

Stories inside include...

Art Contest:

Budding Afghan artists draw for Kunduz advocacy initiative to promote women's rights Page 7



Women's Day:

Rights issues the focus of speeches, dramas and other events across Afghanistan Page 7



https://twitter.com/_unama_

www.facebook.com/UN.Assistance.Mission.in.Afghanistan

www.flickr.com/photos/unama

www.youtube.com/unamatv

United Nations

Afghanistan Quarterly

Volume 5, Issue 1 | Spring 2015

Security Council approves UNAMA mandate renewal

Haysom cites renewed hope for Afghan peace and reconciliation



Nicholas Haysom, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), addresses the Security Council on the situation in the country and its implications for international peace and security. (Photo by Loey Felipe)

The top UN envoy for Afghanistan said there was renewed hope for the peace process as he briefed the Security Council, which extended the mandate of the UN mission in the country for another year.

In a resolution adopted unanimously by the 15-member Council on 16 March 2015, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) will remain in the country for another year to lead and coordinate international civilian efforts. The Council took that action while taking into account the completion of the transition process in Afghanistan and the initiation of the Transformation Decade (2015-2024).

In his briefing to the Council,

Nicholas Haysom, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of UNAMA, pointed to a number of "significant developments" that had brought renewed hope for an active peace process, including the formation of a National Unity Government, together with constructive dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"These positive developments are testament to the efforts of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah," he said. "Their collaborative leadership will remain essential for any peace talks to progress, for comprehensive electoral reforms to take hold, and for the implementation of the changes required to reinvent the economy."

Mr. Haysom urged political leaders to conclude the appointment of senior Government officials and to strengthen efforts to reinforce the rule of law and the fight against corruption. He also noted the recent reports of possible peace talks between the Government and the Taliban.

"There is currently an alignment of circumstances that could be conducive to build a level of trust that will allow them to establish common ground," he said, expressing hope that parties can "come to the realisation that peace is the only viable option for Afghanistan, and that a military victory is neither likely, nor optimal for a lasting national social compact."

The peace process is likely to remain "fragile and vulnerable to ex-

ternal destabilisation," he warned. Mr. Haysom called for coherent and coordinated international support while pointing to the continued "frank dialogue" between UNAMA and the Taliban on humanitarian access and on human rights, notably the protection of civilians.

A key part of the political agreement that led to formation of the National Unity Government was the pledge to establish an Electoral Reform Commission. He welcomed President Ghani's commitment to comprehensive reform, which he said was essential to restoring the faith of the Afghan people in the democratic process and to strengthening political stability.

Mr. Haysom underlined the importance of regional cooperation and of proper intra-Afghan peace dialogue, which he said would require strong regional backing, and noted that the country's economy remained a "significant concern," with support needed for implementation of the Government's Self-Reliance agenda.

He restated concerns about civilian casualties and noted persistent high levels of torture and ill-treatment of conflict-related detainees in Government detention facilities, but added that recent military operations in Helmand and Kunar provinces demonstrated that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) had improved their planning and operational capacity.

"They are now in a position to conduct large-scale operations without direct combat assistance from international military forces," he said. "This development is encouraging even though we expect to see an intensification of combat in the upcoming fighting season as insurgents seek to test the ANSF capacity to hold ground on their own."

Steps taken to fight pollution in Afghanistan capital

Government officials, with the technical assistance of the United Nations Environment Programme, are addressing the pollution in Kabul with legislative measures and green business initiatives.

With a significant rise in the number of people moving to the Afghan capital in recent years, Kabul residents have been breathing increasingly polluted air caused by vehicle emissions, diesel generator fumes and the smoke from the dozens of brick-making kilns situated on the city's outskirts. In winter, Kabul's pollution worsens, as people burn wood, coal and oil to warm their residences and offices.

Studies report that the pollutants in Kabul's air are mainly coming from the approximately one million vehicles moving around the city, with a majority of them using substandard fuel. In addition, to deal with a less-than-stable power infrastructure, Kabul residents have been relying more heavily on diesel generators in recent years. According to the National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA), some 50,000 generators were active during winter this year in Kabul, compared to 11,000 last year.

The most dangerous pollutants, however, come from the dozens of



Experts say that the pollutants most dangerous to Kabul residents come from the dozens of industrial brick-making kilns on the outskirts of the city. They burn tires, wood, coal and used oil to produce bricks for Afghanistan's expanding construction industry. (Photo by Najeeb Farzad)

industrial brick-making kilns on the outskirts of the city. They burn tires, wood, coal and used oil to produce bricks for Afghanistan's expanding construction industry.

Environmental experts say these pollutants are leading to many ailments for Kabul's residents. "We know that a lot of breathing-related sicknesses have become common in Kabul," said Andrew Scanlon, the Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Afghanistan, noting that reports of respiratory diseases have increased more than 1,000 per cent since 2002.

