

London Meet:

UN's political chief calls for continued international engagement in Afghanistan

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Peace Award:

Activist wins UNDP award for her advocacy work promoting women's rights

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Haysom: We are here as partners of Afghans

UN special envoy talks with Afghans from across the country



Nicholas Haysom, the head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, meets with Afghans ahead of the 'Open Jirga' programme, the bi-weekly panel show of Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA). It is backed by the UK's Department for International Development, and is a joint RTA and BBC Media Action production. (Photo by Fardin Waezi)

The top UN official in Kabul, Nicholas Haysom, stressed the world body's commitment to support Afghanistan and to back the nascent Government of National Unity, during a debate with Afghan audiences broadcast in early December on state television.

On the state broadcaster's flagship panel show, 'Open Jirga,' Mr. Haysom highlighted the UN's backing to Afghanistan, responding to questions from a studio audience brought together from across the country's 34 provinces. "We are here as partners of the Afghan people at a most difficult time in the Afghan nation's history," he said.

Mr. Haysom, the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), debated a broad range of issues about how the United Nations fits into and addresses key areas, such as human rights, women's rights, security, elections, corruption and peace talks.

The UNAMA chief, who is also the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, made clear his support for the position of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah on the necessity for a government of national unity.

"They say... that the huge prob-

lems which Afghanistan faces—politically, economically, security-wise—can't be dealt with by a nation divided, 50 per cent on one side and 50 per cent on the other," said the special envoy. "It needs a nation with unity of purpose and a common vision."

The other distinguished Afghan panellists on the programme were Sultan A. Aziz, the senior advisor to the Afghan Deputy Minister of Interior in charge of strategy and policy; Ahmad Wali Massoud, who heads an Afghan organization involved in social, cultural, educational and health activities; and Shinkai Karokhail, a parliamentar-

ian and women's rights activist.

Speaking about the country's current security challenges, Mr. Haysom said that what is required now is a dialogue process in which Afghans talk to Afghans. "We have said, at every available opportunity, that we would make our services available to facilitate these talks and to provide any opportunity for Afghans to talk to Afghans from right across the political spectrum," he said.

"I believe very strongly that Afghans, more than maybe anyone else in the world, deserve peace and they need peace, because the country cannot afford the costs of war, the costs in financial terms and in human terms, for another 13 years," he added.

Calling attention to global economic challenges and the impact those fiscal problems have had on the financial wherewithal of member states, the special envoy identified the stark realities of shrinking budgets at a time of other emerging crises, such as Ebola, and the situations in Mali, Syria and elsewhere.

"We expect, as UNAMA, to face pressure from our head office as to how we use our funds and how much money we can get," he said. "So it just goes to show that there is a limit both to what we can do and the resources that we are going to increasingly be able to get further down the road."

The 'Open Jirga' programme is the bi-weekly flagship panel talk show of Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA). It is backed by the UK's Department for International Development, and is a joint RTA and BBC Media Action production.

Young Afghan activist wins UNDP peace award

An international panel recognized Hasina Jalal for her advocacy work, which has focused on equality for Afghan women, particularly women from rural areas.

Hasina Jalal is one of two Afghans to win the 2014 N-Peace Award prize, administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to recognize the leadership role of women and peace advocates from six conflict-affected countries in Asia.

Ms. Jalal, a founding member of the National Association of Afghanistan Civil Society and board member of the Freedom Message Newspaper, was named the winner of the "Untold Stories: Women Transforming their Communities" category for Afghanistan in an October awards ceremony.

More than 100 nominations were received from the six participating countries: Indonesia, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Nepal and first-time participants Myanmar and Pakistan. The winners were chosen by an international selection panel for their contribution to building peace with and for women in their respective countries.

The judges recognized Ms. Jalal for her advocacy and empowerment work, which has focused on spreading awareness and demanding greater equality for Afghani-



Hasina Jalal (right), a founding member of the National Association of Afghanistan Civil Society and board member of the Freedom Message Newspaper, received UNDP's N-Peace award in the category of "Untold Stories: Women Transforming their Communities." (Photo courtesy UNDP)

stan's women, particularly women from rural areas. In her work, the young Afghan activist has focused on helping to raise the voices of young women through education and training activities, and by promoting partnerships and collaboration among women's groups.

