, needs to be maintained. And the way to maintain it is to have constant incremental signals that move in the direction of dialogue until we reach the conference of Kabul," he told reporters in the capital, referring to the meeting next month between Afghanistan and its international partners.

Mr de Mistura said one of these signals is the response by the UN to the Government's request for the de-listing of individuals from the so-called "Consolidate List" of those subject to UN sanctions in connection with Al-Qaida and the Taliban.

Individuals on the list, which include 137 Afghan nationals, are subject to the assets freeze, travel ban and arms embargo imposed under Security Council resolution 1267 of 1999, and related resolutions, by which all UN Member States are required to impose sanctions on Osama bin Laden, the Taliban and those associated with them.

In January of this year, the Security Council's 1267 committee approved the de-listing of five men who held senior positions within the Taliban regime following a review of the list.

Mr de Mistura said a UN team is currently in Kabul to examine this issue of "updating" the list, and it will provide recommendations towards this end later will be in Kabul in the coming days.

"We are not going to prejudge the conclusions of this group and neither of the Security Council, but the fact that it is taking place so soon after the Peace Jirga and so soon after the appeal to look seriously at this list is a sign of pro-activity which we welcome," he stated.

The Special Representative also highlighted the UN's readiness to support the committee set up following the Jirga to examine the issue of detainees held by both the Government and international forces.

"There was a common feeling even among my human rights colleagues that there were many people who are detained without legal basis, and that could be a possible criterion along which one judges both the deliberation of those who were detained both on the political ground or other ground from both prisons – the national and international ones," he stated.

United Nations "Global Open Days for Women and Peace 2010" marked in Afghanistan

12 June 2010 - Top UN envoy to Afghanistan Staffan de Mistura held a dialogue with Afghan women peace actors during the commemoration in Afghanistan of the week-long United Nations "Global Open Days for Women and Peace 2010."

Afghan women leaders marked the 10th anniversary of the UN "Open Days for Women and Peace" by coming together on Saturday to voice their proposals on how to strengthen their role in Afghanistan's peace process.

Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan Staffan de Mistura, who also heads the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), listened to their proposals in the field of security, conflict-resolution and peace-building, justice and accountability, provision of basic services, and sexual violence.

"The answer to this conflict is dialogue – dialogue with certain very firm lines. And one line is the Constitution – inside the Constitution there is enough space to protect the gains made by women," advised de Mistura to the Afghan women leaders during the "open day."

The event was organized by UNAMA in cooperation with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA



NGO calls for protection of Afghan children from armed conflict

14 June 2010 - A human rights organization has called for the Afghan government, the UN Security Council and the humanitarian community to prioritize child protection, and end impunity for violators of children's rights.

The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict says peace in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without improving the dire situation of its children. Eva Smets, the Director of Watchlist, presented the organization's latest report at the UN on Monday.

"When we look at 2009, over a thousand children were killed in Afghanistan by aerial bombings, by night raids, by suicide bombs, by landmines explosions and so on and so forth. Also, in 2009 Afghanistan hit - it's a sad record, but it hit the world record of the most attacks on education of attacks in one country as documented by the UN," said Smets.

"Those attacks include both school buildings as well as students, mostly girls and teachers. Furthermore, Afghanistan has about a million and a half children that are refugees in Pakistan or in Iran and it has about 160,000 IDPs, more than half of those being children. Of course, the situation of displacement makes them so much more vulnerable for all the other violations, including child recruitment and sexual violence," she added.

The UN's Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, who attended the launch of the Watchlist report, pointed out that children are subject to violence both at the hands of Afghan insurgents and in counter-terrorism actions, such as aerial bombardments and drone killings.

Herat's municipal employees receive training to improve city services

16 June 2010 - In Takht-i-Safar park, where the former governor of Herat province Ismail Khan built a monument to mark his fight against the communist regime, the Afghan Government and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have started a new campaign against inefficiency and confusion within the municipalities of western Afghanistan and beyond.