On the legislative side, the Government, with the technical as-

sistance of UNEP, developed an environmental law with very clear articles on air pollution. According to NEPA, the use of wood and coal has dramatically decreased as a result of the legislation and related efforts, with one notable development being that most bakeries in Kabul have switched from wood to natural gas for their ovens.

The Deputy Director General of NEPA, Ghulam Mohammad Malikyar, explains that a high-level Government commission on environmental issues now meets every month to assess the situation and issue directives. He explains that liquid petroleum gas (LPG) is quickly becoming a success story as an alter-

native to petrol and diesel for vehicles, with 30 per cent of the automobiles in Afghan cities already having switched to LPG from petrol.

"I would say that LPG has probably halved the increase in pollution in Kabul over the last three years, and that was done only with Afghan investment, without any foreign support," says Mr. Scanlon. "LPG is less expensive and it has only H₂O emissions, giving off carbon dioxide in water, which is much less harmful than all the sulfur that we are getting from the diesel."

In addition to these and other efforts, municipalities across Afghanistan have prepared short- and long-term plans to put concrete and asphalt over dirt roads, a process that is expected to reduce air pollution by some 15 per cent. "Also, we are trying to improve electricity supply to the cities, which will reduce the use of solid fuel material and result in better air quality," says Mr. Malikyar.

Beyond these efforts, experts cite the need for the Government, especially at the local level, to devise better public transport and encourage the private sector to invest. "There is profit to be made by the private sector in public transport, and a very successful public transport system is definitely part of the answer," says Mr. Scanlon. "If there is money to be made in being green, then you will find the business investors will take the chance."

Policy in works to support migrant Afghan labourers

While millions of Afghans are working abroad, many are doing so through non-regulated procedures and are vulnerable to deportation and forced-labour situations.

For decades, Afghans have been migrating to other countries to help their families back home, driven abroad by prolonged conflict, poverty, unemployment and underemployment. The bulk of these migrants have travelled to neighbouring countries, especially Iran, Pakistan, and the Gulf States, where they have arranged for their jobs through irregular means, and are therefore vulnerable to forced-labour situations and the risk of deportation.

According to the Afghan Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), the Government of Iran deported 400,000 Afghans in 2007 and another 211,023 in 2011. Similarly, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that 45,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan this year following the terrorist incident at a school in Peshawar.



Skilled Afghan labourers construct an irrigation channel outside of Kabul. A new Afghan policy, soon to go before parliament, is designed to streamline labour migration. (Photo by Eric Kanalstein)

To regulate labour migration and protect and promote the rights of Afghan workers abroad, MoLSA, with the technical support of IOM and the International Labour Organization (ILO), drafted Afghanistan's first National Labour Migration Policy.

"The National Labour Migration Policy is good to start, recognizing the fact that a large group of people that leave Afghanistan either legally or irregularly are driven by economic factors," says IOM's Kabul-based Policy Advisor, Vivianne van der Vorst,

noting that the policy not only will help streamline and facilitate labour migrations, but also will help provide protection to migrants.

The Director General of Manpower and Employment Relations at MoLSA, Khair Mohammad Niru, says the policy will be sent soon to the Afghan parliament for approval. Once endorsed, the policy is expected to establish the framework for new legislation concerning labour migration. Also, the policy is expected to help recruitment agencies, especially

those that have strong international connections, facilitate labour migrations through proper mechanisms.

"It means that the whole process is legal," says Ms. van der Vorst. "People go with a proper visa and get proper contracts, and will have health insurance and proper housing."

Another major focus of the policy is on development in terms of controlling and regulating the flow of money from abroad and facilitating the return and reintegration of migrant workers. Ms. van der Vorst says IOM is planning to initiate some concrete activities with MoLSA after the policy gets endorsement.

"IOM can support information centres for the beneficiaries," says Ms. van der Vorst, adding that migrant workers should know what can happen to them and what resources they have available to them.

As part of its routine work in Afghanistan, IOM facilitates conferences to bring together government and civil society, along with certified recruitment agencies, so they can discuss needs and share ideas. IOM also organizes such conferences at the regional level to share best practices and strengthen country relations.

In deadliest year, civilian casualties top 10,000 in 2014

The latest casualty figures represent the highest numbers recorded in a single year since the United Nations started tracking the statistics, according to UNAMA's latest report on protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Civilian casualties in Afghanistan topped 10,000 in 2014, a 22 per cent increase compared to the past year, reflecting increased ground battles between armed groups and the Government, and a drastic drawdown of western troop presence in the country, according to a United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report released on 18 February 2015.