"Receiving the 2014 N-Peace Award has motivated me to struggle for Afghan women's rights toward an ideal of equality and freedom," said Ms. Jalal, noting that she feels proud of her achievement. "I have an uncompromising belief in the promotion of women's rights and democratic principles, enabling me to remain resilient in the face of cultural barriers and security threats."

Despite the challenges she faces, she said she will continue to push

the agenda of women's rights. "My work for a more inclusive society extends to the written word, in which I expose abuses against women, promote inclusion and celebrate freedom of expression," she went on to say, describing how she cofounded the Freedom Message Newspaper to promote freedom of expression, tolerance and understanding of democratic principles.

Despite her achievements, she explained, there are many challenges still to be overcome, not the least of which is the ongoing threat to her personal safety. "Recent events in Afghanistan witnessed women activists and defenders of human rights being assassinated by enemies of the people," she said. "In the culture of Afghanistan, a young

women like me is not expected to play active role in public life, much less become an activist."

She explained that, even in facing such challenges, she remains resilient. "I believe that inclusion of women is not a favour to women but an essential element for peace," she said, stressing that she intends to continue to focus on helping amplify the voices of young women through education and training, and promoting partnerships and collaboration among women's groups, working to bring together the voices of people who are being marginalized by violence, poverty and isolation.

"I believe that the collective power of the disempowered is key to equality, democracy and a peaceful and more progressive life for all," she said. "In winning this award, I demonstrated that young women in Afghanistan are capable of contributing to peace and development despite the many social, economic and political obstacles, and the enormous threats to their security."

Since 2011, the N-Peace Awards have recognized the efforts of women peace activists in Asia as well as male partners who focus on gender equality and the inclusion of women in peace processes in their own countries. The 2014 awardees joined other peace advocates from the region and the awards selection panelists for an Awards Ceremony in Bangkok, Thailand, in October.

N-Peace is managed by UNDP's Asia-Pacific Regional Centre.

Legislation bans use of children in security forces

The passing of new legislation follows the endorsement earlier in 2014 of an action plan to end the recruitment of underage Afghans into security forces.

The United Nations in Afghanistan welcomed the passing of legislation in early November by the Afghan Lower House of Parliament to criminalize underage recruitment in the Afghan National Security Forces as a significant step forward in protecting the rights of Afghan children.

The passing of the legislation follows the endorsement by the Government of a 15-point roadmap to implement an action plan signed with the UN in 2011 to end the recruitment of Afghans under 18 years old into the country's security forces.

The measures outlined in the roadmap include the criminalization of the recruitment and use of children by security forces; the development of a policy to ensure that children arrested and detained on



The Afghan Lower House of Parliament passed legislation to criminalize underage recruitment in the Afghan National Security Forces, following the endorsement in 2014 of an action plan, signed with the UN in 2011, to end the recruitment of underage Afghans. (Photo courtesy RTA)

national security charges are treated in line with international juvenile justice standards; and improved age-verification mechanisms.

The roadmap was supported by UNAMA and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in their roles as co-chairs of the UN-led Country Task Force on Children and Armed Conflict.

"The recruitment of children has been a real concern in Afghanistan,

and should be stopped without delay," said UNAMA's Human Rights Director, Georgette Gagnon, who is also Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

"This law should advance the roadmap for the prevention of underage recruitment into armed forces and, most importantly, should advance the protection of children's rights in Afghanistan," Ms. Gagnon added. "The United

Nations urges all armed groups to halt the recruitment of children, as required under international law."

A recently released report on children and armed conflict from the world body's chief, Ban Ki-moon, highlighted issues regarding child recruitment in Afghanistan. According to the report, in 2013 alone, nearly 100 boys—some as young as eight years old—were recruited into armed forces, including in state security.

Since 1998, more than 100,000 children associated with armed forces or armed groups have received UNICEF assistance to return to school and receive education and vocational training, with the ultimate goal of providing the children with future opportunities for income-generating work.

Congratulating the Government on moving the legislation forward, UNICEF's Officiating Representative in Afghanistan, Lakshmi Narayan Balaji, pledged continued support to the Government for the full implementation of the action plan to prevent and end underage recruitment.

UN political chief urges new approach to Afghanistan

The UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs says Afghanistan's recent presidential elections mark a key milestone in the political rebirth of the nation.

Despite lingering instability and economic fragility, Afghanistan sits at an historic crossroads from which it can fully transition to a "strong, independent, and forward-looking" nation, the top United Nations political official said on 4 December in London.

