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UN: Rights achievements must be sustained

Encouraging indicators against backdrop of many challenges

Afghanistan must shield and develop its real human rights advances, said a senior UNAMA official, pledging the UN's commitment to remaining centre stage with Afghans to safeguard the gains and prevent any rollback.

Speaking in an interview after completing more than five years' service as UNAMA's Human Rights Director, Georgette Gagnon highlighted positive and encouraging indicators against a backdrop of serious challenges posed by conflict, as well as by the complex political and economic situation.

Ms. Gagnon expressed hope that human rights achievements will be advanced in the years ahead. "We're expecting that the gains made will be sustained, will not be rolled back, and will not be sacrificed," she said. In outlining these expectations, the Human Rights chief said civil society groups, in particular, are advancing the human rights struggle here.

"Civil society in Afghanistan is vibrant; it is very human-rights based and human-rights friendly, and it is taking forward the human rights struggle here," she said. "That, of course, is very encouraging."

In the interview, Ms. Gagnon spoke about critical issues for Afghanistan, such as the protection of civilians during armed conflict, children in conflict, women's issues, detention practices and peace and reconciliation initiatives.

On protection of civilians, the Human Rights chief said that, during the last five years, UNAMA has dedicated resources to meticulously documenting the impact of the conflict on civilians across the country, to get the parties to the conflict to



During the last five years, UNAMA has dedicated resources to meticulously documenting the impact of the conflict on civilians across the country, to get the parties to the conflict to take concrete steps to mitigate the effects on civilians—to protect lives. Photo: UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

take concrete steps to mitigate the effects on civilians—to protect lives.

Tragically, while UNAMA's work did result in government and international forces adopting procedures to limit their actions' impact on civilians, the number of civilians killed or injured is higher in 2015 than at any previous recorded stage in the conflict. Ms. Gagnon described how the UN continues working with all parties to abide with their national and international obligations to protect civilians. UNAMA identified anti-government elements as being responsible for the largest proportion (73 per cent) of total civilian casualties in the first quarter of 2015.

"We're bringing forward our findings, our documentation, our reporting, and we're urging and putting forward recommendations, practical ways and means to reduce civilian casualties," she said. "We have regular dialogue in the field with the military actors,

urging them to abide by their obligations to protect civilians—ensure they have directives in place, rules of procedure, rules of engagement that put the protection of civilians at the centre."

On the issue of women's rights, Ms. Gagnon described how the UN has been focused on documenting and reporting how the government is implementing the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) legislation. "We've actually seen quite a bit of change," she said. "We've seen the government setting up what's called EVAW prosecution units across the country."

She said that while there hasn't been a large increase in prosecutions, there has been more reporting, with women going to institutions to get justice. "Most women we've interacted with would say there have been achievements and change over the last five years," she said, explaining that there

is much greater awareness now across the country of the rights of women and of the government's obligations to do everything it can to empower them.

Ms. Gagnon referred to the case of Farkhunda, an Afghan woman who was brutally murdered by a Kabul mob on 19 March. "Many women's groups and others went on the street to demonstrate for proper, prompt justice," she said. "Unfortunately, there has not been proper, prompt justice."

What this case suggests, she indicated, is that there is still much more to be done to address women's rights issues and how the government responds to those issues. "There still are many serious issues with women's rights," she said. "The level of violence against women is still high; the government does need to do much more to address it."

"There still are many serious issues with women's rights. The level of violence against women is still high; the government does need to do much more to address it."

—Georgette Gagnon

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UNAMA head says Afghan war unaffordable, peace the only option

In an interview, the top United Nations envoy in Afghanistan said the levels of aid that sustain the security establishment in the country are not going to last forever and that peace is the only viable long-term option.

War is unaffordable for Afghanistan and peace is the only viable way forward for the country. That's the message from the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom.

Speaking during an interview, Mr. Haysom, who is also head of UNAMA, said: "War is unaffordable, and the levels of aid which go on to sustain the security establishment are not going to be forthcoming forever."

He added: "It doesn't have to be at peace immediately, but [Afghanistan] is simply not going to survive if there isn't peace in the long-term."