“Parties to the conflict should understand the impact of their actions and take responsibility for them, uphold the values they claim to defend, and make protecting civilians their first priority.”

—Nicholas Haysom

A total of 3,699 civilians were killed and 6,849 injured in 2014. The figures, released in UNAMA's Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict and prepared in coordination with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, are the highest number of civilian casualties recorded in

a single year since the UN started tracking the statistics.

The report also found that, for the first time since 2009, more Afghan civilians were killed and injured in ground engagements than improvised explosive devices (IEDs). According to the report, civilian deaths and injuries from ground operations surged 54 per cent in 2014, with parties to the conflict increasingly using mortars, rockets and grenades, sometimes indiscriminately, in civilian areas.

“Rising civilian deaths and injuries in 2014 attests to a failure to fulfil commitments to protect Afghan civilians from harm,” the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, Nicholas Haysom, said in presenting the report at a Kabul press conference.

“Parties to the conflict should understand the impact of their actions and take responsibility for them, uphold the values they claim to defend, and make protecting civilians their first priority,” Mr. Haysom stressed. “We need to see concrete steps and a real drop in civilian casualties in 2015.”

The UNAMA report highlighted that Anti-Government Elements remain responsible for 72 per cent of all civilian casualties. Meanwhile, Pro-Government Forces are responsible for 14 per cent of civilian casualties, with 12 per cent of that linked to the Afghan national security forces and two per cent to international military forces. Ten per cent of civilian casualties could not be attributed to a specific party; three per cent were caused by explosive remnants of war.

As international troops with-



Georgette Gagnon, UNAMA's Director of Human Rights, and Nicholas Haysom, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, present UNAMA's latest report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict at a press conference held in Kabul. (Photo by Fardin Waezi)

draw their combat support in 2014, UNAMA observed a rise in deadly ground battles. Civilian deaths and injuries from ground engagements, operations and attacks by Pro-Government Forces rose significantly, according to the report, with 921 civilian casualties (336 killed and 585 injured). This figure represents an increase of 141 per cent from 2013. An increase in civilian casualties caused by Anti-Government Elements was also documented by UNAMA, with 1,551 civilian casualties (438 deaths and 1,113 injured), up 51 per cent from 2013.

Women and children were particularly hard hit by the armed conflict in 2014, the report found, with a 40 per cent increase in child casualties (714 killed and 1,760 injured) compared to 2013. Women casualties increased by 21 per cent with 298 women killed and 611 injured.

“For Afghan women and children, the anguish of losing a husband and father in the conflict is often only the beginning of their suffering and hardship,” said UNAMA's Director of Human Rights, Georgette Gagnon. “The long-term social and economic consequences are devastating, affecting the most vulnerable the hardest.”

After a year in which conflict-related violence led by ground engagements killed and injured record numbers of women and children, the destruction and damage to Afghan lives “must be met with a new commitment by all parties” to avoid harm to Afghan civilians, Ms. Gagnon added.

In speaking with dozens of women from all regions in Afghanistan whose husbands—all civilians—were killed or seriously injured, UNAMA found that women who were left as sole income-providers for their households faced poverty, forcing many women to give their daughters in

marriage in exchange for debts or to take their children out of school to work. Widowed women were particularly vulnerable to forms of violence from family and community members.

UNAMA shared a draft of its 2014 Annual Report with the Government of Afghanistan, the Taliban and NATO's Resolute Support Mission. In its recommendations to all three groups, UNAMA called on Anti-Government Elements to cease carrying out indiscriminate attacks and deliberately targeting civilians, and called on armed groups to enforce Taliban leadership statements that prohibit attacks on civilians.

“For Afghan women and children, the anguish of losing a husband and father in the conflict is often only the beginning of their suffering and hardship. The long-term social and economic consequences are devastating.”

—Georgette Gagnon

Meanwhile, UNAMA called on the Government of Afghanistan to cease firing rockets and grenades into civilian areas, enforce efforts to protect its people, disarm armed groups and ensure accountability for human rights abuses. To international forces, UNAMA urged them to ensure all foreign intelligence or security forces take all necessary measures to protect civilians during ground and aerial operations.

Since 2009, according to UN statistics, the conflict in Afghanistan has caused 47,745 civilian casualties with 17,774 Afghan civilians killed and 29,971 injured.

Civilian Deaths by Parties to the conflict
January to December: 2009 - 2014



Since 2009, according to UNAMA statistics, the conflict in Afghanistan has caused 47,745 civilian casualties with 17,774 Afghan civilians killed and 29,971 injured. The chart details the number of deaths, since 2009, attributable to Pro-Government Forces (PGF), Anti-Government Elements (AGE) and other conflict-related incidents.

Afghanistan's first soymilk factory under construction

The new soymilk factory, due to be completed this year, is expected to capitalize on the increased production of soybeans by Afghan farmers, and is part of a larger programme to counter malnutrition in Afghanistan.