In his message to the London Conference on Afghanistan, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, noted that although many challenges lay ahead for the Asian country on its road to stability and peace, it had nevertheless successfully transferred political power from one democratically elected leader to another in its recent elections—a feat, he said, that marked "a key milestone in the political rebirth of the nation."

Afghanistan's democratic elections concluded in September when presidential candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah

signed an agreement to establish a government of national unity, ultimately ending the months of political uncertainty that followed a run-off vote between the two.

But while the seeds of political progress had been planted, Mr. Feltman added at the 4 December high-level meeting, much work still remained to be done in the country's overhaul.

"Endemic poverty, hunger and malnutrition, faltering growth, diminishing revenue and a burgeoning illicit economy continue to diminish opportunities for Afghan communities, and inherently leave open space for those who seek to exploit such fragility for their own ends," he told the gathering, which included President Ghani and Mr. Abdullah, and was also attended by the UN Special Representative and Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom and Mark Bowden.

"Similarly, corruption, weak rule of law and lack of respect for human rights including women's rights, remain widespread, exercising a deeply corrosive influence on both the capacity of Government to deliver results and the faith that Afghans and the international community can place in Government itself."

The UN official highlighted, however, that Afghanistan's political class is "keenly aware and engaged" in confronting these issues as it prepared an "ambitious and focused proposal for reform and renewal."

To that point, Mr. Feltman explained that the conference offered Afghanistan and its citizens an opportunity to forge "strong, sustainable and accountable" partnerships with the international community



Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani speaks at the London Conference, 4 December 2014. The Conference brought together the international community in support of a peaceful future for Afghanistan. (Photo by Patrick Tsui/FCO)

in order to catalyse economic growth and development.

"Improved governance, revitalized markets and strengthened institutions can only take place with the assistance, commitment and input of the community, civil society, the private sector and regional partners," he continued. "Only through such broad engagement can the conditions in which greater stability, increased peace and growth in opportunity prosper."

He urged Afghan stakeholders to address the country's economic fragility not only through a bolstering of the rule of law framework but also through empowering Afghanistan's women and strengthening the safeguards to protect them—a necessary step, he clarified, to ensuring prosperity and growth.

As the country pushes forward

with its necessary reforms, the Under-Secretary-General warned that the security situation remained "deeply troubling," and humanitarian support remained "an acute need" for large swathes of the population.

"Despite the drawdown in international military forces, the international community must remain engaged in combating the devastating effects on civilians of this conflict," stated Mr. Feltman, who urged members of the international community, including the UN, to refrain from "business as usual."

"Genuine partnership requires both honesty and commitment on both sides, and I acknowledge that rethinking our approach to development in this context is an opportune discussion, and one rich in potential rewards for how we all progress a sustainable reform agenda."



UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman. (Photo: Patrick Tsui/FCO)

Country's solutions are 'political and not military'

Speaking in Brussels at a North Atlantic Council meeting of Foreign Ministers, UNAMA chief Nicholas Haysom called for sustained and predictable international assistance to Afghanistan.

On 2 December in Brussels, Belgium, the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, called for continued international assistance to Afghanistan and support to its institutions.

Speaking in Brussels at a North Atlantic Council meeting of Foreign Ministers, Mr. Haysom commended those countries that have contributed to security, but said that a clear message needs to be heard from the international community.

"Sustained and predictable in-

ternational security assistance in accordance with mutually agreed security agreements is vital," said Mr. Haysom. "International attention will not waver and Afghanistan will not, once again, be abandoned to further cycles of civil strife."

While paying condolences to the families of those who have lost family members, Mr. Haysom, who is also head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, highlighted his deep concern at the continued high number of civilian casualties.

"It is civilians who increasingly bear the brunt of this grinding conflict," he said, urging the international community to boost, among other things, Afghan institutions' ability to mitigate the threat posed to civilians by the conflict.

He acknowledged significant remedial measures taken by international military forces to reduce civilian casualties and noted that

armed opposition groups are still responsible for the vast majority of civilian casualties.

The shared goal of a sovereign and prosperous Afghanistan, Mr. Haysom continued, can only be accomplished through enduring peace. He welcomed the approach of Afghanistan's recently elected authorities in seeking solutions to many of the key challenges facing the country.