"We are starting from what we would call the 'ancient reality' of municipalities," explains Saboor Kamran, municipal specialist for UNDP's Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Programme. And the picture is grim: Paperwork, lack of cooperation and corruption are commonly used terms to depict municipalities in Afghanistan.

"Too often, the staff is not aware of the municipality's own regulations," adds the specialist.

To change these practices, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) – the Afghan ministry in charge of provincial, district and municipal government – has teamed up with UNDP and launched a reform plan. Staff from five provincial municipalities – Herat, Badghis, Ghor, Farah and Uruzgan – and four district municipalities (Shindand, Zinda Jan, Guzara and Ghoryan) attended the four-day workshop last week.

Shah Lala Farahi, IDLG revenue officer, came from Kabul to supervise the training in Herat. He shares the same views as his co-trainer: "Before this programme, municipalities were providing services and following a very old system. We teach new ideas. We tell the staff how to provide urban facilities for urban citizens."

In order to improve public services such as road and drainage construction or power delivery, the trainers recommend involving the private sector and other departments of ministries at the provincial level. They also advocate consulting with the city and provincial shuras (councils) or youth organizations.

Mr Farahi is adamant that "only after they accept a project do we start initiating it."

The trainers then focus on the core issue of finance. Mr Kamraan starts from the very beginning: "We are telling the municipal staff that their salary comes from the people and not from a government fund. As such, they should improve their revenues through tax collection."

To this end, a tax-mapping process will be established, which will be approved by a commission and taxes will be paid directly at the bank; all measures are intended to limit corruption.

Once the process is implemented, municipalities will be expected to plan their revenues and expenditures for the coming five years.

Meanwhile, the Civil Service Commission has agreed to pay additional salary for the staff for one year, until the reform is completed. Currently, salaries vary between 5,000 and 10,000 Afghani approximately. They are expected to increase to 5,200 and up to 62,000 Afghani.

The mayor of Farah describes some of the challenges he faces in his administration.

He says that "Farah has grown from a small city to a large one, with 120,000 residents in and around the town. I need more staff and more training to improve their capacity."

Municipal employees, which were previously recruited at the whim of the mayor, will have to take examinations and present their degrees once the reform is passed.

Looking towards the future, organizers also plan to establish school-level municipalities. Elections in classrooms will see a mayor elected and his deputies and revenue officers will work to improve the school environment and its surroundings – another approach to prepare the next generation while influencing the parents.

By Fraidoon Poya and Henri Burgard, UNAMA



UN top envoy de Mistura visits Herat

UN News Centre (New York) 11 June 2010 - The Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Staffan de Mistura today concluded a one and half day visit in the province of Herat, in the west of Afghanistan.

Special Representative de Mistura said he "looked forward to increasingly see the capacity and reach of the Government of Afghanistan meet the demands of its people - improving their daily lives and assuming ownership of their own future."

The Special Representative met with the Governor, Dr Noorsitani, the Provincial Council, the provincial reconstruction team and members of the diplomatic community. Special Representative de Mistura also met the Prosecutor-General, Maria Bashir.

The Special Representative then visited the regional hospital and a regional prison and female correctional facility where he was encouraged by the manner of treatment of women and their children in facilitating their reinsertion into society.

Finally, the Special Representative paid respect to the long Islamic tradition of Afghanistan by visiting some of the symbols of Islamic culture reconstructed with the support of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture - the Citadel and blue mosque in the centre of Herat city.

The Special Representative, Staffan de Mistura at a press conference said: "We are your guests, we will be by your side for as long as we are welcome, but the future lies in the hands of Afghans. There are difficult months ahead for Afghanistan, but the solution is real internal dialogue amongst Afghans. We will be with you through this process."

UN Secretary-General's message for 100-day countdown to International Day of Peace

13 June 2010 - One hundred days from today, the world will mark the International Day of Peace – a day on which armed conflict is meant to be stilled... a day on which we appeal to combatants to observe a ceasefire... a day on which we reaffirm commitment to non-violence and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

This year's observance, which takes place on 21 September, focuses on youth and development, under the slogan: "Peace = Future."