Scheduled to be completed in 2015, Afghanistan's first soymilk factory is under construction in Parwan province, north of Kabul. When finished, the factory, backed by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and a contribution of US\$12 million from the Republic of Korea, will produce sterilized, protein-rich soymilk.

The project, initiated to capitalize on the increased production of soybeans by Afghan farmers, is part of a larger programme supported by WFP and non-governmental organization Nutrition and Education International (NEI) to develop soybean consumption as a way to counter malnutrition in Afghanistan.

"This factory is a positive development that now necessitates expanding the soy-processing sector and increasing consumer demand for soy products to absorb the growing supply of soybeans Afghan farmers are not using for home consumption," says Wahidullah Amani, a Kabul-based WFP official, noting that as a result of more than a decade of effort, soybean production is now widespread in Afghanistan.

NEI is managing the factory construction with the support of WFP. Both organizations are working to promote awareness about soy products. The project is being implemented in partnership with several government entities, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock, the Ministry of Public Health, and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

"Our ultimate goal is to defeat malnutrition through the development of a self-sustaining soy industry with a full value chain that we hope to achieve soon," Mr. Amani says.

When complete, the factory is



In Bamyán, farmers cultivate the land in the spring planting season. Afghanistan's soil is rich in nutrients. Agricultural activities in the country form the backbone of the Afghan economy, with fruits and vegetables consumed domestically and also exported. (Photo by Aurora Alambara)

expected to be able to manufacture shelf-stable soymilk for nationwide marketing and distribution. In addition, chickenfeed will be produced from the residual soybeans that are a byproduct of the soymilk-making process. Mr. Amani explains that the chickenfeed will be provided to local women to encourage them to raise chickens to generate income.

According to Mr. Amani, WFP and NEI are now working to help

improve soybean production in Afghanistan through new seed trials and a certified seed-production programme. The two organizations have scheduled work with farmers in an estimated 20,000 villages across Afghanistan, and are developing 100 model farms desired for soybean research.

For more information about soy products and their benefits, please see: <http://neifoundation.org>.

Hundreds of girls hear Afghan women talk empowerment

A UN-backed conference, organized by the eastern regional office of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), was held to encourage girls in the province to become active members of Afghan society.

Women leaders in Afghanistan's eastern province of Laghman encouraged girls attending a March conference on women's issues to focus on their education so they can play a more powerful role in Afghan society.

Zifunoon Safay, a member of

the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament from Laghman, and Brikhna Safay, a Legal Advisor to the Department of Public Health, were the featured speakers. They talked at length about their experiences, achievements and activism related to women's rights.

The conference, organized by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) with the Directorate of Women's Affairs, the Education Department and non-governmental association Development and Change, was held to encourage girls in the province to become active members of society.

"My father was an ordinary farmer and had little income,"

said Ms. Zifunoon. "My mother used to sell chickens and eggs to supplement my father's income and to support my education at school. Although we were very poor, my intentions were to complete my education and become a successful woman."

Ms. Brikhna, for her part, talked about how she was pursuing her education in Kabul during the war. "Many of my classmates quit school," she said. "But I continued because I was sure that, one day, the fighting would stop and I would be able to use my knowledge and energy to serve my people."

Both women highlighted the importance of education, and discussed issues related to security, cultural constraints, discrimination and violence against women.

In 2009, Afghanistan enacted the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law, which criminalizes 22 acts of violence against women and specifies punishment for perpetrators.

UNAMA's latest report on the implementation of the EVAW law, released in December 2013, found that Afghan authorities registered more cases of violence against women in 2013, but the number of prosecutions and convictions under the law remained low, with most cases settled by mediation.

The conference, attended by some 500 girl students and



Zifunoon Safay, a member of the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament from Laghman. (Photo by Shafiqullah Waak)

teachers, government officials, civil society representatives and members of the media, followed a series of events organized earlier in the month to commemorate International Women's Day across Afghanistan.

The events included speeches, theatrical performances and other presentations, including information campaigns conducted in Kabul and at the UN's regional offices in Afghanistan, all designed to raise awareness about women's human rights, cultural constraints, discrimination and violence against women.

In a statement for Women's Day, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, said the UN political mission will continue to emphasize that upholding and advancing women's rights is an essential step on the road to peace and development.



A UN-backed conference in Laghman was attended by some 500 girls, government officials, civil society representatives and members of the media, all of whom listened to prominent Afghan women talk about empowerment. (Photo by Shafiqullah Waak)

UN report urges push to end torture in Afghan facilities

Although torture is prohibited and criminalized under Afghanistan's constitution and international law, new UN findings indicate that the country's accountability and oversight mechanisms remain "inadequate."