Afghanistan elections this year marked the country's first-ever transfer of power from one elected president to another. The Afghan political transition coincides with a security transition, with the country's security forces taking up security responsibilities from their international allies, who are ending their combat mission at the close of the year.

"While the electoral process was protracted and challenging, the result is a leadership that is legitimate,



UNAMA chief Nicholas Haysom. (Photo courtesy NIDS/NATO Multimedia)

freshly mandated and broadly supported," he added. "I commend President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah for working together through the difficulties of making this complex arrangement work."

"We all recognize that ultimately the solutions to conflict in Afghanistan are political and not military; I welcome the priority given by the new administration to reconciliation and outreach," Mr. Haysom concluded. "The United Nations, as requested, stands ready to support this in any way it can."

Campaign to eliminate violence against women

Topics highlighted in the UN-backed events that have taken place in 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces included education as a way to raise greater awareness about violence against women.

United Nations-backed radio broadcasts, television debates and theatre performances focused on the critical importance of protecting Afghan women and girls from violence.

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW), commemorated annually on 25 November, marked the beginning of '16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence,' a UN information campaign designed to link violence against women with human rights issues, with awareness-raising activities leading up to Human Rights Day on 10 December.

The radio and television broadcasts across the country, facilitated by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), involved scholars, university students, religious leaders, government officials and civil society members, and covered a broad spectrum of opinions on how best to end violence against Afghan women and girls.

Topics highlighted in the radio and television broadcasts, and at various events that have taken place in 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, included education as a way to raise greater awareness about violence against women, judicial mechanisms to redress victims of violence appropriately, and ways to increase participation of women in Afghanistan's political and peace processes.

"To reduce and eliminate



During a UN-backed event held as part of the '16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence' information campaign, Panjsher University students discuss and debate Afghan legislation related to protecting women's human rights. (Photo by Sayed Muhammad Shah)

"We need to strengthen implementation of EVAW law. We also need to place more focus on preventing violence against women and girls, which requires the engagement of all segments of society."

—Elzira Sagynbaeva

violence against women, I request religious leaders and community elders to raise awareness among ordinary people, particularly young people, about women's human rights," said a civil society activist, Nooria Hameedi, during a discussion in the northeastern province of Baghlan.

At a similar roundtable in the

eastern province of Nuristan, the Governor of Nurgram district, Niamatullah Muslim, said women and girls need greater access to justice. He called on the Government to encourage girls to study and urged community elders to refer cases of violence against women to the appropriate judicial organs.

According to a joint UN news release, violence against women and girls in Afghanistan remains endemic, and constitutes a violation of human rights, impeding women's full realization of their civil, political, social, cultural, economic and development potential.

"Afghan women and girls must be able to fully enjoy their freedom and contribute to the building of the nation," said the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, who is also head of UNAMA. "There should be no place in Afghanistan for violence and discrimination against women and girls, and every effort is needed to end the impunity for such violent crimes."

In the joint news release, the UN Women Country Representative in Afghanistan, Elzira Sagynbaeva, said that more than 80 per cent of women in Afghanistan face violence in their lifetime.

"We need to strengthen implementation of EVAW law," said Ms. Sagynbaeva. "We also need to place more focus on preventing violence against women and girls, which requires the engagement of all segments of society, and especially men and boys as partners in gender equality and respectful relationships."

In the interest of helping to address this issue, radio stations and television channels across Afghanistan scheduled repeat broadcasts of the roundtable discussions.

Violence against Afghan women 'widespread'

The UN Special Rapporteur detailed her assessment of the situation of Afghan women following a weeklong investigative trip to the country.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Rashida Manjoo, spoke to members of the media at a Kabul press conference on 12 November, detailing her assessment of the situation of Afghan women following a weeklong investigative trip to the country.

At the end of the visit, which took Ms. Manjoo to Kabul, Jalalabad and Herat, the world body's Special Rapporteur delivered a statement in which she outlined developments in the country related to the rights of Afghan women and girls, and identified the challenges they face.

"Violence against women and girls is a widespread and systemic problem that has an impact throughout the lifecycle of women and girls, whether it occurs in the public or private spheres," said Ms. Manjoo. "It precludes the realisation of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and development rights, and is a barrier to the effective exercise of citizenship by women and girls."

Ms. Manjoo called attention to institutional improvements that she characterized as a "reflection of political will" in addressing the promotion and protection of women's rights. However, she said, such developments should not detract from the fact that violence against women continues to be a source of deep concern in Afghanistan.