Young people already play a crucial role in working for peace. Yet I know they can do even more. So this International Day comes with a challenge for young people everywhere: Expand on your work to build peace. Share your plans and ideas, with creativity and passion. The world's concerns will soon be in your hands.

This year, the International Day of Peace coincides with the Summit I am convening to boost progress towards the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Achieving the goals is essential for ending armed conflict and building sustainable peace.

I hope the voices of young people will be heard at the Summit and in the run-up to it.

Over the next 100 days, I urge young people to plan projects that can help create the conditions for peace in their communities, in their schools, in their countries. We need your voice and commitment, and we will share your stories with the world.

As we start the countdown to the International Day of Peace, we recognize two truths: Only in a peaceful environment will young people realize their full potential – and young people have the potential to start building that peaceful world today.



UNODC offers hope to drug users returning from Iran

14 June 2010 - Nafas Gul hides her face behind her long black veil, while she speaks of her suffering and shame.

From Iran where he had gone in search of a job, her husband came back addicted to drugs—a dependence he soon transmitted to his wife and relatives.

The 23-year-old widow recalls her ordeal: "Some four or five years ago, I started taking opium. I then smoked heroin, and now take crystal heroin. Two years ago, my husband died. The drugs made him sick and weak."

Nafas Gul lives with her mother-in-law and her sister, who endures the same addiction.

Both visit each day the assistance centre set up by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Islam Qala, at the border with Iran. The facility offers services ranging from primary healthcare to clean syringe distribution.

Sayed Azizullah is project coordinator for the Khatiz organization for rehabilitation, an NGO that implements the programme for the UN agency. He has been the director of the centre since it started its activities in January 2010. With a team of eight members, including one doctor and one nurse, they attempt to mitigate health risks due to drug consumption.

"We have a team of peer educators who go to zero point (the entry point into Afghanistan) and encourage addicted returnees to come visit the centre. Once they arrive here, they are registered by a team of two social workers who also provide counselling," says Mr Azizullah.

And the figures show the centre responds to a need in the community. Since January, 864 drug users have come to seek treatment, counselling or simply to drink tea and take shelter for the day. Nafas Gul and her sister are termed as 'regular clients.'

Nafas Gul explains, "it is very painful to fight the addiction and almost impossible to overcome it outside a clinic with beds and doctors."

Maulawi Gulham Nabi, a mullah who leads Friday prayers at the local mosque, confirms "we need a clinic, where people can fight the addiction."

But the problem is wider, and he also calls on the Government to take the matter in its hands

According to the mullah, the Government's partners are also expected to contribute fully "to reintegrate former addicts in the society, we want the international community to launch projects that create job opportunities."

UNODC, which has planned its actions over three years, will need further resources to continue the activity and develop.

By Fraidoon Poya and Henri Burgard, UNAMA

UN refugee agency concerned about Afghan children seeking asylum in Europe

UN News Centre (New York) 14 June 2010 - The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is raising concern over the growing number of Afghan children making a difficult and dangerous overland journey to Europe seeking better opportunities.

UNHCR says more than 5,900 Afghan children, mostly boys, sought asylum in Europe last year, compared to 3,380 in 2008. Research by UNHCR on unaccompanied Afghan children in Europe says the children often travel without their parents, exposing them to dangers and human rights abuses.

The report says the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, widespread poverty, political instability; poor educational prospects and a declining hope for a brighter future are all fuelling the flows.

"The children face shocking hardships along the way, but feel an obligation to their families to continue their journey" says UNHCR's Director for Europe Judith Kumin. "As a result, they are victimized over and over again."

The UNHCR study notes that Afghan youth arriving in Europe do not always receive the support they need forcing many to remain in the hands of smugglers, who entice them to continue their journey.

Large numbers of Afghan boys are among the inhabitants of makeshift settlements in places like Calais in France and Patras in Greece.

UNHCR says Afghanistan appears to have turned a blind eye to the trafficking of children and is calling for more action in the country to ensure that parents and families are made aware of the risks of putting their children in the hands of people smugglers.