The Government of Afghanistan's efforts to prevent torture and ill-treatment have shown some progress over the last two years but much more remains to be done, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) indicated on 25 February 2015 when it released its latest report on the treatment of conflict-related detainees in Afghan custody.

"UNAMA's finding that torture of conflict-related detainees persists in spite of Government efforts over 2013-14 to address it is a source of serious concern," said UNAMA Human Rights Director, Georgette Gagnon. "Continuing impunity for the use of torture allows torture to continue."

The report—the third of its kind, and jointly produced with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)—is based on interviews with 790 conflict-related detainees between February 2013 and December 2014, and highlights ill-treatment and torture during the arrest and interrogation phases in numerous facilities across the country, with many alleged



A Mullah calls for prayers inside an Afghan detention centre. UNAMA's latest report on the use of torture in detention facilities shows a 14 per cent decrease in the number of detainees tortured or ill-treated compared to the previous reporting period. (Photo by Eric Kanalstein)

members of the Taliban and other anti-Government groups subjected to "severe pain and suffering, aimed mainly at obtaining a confession or information."

Overall, the report detailed 16 methods of torture and ill-treatment, including severe beatings with pipes, cables and sticks; suspension; electric shocks; and near-asphyxiation. The report documents a "persistent lack of accountability" with only one criminal prosecution for torture observed despite numerous verified incidents raised with officials over the course of the reporting period.

Although torture is prohibited and criminalized under Afghanistan's constitution and international law, UNAMA's findings indicate that

the country's National Directorate of Security and the Ministry of Interior accountability and oversight mechanisms remain "inadequate," lacking independence, authority, transparency and capacity.

"Accountability—particularly the prosecution of both those who perpetrate and administer torture, and those who order or condone it—is a key means of signalling political commitment at the highest levels to end it," Ms. Gagnon added.

Twenty out of 71 interviewed detainees reported having experienced torture or ill-treatment following their transfer to Afghan custody in 2013 and 2014, including in Afghan facilities the International Security Assistance

Force had certified as not using torture. Moreover, the report points out that many Afghan security and police officials interviewed appeared not to accept that torture is illegal, instead viewing it as an appropriate method by which to extract valuable information.

"Torture is a very serious crime, for which there can be no justification," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein stressed in a statement. "The international prohibition is absolute."

In addition, he pointed out that both the Afghan constitution and the criminal procedure code include due process guarantees to protect detainees from the use of torture and ill-treatment, including the prohibition of using evidence gained through torture.

The report shows a 14 per cent decrease in the number of detainees tortured or ill-treated compared to the previous reporting period. Nicholas Haysom, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, confirmed the Mission's steadfast willingness to assist the authorities in improving accountability mechanisms in an effort to further reduce the instance of torture.

"UNAMA welcomes the incoming Government's commitment to implement a new national plan on elimination of torture," he said. "We support—and can assist as requested—this comprehensive approach to eliminate torture and ill-treatment in Government of Afghanistan facilities."

Funding shortfall threatens mine action programme

Despite progress made in landmine removal in more than 25 years of work, nearly one million Afghans still live within 500 metres of a landmine or an explosive remnant of war.

Since 1989, the United Nations-backed Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) has cleared more than 80 per cent of the minefields in the country, significantly reducing the number of civilians killed by mines each year.

To date, working as a consortium of more than 50 humanitarian and commercial organizations, MAPA has destroyed more than 16.5 million items of unexploded ordnance, cleared 688,162 anti-personnel mines, disposed of 28,619 anti-tank mines, and destroyed 739 improvised explosive devices.

Despite this progress, a funding shortfall is threatening to prevent Afghanistan from becoming mine-free by 2023, according to the Mine Action Coordination Centre for



The United Nations Mine Action Service has been supporting the Afghan mine action programmes since 2002, with nearly one million Afghans still living within 500 metres of landmines and explosive remnants of war. (Photo by Eric Kanalstein)

Afghanistan (MACCA), which is the lead Afghan agency driving efforts to eradicate landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW).

In his latest report to the UN Security Council, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that despite significant gains, limited funding has resulted in the clearance operations not meeting 2014 targets, as set out in

the 10-year workplan of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. "The remaining ordnance hampers freedom of movement, curtails agricultural activity and slows economic growth," Mr. Ban noted.

The UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) has been supporting the Afghan programmes since 2002 and has been working alongside MACCA, which was a UN body

until 2012. Despite efforts, nearly one million Afghans still live within 500 metres of landmines and ERW, with an estimated 1,726 communities affected across the country.

According to UNMAS, new contaminations are resulting from continued conflict. "The outstanding issue here is that MACCA needs funding so that we can quality-assure the clearance of firing ranges," says Brid Sheehan, a programme officer with UNMAS in Afghanistan. "Due to the funding shortfall, we do not have the capacity to visit all project sites as both international and Afghan mine action standards require."