"It is crucial to recognize that violence against women and girls is a human rights violation that is rooted in multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities, and that it is strongly linked to the social, cultural and economic situation of women," she said.

Ms. Manjoo's findings from her trip to Afghanistan are expected to be released in a comprehensive report that she will present to the United Nations Human Rights Council in June 2015.



United Nations Special Rapporteur Rashida Manjoo. (Photo by Fardin Waezi)



At a UN-backed event held in Kandahar as part of the '16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence' information campaign, a woman in the audience offers comments to a group of panellists discussing women's issues. (Photo by Mujeeb Rehman)

UN: Universal Declaration for all people everywhere

In Afghanistan, and around the world, the UN commemorated Human Rights Day with events designed to cultivate an appreciation for the Universal Declaration.

Each year, the United Nations commemorates Human Rights Day on 10 December, the day on which the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.”

This year’s slogan, “Human Rights 365,” is designed to reflect the notion that the fundamental propositions in the Universal Declaration apply to all people, everywhere, at all times. In Afghanistan, and around the world, the UN commemorated the Day with various events designed to cultivate an understanding of and appreciation for the Declaration and its applicability, across borders and throughout the year, to improving people’s lives.

Human rights are not country-specific, said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, noting that human rights are the inalienable entitlements of all people, 365 days a year. The UN’s Human Rights chief said the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration serve to discredit the tyranny, discrimination and contempt for human beings that have so painfully marked human history.

“Since the Declaration was adopted, countless people have gained greater freedom,” he said, noting that the Declaration embodies the notion that ideas can change the world.



To commemorate this year’s Human Rights Day, UNAMA facilitated Kabul events to highlight the world body’s work in Afghanistan. (Photo by Sayed Muhammad Shah)

In 1950, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 10 December as Human Rights Day to bring to the attention of the peoples of the world the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.

In a statement, the High Commissioner said the year 2014 will be remembered as a year of daunting human rights challenges. Nonetheless, he said, there have been significant, ongoing, global advances in achieving human rights.

The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, said the world body protects human rights because when people enjoy their rights, economies flourish and countries are at peace. Mr. Ban called on all countries to honour their obligations to protect human rights every day of the year, and urged people everywhere to hold their governments accountable.

“Let us respond to the cries of

the exploited, and uphold the right to human dignity for all,” he said.

Human rights form an important part of the work carried out by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The Mission is expected to monitor the situation of civilians, to coordinate efforts to ensure their protection, to promote accountability, and to assist in the full implementation of the fundamental freedoms and human rights provisions of the Afghan Constitution and international treaties to which Afghanistan is a State party.

To commemorate this year’s Human Rights Day, UNAMA’s human rights team facilitated two daylong panel discussions in and around Kabul to highlight the activities, programmes and structures of the world body’s human rights work in Afghanistan. The event attendees, including national human rights experts, activists and civil society members,

“Since the Declaration was adopted, countless people have gained greater freedom.”

—Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein

discussed a broad range of human rights issues, including international human rights declarations in the context of Afghanistan.

As a follow-on to the discussions held for Human Rights Day, street theatre and debates about family-violence issues were staged on 15 December at a UNAMA Human Rights-backed event in the Shakardara district of Kabul.

The event, involving the Afghan Educational Children’s Circus (AECC), drew enthusiastic crowds of local residents who cheered during the children’s acrobatic performances and, in interviews following the debates, said such programmes are important in helping to raise awareness about human rights issues, especially as they intersect with Afghan laws and social custom.

“The programme was interesting, and it had important messages for families, especially in terms of focusing on how women and girls should contact clinics and hospitals in case they are suffering from sickness and disease,” said Khalid Siddiqui, an audience member and a student at a local school.

Ms. Siddiqui also said that such programmes are important in helping to raise awareness about the educational issues women and girls face. She said women, if they can receive an education, can serve their country as doctors, engineers and government officials.

UN envoy, Afghan President decry rights violations

The Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, joined Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in calling for an end to the culture of impunity in the country.

Afghanistan’s President and a senior United Nations official on 14 December condemned widespread human rights violations in the country and urged that perpetrators be held to account.

At an event in Kabul to mark Human Rights Day, President Ashraf Ghani spoke out against torture and violence, especially

the recent upsurge in attacks by anti-government elements. “These attacks are no longer acceptable,” said the President. “They are not Islamic; they are not humane.”

The UN Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and also deputy head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Tadamichi Yamamoto, called for an end to the culture of impunity. “There must be accountability for all those who commit human rights violations, and real efforts to end the entrenched impunity that has been a feature of Afghan society for so long,” he said.

Many speakers at the Human Rights Day event, introduced by the chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, Sima Samar, focused, in particular, on

the rights of innocent civilians caught in the country’s conflict and directly and indirectly targeted by violent attacks.

President Ghani called attention to the enduring relevance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948. “The Declaration now turns to global values; in every constitution it is endorsed around the world, and our constitution endorses it,” said the President.

Mr. Yamamoto said that every day in Afghanistan is a day the UN works diligently to ensure that all Afghans can gain equality, dignity and freedom. “With the formation of the National Unity Government, committed to a reform agenda, we believe there is a genuine opportunity to



At an event in Kabul to mark Human Rights Day, Tadamichi Yamamoto, the Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan, called for an end to the culture of impunity in Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy RTA)

consolidate and expand the human rights protections achieved so far,” said Mr. Yamamoto.

VOX POPULI

The United Nations asked Afghans in different regions of the country the following question: "What kind of change for Afghanistan do you expect in the year ahead?"

MAZAR-E SHARIF

**Mubina Saeed, journalist**

Sometimes I feel concerned seeing some of the disagreements between the two leaders, and I fear it will hold us back. But when I remember the promises the leadership has made, and their determination to fulfil them, I feel hope that the country will develop more quickly, and security will improve. Ultimately, this will build public trust toward the Government.

KUNDUZ

**Abdul Qudoos, religious leader**

The people's expectations are high. They hope the new Government will work toward achievements in various fields. Personally, my expectation is that the economy should be developed; security and peace should be provided; national unity should be strengthened; Islamic culture should be promoted; poverty should be reduced; and family violence should be eradicated.

KANDAHAR

**Nilofar Noori, journalist**

Afghanistan will have bright prospects in the coming years. In terms of women's rights, a lot of progress has been made, and girls can now get an education, work in offices and voice their opinion. Afghans have suffered a lot, and now they realize that their future can be peaceful and harmonious. We have high hopes to have an Afghanistan free from corruption.

BAMYAN

**Hussaindad Ahmadi, civil society activist**

We expect from the National Unity Government of Afghanistan to pay more attention to the political and peace processes going on in the country. There should be a clear understanding between enemies of the country of Afghanistan and politically motivated anti-Government groups. We expect the Government to take concrete steps toward the elimination of corruption.

NANGARHAR

**Abdul Rashid Malekzai, university lecturer**

The foreign policy of the new Afghan Government of National Unity and the recent visits of President Ghani to different countries gave me a lot of hope, and I think we will witness many positive changes if the two teams remain united and committed to following through on their promises. I expect the new Government will take prompt action in bringing peace.

HERAT

**Roqia Rasooli, border police officer**

It has been five years since I started serving as a border police officer in Herat. I have experienced many challenges and problems during my work, and I am ready to face new ones. Next year will have more opportunity for Afghan police to show to the world and to the people of Afghanistan that we are capable of defending our country.

MAZAR-E SHARIF

**Sayed Basir Hashemi, journalist**

Iam concerned about the ambiguity of the cabinet and the declining trust of the people toward the Government. I am hoping they will appoint ministers immediately. And for the sake of the country, I sincerely hope they'll appoint people who have something good to do for this nation, not because they belong to a specific party or ethnic group, or speak a particular language. If things go well, I am hopeful that the Government will create jobs.

KUNDUZ

**Gawharshad Bawar, civil servant**

My expectation for the next year is to eradicate poverty. The Government should provide employment opportunities to the people. More roles should be given to women in the National Unity Government. Work opportunities should be provided to women. Educated and qualified women should be appointed to high-ranking positions, such as in ministries.

HERAT

**Abbass Hossaini, shopkeeper**

The quality of our lives changed positively after the Taliban's regime. We have better hospitals and security, and a free country with a good police force and army now. What I saw in the news is that foreign forces will leave us this year. I am not happy about that. We want them to stay in the country and support us to fight against the Taliban.

Winter comes to Afghanistan, affecting most vulnerable

More than 30,000 Pakistani families displaced to the southeastern part of the country will face challenges in the winter months ahead, joining millions of Afghans affected by extreme weather.