Afghanistan is a signatory to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty. In December 2012, the state parties to the treaty approved Afghanistan's request to extend its 2013 deadline for becoming mine-free by 2023.

In September 2013, Afghanistan issued an appeal to the international community for funds for the country's mine action programme. So far, Afghan organizations have received only about 30 per cent of the required funding needed.

VOX POPULI

“What value does the United Nations bring to Afghanistan’s regions?”

Bamyan



Ismael Zaki, civil society activist

In fact the work of UNAMA and United Nations in Afghanistan, particularly in Bamyan, has been very impressive. If we name a few issues, the United Nations has brought democratic values to Bamyan. The efforts of UNAMA for rule of law and good governance, and its support to civil society and other democratic institutions, have been very effective.



Fatima Rezayee, journalist

The work of the United Nations for raising awareness about the elimination of violence against women and women’s empowerment has been remarkable in Bamyan, resulting in the values of gender equality and respect to women’s rights being further strengthened. The United Nations support to media has been very helpful in terms of capacity-building and coordination.

Balkh



Mubina Akbari Sami, development organization head

Afghanistan has needed financial support and a lot of expertise from the international community. That support came from the United Nations. The United Nations didn’t abandon the Afghan people in the most difficult times of war, or when the country needed funds and experts. In the northern region, there is nobody who has not directly or indirectly benefited from the UN’s assistance.



Farzana Asra, journalist

The UN has long stood by the people of Afghanistan, and what I can highlight right now is the UN’s support in promoting women’s rights. Girls go to school. A lot of women have come to understand their basic rights. They can go out to work and help with the economy of the family. They’re taking part in the decision-making process. They enjoy freedom of speech. This all wouldn’t have been possible otherwise.

Nangarhar



Khyber, university student

The UN plays a vital role not only in my region but throughout the world. In my region, I am witness to dozens of valuable projects supported by the UN. I particularly appreciate UNAMA’s role in helping bring democracy to our country and to our region. The term of “democracy” was something new for the Afghan people. The credit goes to the international community and the Afghan Government.



Zarmina, office cleaner

I highly value the UN’s work. I particularly like the UN’s work for the empowerment of Afghan women. Now our women are given more opportunities to take part in social and political activities. I remember, about 50 years ago, UN workers were supporting our villagers in spraying anti-mosquito powder to protect people from malaria. We still need the UN’s support. I hope the UN will not leave us alone.

Paktva



Mahira Ahmadzai, head of a local women’s council

Since I have been observing UN activities in our region, 99 per cent are in the interests of our people, community and country. The UN has been playing a vital role, and closely working with the Government to protect women’s rights and to promote good governance and rule of law by building capacity and providing technical support to the Government. The UN has done valuable work in our region.



Mohammad Ismail Larwai, civil society activist

The UN has played a crucial role in shifting our society from traditional to modern by raising awareness about the values of a modern society. Similarly, the UN role in the promotion of good governance is laudable, and the UN’s assistance in capacity-building and bridging the gap between government and the governed, and its assistance in support of civil society organizations are remarkable.

Kunduz



Enayatullah Khaliq, journalist

Kunduz is affected by insecurity. Although we love peace, our country and our region is in constant conflict. Support for building peace and a peaceful life is one of the values the UN brings to Afghanistan, particularly to the provinces affected by insecurity. Because of the high rate of poverty and our vulnerability to natural disasters, the UN can coordinate assistance for our people.



Marzia Rustami, civil society activist

The active presence of the UN in Afghanistan, particularly in the province where I live, indicates this country is the focus of the international community. This global organization is empowering and encouraging civil society and various social groups to participate in the national processes and pave the way for establishing a dynamic Afghanistan free from violence.

Kandahar



Nargis Ehsan, recent university graduate

Especially in terms of girls’ education, the UN’s role is positive and commendable. We hope that the UN will play its part in supporting women financially, to help them explore markets for their handicrafts and other products. Moreover, the UN can help Afghanistan’s sustainability in terms of politics and the economy. We hope the UN will continue its assistance for the Afghan people.

Herat



Mohammad Sarwar, shopkeeper

We had lots of difficulties with a bridge that was damaged due to carelessness and conflict in Herat. The river was closed repeatedly, and water damaged people’s houses, so the UN helped the reconstruction of the bridge and river’s dike, and now one of our biggest problems is solved in our area. This is why I think the UN has played a very effective role in helping to improve our lives.

In art competition, Afghan youth draw against violence

A Kunduz competition for budding Afghan artists focused on depicting the negative physical, psychological and social effects of violence against women.