Winter in land-locked Afghanistan brings blizzards, lashing winds and freezing rain. Snow blocks highways and cuts off millions of people from basic services. As the cold season sets in, Afghans around the country are supported each year by several aid organizations that distribute winter assistance kits, called "cold packages," to vulnerable families.

Millions of Afghans in the central, northern, eastern and southern provinces of the country are affected by the extreme weather each year. New additions to the list this year are more than 30,000 Pakistani families displaced to the southeastern Afghan provinces of Khost and Paktika due to large-scale military operations on the other side of the border.

Concerned about the looming



A street in Kabul covered with snow during last year's winter. As the cold season sets in, Afghans are supported each year by several aid organizations (Photo by Fardin Waezi)

winter and the resulting hardships facing the people, President Ashraf Ghani asked the United Nations in October to share the world body's plans to support the most vulnerable Afghans in the winter.

In a show of support, the UN's top humanitarian official in Afghanistan, and the deputy chief of UNAMA, Mark Bowden, visited Khost later in October to underscore the world body's commitment to the vulnerable Afghans as winter was approaching.

Mr. Bowden was accompanied by the head of the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Afghanistan, Bo Schack. The UN delegation met with community leaders in the Gulan camp for the conflict-displaced in Khost and discussed their needs, including fuel, power and shelter, for the coming winter.

"We will look, within our means, at how we can support your needs," said Mr. Bowden during the Khost visit, adding

that he will convey the people's concerns to authorities in the Afghan capital, Kabul.

Tied into this and many other humanitarian challenges facing Afghanistan, the UN agency responsible for coordinating humanitarian work has appealed for more than US\$400 million to meet the life-saving needs of nearly four million vulnerable Afghans in 2015.

Speaking at an event organized to launch the appeal, Mr. Bowden called on the donors to stay the course and maintain their level of response and funding to address Afghanistan's humanitarian challenges. "Do not allow Afghanistan to become one of the world's forgotten emergencies," he added.

Recent reports from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs indicate that conflict and natural disasters have left many Afghans living without proper shelter. These include families who lost their homes during spring floods in the north, refugee families from North Waziristan who have fled their homes to Khost and the neighbouring province of Paktika, and families displaced internally in the last year due to conflict.

Information law hailed as press freedom milestone

Designed to clarify certain rights identified in the Afghan Constitution, the country's new Access to Information law was ratified by President Ghani.

A protracted struggle for media freedoms has culminated in Afghanistan's President ratifying the Access to Information law, which some have hailed as a new era of press freedoms.

Media advocates say they hope the law will play a role in helping to fight corruption and increase transparency and accountability in public and private sectors, as it is especially designed to help journalists prepare investigative reports.

"The Access to Information law is a big step toward effective information accumulation, dissemination and circulation in Afghanistan," said Siddiquallah Tawhidi, the director of Nai, an organization that supports open media in Afghanistan.

"The law will help journalists, and even the general public, obtain required information from government institutions and private firms regarding their programmes, projects and activities," said Nai's director.

Designed to clarify certain rights identified in the Afghan Constitution, the law was ap-



Studio technicians work to produce a television broadcast in the Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) studios in Kabul, Afghanistan. (Photo by Fardin Waezi)

proved by the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament on 30 June and ratified by President Ashraf Ghani on 30 November.

Mr. Tawhidi said that, prior to the legislation's ratification, journalists faced difficulties in preparing their investigative reports, as the required documents from government institutions were inaccessible. Sharing similar views, Hamid Poia, the head of Media Bazaar, an Afghan media watchdog, said that the ratification of the law is promising, and will help fight corruption.

"Both President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer

Abdullah Abdullah, during their electoral campaigns, committed to seriously fighting corruption," said Mr. Poia. "Implementing the Access to Information law is a major step toward fighting corruption, and now is the time for both leaders to issue strict directives for government authorities concerning the implementation of the law."

However, despite the excitement corresponding to the ratification of the law, some have expressed concerns regarding its implementation. "If the law is not presented strongly in Afghan society, and if the Government does not strongly support it, I don't be-

lieve it can change anything," said Farahnaz Forotan, an Afghan television reporter, emphasizing that, in addition to implementing the law, the Government should provide protection to journalists.

Similarly, Mr. Poia said he believes corrupt officials could impede the implementation of the law, and appealed to the leaders of the Government of National Unity to help give it strength.