Afghan students graphically depicted violence against women, including the negative physical, psychological and social effects, in a week-long drawing competition that culminated in a February awards ceremony attended by dozens of people in the north-eastern province of Kunduz.

The United Nations-supported event included some 40 participants between the ages of seven and 20, and involved the exhibition of roughly 60 drawings, all highlighting the consequences of various forms of violence against women, including battering, chemical assault, the practice of “baad” (giving away a woman or girl to settle a dispute), verbal abuse and forced labour.

“Violence against women is a serious problem in our community; we need to address it,” said the winner of the contest, Jawid Ranjbar, age 20. “I am glad to be able to express my opinion on the issue by



A drawing by Laila Muhammadi entered into the UN-backed art competition (the top line translates as “woman, with one hand she rocks the cradle and with the other rocks the world”). The competition involved some 40 participants between the ages of seven and 20.

participating in this contest.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by the first and second runners-up, 18-year-old Shila Muradi and 15-year-old Mursal Ibrahim.

The contest, open to the public, was organized by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) with the Afghan Civil Society Forum, the provincial Department of Women’s Affairs (DoWA) in Kunduz and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

“The number, the quality

and the amount of thought behind each work submitted was impressive,” said Diloru Kadirova, a UNAMA Human Rights official based in Kunduz, noting that UNAMA now will reproduce and disseminate some of the best art from the competition along with relevant articles of Afghanistan’s Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law.

“The objective of this competition is to improve the awareness and understanding of the EVAW law,”

said Ms. Kadirova. “We hope this initiative will further the understanding and the application of the law among the general public and the authorities of the region.”

In her remarks at the awards ceremony, the acting head of DoWA Kunduz, Nahid Asifi, said her office will continue to monitor cases of violence against women “tirelessly” and will work with authorities to protect women. “It is a long road ahead, but we must not give up,” she said.

According to Ms. Asifi, during the Afghan year 1393 (ending 20 March), her office registered more than 80 cases of violence against women, which she said represents only the “tip of the iceberg,” as many incidents remain unreported due to cultural and social stigma.

In 2009, Afghanistan enacted the EVAW law, which criminalizes 22 acts of violence against women, including rape and beating, and specifies punishment for perpetrators.

UNAMA’s latest report on the EVAW law, released in December 2013, found that Afghan authorities registered more cases of violence against women in 2013, but the number of prosecutions and convictions remained low, with most cases settled by mediation.

Theatre performances, exhibitions mark Women’s Day

In the week leading up to the annually commemorated International Women’s Day, UN-backed events highlighted the critical importance of raising awareness about equal rights for Afghan women and girls.

Theatre performances, exhibitions of artwork and speeches highlighting education for women and girls, and the importance of their participation in public spheres, marked International Women’s Day on 8 March in United Nations-backed events across Afghanistan.

At an event in southern Kandahar province, Deputy Governor Abdul Ali Shamsi urged moving away from “routine meetings and workshops” to taking “practical steps” to ensure women’s rights. At the event, a group of theatre actors presented a sketch on the theme of girls’ access to education.

Speaking at a similar event in Bamyan province in the central highlands region, Governor Ghulam Ali Wahdat said education is an “efficient way to empower women,” and urged parents to enrol their girls in school. Throughout the week, local authorities and civil society organizations in



Afghan girls perform in the western province of Herat. Other events highlighting education for women and girls, and the importance of their participation in public spheres, marked Women’s Day in UN-backed events across Afghanistan. (Photo by Fraidoon Poya)

Bamyan organized several events to raise awareness about equal rights for women.

In a joint statement issued on Women’s Day, officials from the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN Women said the world body is committed to supporting the Afghan Government and civil society organizations in enhancing women’s participation in and contribution to all aspects of governance, including in peace processes.

The UN Secretary-General’s

Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, Nicholas Haysom, said the UN political mission will continue to emphasize that upholding and advancing women’s rights is an essential step on the road to peace and development. “We welcome commitments to ensuring women be properly represented in government and major decision-making bodies affecting the country’s future, especially in any peace talks,” said Mr. Haysom.

The statement indicated that although the Afghan leadership

has shown commitment to ensuring women’s rights, a recent surge in violence against women and a reduction in the quota for women in provincial councils, as well as the abolishment of quotas for women in district councils, point to the need to guarantee women’s rights.

“The reported increase in the number of cases of violence against women and girls is a source of major concern,” said the UN Women Country Representative in Afghanistan, Elzira Sagynbaeva.

Among other UN-backed events to commemorate the day, an exhibition showcasing women’s entrepreneurship in handicrafts, jewellery and saffron production was held in the western province of Herat.

The Women’s Day observances in the eastern province of Nangarhar and the north-eastern province of Kunduz included exhibitions of artworks by schoolgirls seeking to end violence against women.