In addition to expressing concerns over the legislation's implementation, media advocates have stressed the need for necessary amendments to the law so it can achieve its objectives. Sayed Ikram Afzali, the Chief Executive Officer of Integrity Watch Afghanistan, said that at least 10 articles of the law are "problematic," and pointed out that, in its current form, the law will create limitations for the media and research bodies, and ultimately harm freedom of speech.

One article of the law, for example, states that if national interest is threatened, the information will not be given to anybody. Mr. Afzali said the legislation's definition of "national interest" is unclear and could lead to long delays in accessing vital information for journalists working on tight deadlines.

Members of the Afghan parliament are opposing amendments.

UN urges reform to ensure country's security

Afghanistan faces a number of critical issues, including security and political challenges, in 2015, UNAMA's head tells Security Council.

As Afghanistan builds upon recent political developments, including the formation of a unity government, the country's authorities and the international community must not ignore the immense challenges ahead, the top United Nations official for the country told the Security Council in New York in December.

"While the electoral process was prolonged and challenging, the result is a leadership that is legitimate, freshly mandated and broadly supported; President [Ashraf] Ghani and Chief Executive Officer [Abdullah] Abdullah are to be commended for their ongoing commitment to make the national unity arrangements work," the Secretary-General's Special

Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Nicholas Haysom, told the 15-member Council, during the 18 December meeting on the situation in the country.

"President Ghani himself has made this clear and has extended an invitation to those who oppose the Government to enter into an inter-Afghan dialogue to resolve the conflict," he went on to say. "This commitment to direct dialogue between the Government and the armed opposition through an Afghan-led peace process is to be welcomed."

In September, presidential candidates Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah signed an agreement establishing a National Unity Government, resolving months of political uncertainty and bringing an end to fears that the country was on the cusp of renewed internal strife.

"The agreement between the two candidates ended a political crisis that, if unresolved, would have, at best, left the country divided and, at worst, could have reignited past cycles of conflict,"



Nicholas Haysom, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, addresses the Security Council. (Photo by Mark Garten)

said Mr. Haysom, who urged Afghanistan's political leadership to conclude its process for the appointment and approval of other senior government officials.

"A politically representative yet merit-based cabinet can strengthen the population's confidence that government intends to deliver on its election promises," he said. "It will demonstrate the workability of the National Unity Government arrangements and signal that the new Government is ready to govern."

While the Government is clearing its first political hurdle, continued the UNAMA envoy, a broad range of critical issues still need to be addressed, including reforms focusing on public accountability and transparency as well as women's rights, an end to ongoing budgetary difficulties and full-fledged efforts to combat corruption.

"Their sense of common purpose—and clear commitments to reform, combatting corruption, sustainable economic growth—has given rise to renewed hope and a palpable sense of expectation amongst the Afghan people," he said.

Above all, Mr. Haysom noted, Afghanistan will struggle to build upon the devastation of the past if its issues of insecurity remain unresolved. As of 30 November, UNAMA recorded more civilian deaths and injuries in Afghanistan than any other year since 2009, when UNAMA began comprehensively tracking those statistics, with civilian casualties increasing 19 per cent overall from last year and some three quarters of the casualties attributed to insurgents. These casualties, said the special envoy, resulted mostly from ground engagements between parties to the conflict, improvised explosive devices, and suicide and complex attacks carried out by

anti-Government forces.

Speaking at a later news conference while in New York, the UNAMA chief noted that the number of civilians killed or injured in the Afghan conflict is one of the measurements of the overall security situation.

"Civilian casualties are a par-

"Their sense of common purpose—and clear commitments to reform, combatting corruption, sustainable economic growth—has given rise to renewed hope and a palpable sense of expectation amongst the Afghan people."

—Nicholas Haysom

ticularly tragic and very prominent part, even benchmark, of the horror of the violence that ordinary Afghans face," he said.

At the Security Council briefing, Mr. Haysom noted that the recent surge in security incidents is cause for concern. "It is too early to assess whether this surge is timed to coincide with the withdrawal of international military forces, or is the new normal," he stated, noting that UNAMA stands ready to support Afghan-led and owned reconciliation and political processes, and will engage all parties in support of this, in full consultation with the Government.

"Stability and prosperity can simply not be achieved in the absence of a durable peace," he said. "Ultimately, the solution to the conflict in Afghanistan is political rather than military."