Speaking at the event in Kunduz, an official from the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Shafiq Separ, said street violence has been a serious problem that has been hindering girls’ education. “It’s a big concern for the women and girls; some families do not allow their daughters to go to school for this reason,” said Ms. Separ.

UN envoy: Listening to Afghan voices critical to stability

More than three years of UNAMA-supported and civil society-led dialogue among Afghan men, women and youth from all walks of life culminated in a national conference convened to address prospects for peace at the local level across Afghanistan.

At a January conference in Kabul, the top United Nations official in Afghanistan said that Afghan leaders should incorporate people's views and proposed solutions into all efforts aimed at stabilizing the country.

"My firm conviction is that peace will come to those who clearly demand the conditions to allow its establishment," said the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, in his comments at the conference.

Mr. Haysom, who also heads the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), said shared goals of a secure, sovereign and prosperous Afghanistan can only be accomplished through enduring peace.

The conference was the culmination of more than three years of UNAMA-supported and civil society-led dialogue among Afghan men, women and youth from all walks of life on prospects for peace at the local level across Afghanistan.

The Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace, undertaken and led by 11 Afghan civil society networks and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AI-HRC), involved consultation with more than 6,000 people.

The conference in Kabul, which was also attended by senior government officials including Second Vice President Mohammad Sarwar Danish, AIHRC head Sima Samar and a senior official with the High Peace Council, provided the opportunity for Afghan civil society organizations to refine their advocacy plans to ensure that the voices of Afghans are heard by the policymakers at provincial and national levels.

Mr. Haysom noted that one

of the most important findings of the three-year process was an understanding that "what peace requires is more than a temporary silence of the guns but the active presence of social justice."

Participants at the conference discussed the need for strengthening security institutions, promoting responsive state institutions, ending corruption, promoting human rights, tackling impunity, disarming illegal armed groups, and providing employment opportunities as the main priorities for addressing the root causes of the conflict and achieving durable peace.

"In peace and reconciliation processes, UNAMA shares the view that human rights cannot be sacrificed, and that women must play a

strong and active role, so that peace is both a top-down and bottom-up process," said Mr. Haysom.

"In peace and reconciliation processes, UNAMA shares the view that human rights cannot be sacrificed, and that women must play a strong and active role, so that peace is both a top-down and bottom-up process."

—Nicholas Haysom

In his comments, Mr. Danish said that the Afghan Government will fulfil its commitments on peace and will be accountable to the people of Afghanistan. He also promised to "fully consider" the findings of the three-year process in the Government's strategies and plans.

The work on the local road maps for peace builds on the June 2014 public report on the national findings of the second phase of the dialogue process. The report included a 10-point national road map to peace and 33 recommendations.

Mr. Haysom called the national conference a unique opportunity for civil society to develop their advocacy plans to ensure that the voices of Afghans are heard. "This advocacy could not be more important or timely," he said. "The United Nations stands ready to support this in any way it can."



On 15 January 2015, at a conference in Kabul, the top United Nations official in Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, said Afghan leaders should incorporate people's views and proposed solutions into all efforts aimed at stabilizing the country. (Photo by Fardin Waezi)

New institute formed to strengthen civil society

The idea of establishing the Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society was conceived almost a decade ago, and later refined in a civil society group consisting of some 200 members who worked together to conceptualize the new Institute.

Afghan civil society gained momentum on 17 February with the formation of a national, independent organization designed to promote high standards among civil society institutions through a comprehensive certification process.

In Kabul, the UN Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, participated in the launching ceremony of the new organization, called the Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society (AICS).

The idea of establishing AICS



The UN Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, participated in the launching ceremony of the new Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society (AICS), the purpose of which is to systematize training efforts so their impact can be measured more effectively against performance benchmarks. (Photo by Fardin Waezi)

was conceived almost a decade ago, during the Enabling Environment Conference, and later refined in a civil society group consisting of some 200 members who worked together to conceptualize the structure, mandate and objec-

tives of the Institute.

Welcoming the establishment of AICS, Afghanistan's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Abdullah Abdullah, said civil society has played a significant role in transforming Afghan society, foster-

ing development, promoting human rights, defending freedom of speech, fighting corruption and advocating for Afghans in all national processes.

In his comments, the Executive Director of AICS, Maiwand Rahyab, said the Institute is designed to systematize training efforts so their impact can be measured more effectively against performance benchmarks. He said the Institute will help strengthen the role civil society plays in Afghanistan's development, especially in terms of active engagement with government.

In January 2015, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) welcomed progress made by civil society groups in developing and promoting local road maps for peace. A national conference, held on 15 January in Kabul, presented 12 of these local road maps and provided a chance to develop advocacy strategies so that provincial and national policy makers act upon their findings.