UNAMA received a new mandate from the UN Security Council in March. The mandate says that the mission will play a role in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan and that an Afghan-led and



"A peace process must be one in which Afghans talk to Afghans, not Afghans talk to the United Nations," said Nicholas Haysom, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, in an interview. "As we say in Africa, where I come from, the doctor can't take medicine on behalf of the patient." Photo: UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

Afghan-owned political process is critical to support reconciliation.

In the resolution adopted unanimously by the 15-member Council on 16 March, 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, Mr. Haysom 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.

"A peace process must be one in which Afghans talk to Afghans,

not Afghans talk to the United Nations," said Mr. Haysom, a South African, in the interview. "As we say in Africa, where I come from, the doctor can't take medicine on behalf of the patient."

UNAMA helps ensure coordination between the international community, donors and Government of Afghanistan. In addition, more than 20 UN agencies work in Afghanistan; many have been in the country for decades.

"As the international community draws down, if the UN would precipitously leave Afghanistan, it would be seen as abandonment," said Mr. Haysom.

As part of its core mandate, the mission is working to try to ensure that women—and youth—have an equal right to participation in public life.

"Why would we put such an emphasis on it?" Mr. Haysom said. "Apart from the question of human rights standards, apart from the question of the fact that women constitute 50 per cent of the population, or that youth are the country's future, what we know is that for effective growth and development, the participation of women in the public and economic life of the nation is critical."

Šimonović: Opportunities for peace amid growing violence

UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonović, during his second official visit to Afghanistan, focused on the security situation following the transfer of security tasks to the Afghan National Security Forces.

At the end of a seven-day mission to Afghanistan, a senior United Nations' human rights official described the "paradoxical situation" in which the country finds itself.

"On the one hand, there are new opportunities for peace talks that would have been unimaginable only a few months ago," said Ivan Šimonović, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights. "On the other, the conflict looks set to intensify as insurgents test the strength of the security forces, hoping to gain leverage in future negotiations."

Mr. Šimonović, who visited Kabul and the provinces of Nangarhar and Kapisa, said recent violence underlined the fact that it would be Afghan civilians who pay the price, with more work needed to be done to protect them.

"2014 was already a terrible year for the civilian population of Afghanistan and figures for the first quarter of 2015 have confirmed that



During his second official visit to Afghanistan, Ivan Šimonović, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, visited Kabul and the provinces of Nangarhar and Kapisa, and said recent violence underlined the fact that it would be Afghan civilians who pay the price, with more work needed to be done to protect them. Photo: UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

negative trend," he said referring to statistics compiled by UNAMA, which pointed to the deaths of 655 civilians and injuries to 1,155 more in the first quarter of 2015.

During his second official visit to Afghanistan, the Assistant Secretary-General focused on the increasingly difficult security situation following the withdrawal of foreign troops and the transfer of security tasks to the Afghan National Security Forces.

He met with children detained for conflict-related crimes, includ-

ing attempted suicide bombing, as well as civilian victims and their doctors at an emergency hospital in Kabul. Mr. Šimonović was in Jalalabad at the same time a suicide attack by anti-Government elements on a crowded marketplace killed at least 35 people.

"It is unacceptable that Afghans should face such violence on a daily basis," he said. "There can be no doubt that the use of tactics of this kind represent war crimes, and those responsible for organizing or perpetrating such attacks must be

brought to justice."

While encouraging Afghanistan to institutionalize torture prevention by ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, which would lay the basis for a national inspection mechanism for places of detention, Mr. Šimonović welcomed the Government's commitment to eradicate that scourge.

"I was greatly encouraged by President Ghani's and Chief Executive Abdullah's personal commitment to ending torture in Afghan detention facilities, and the steps being taken to prepare a national action plan on torture prevention," he said. "These institutional reforms must be reinforced by strict accountability measures; torturers must be prosecuted and punished, not transferred to other positions."

In addition to his assessment work, Mr. Šimonović helped launch a new report by UNAMA and the UN Human Rights Office on barriers to justice still faced by women.

"Clearly, the gains for women's rights in Afghanistan need to be reinforced and protected," Mr. Šimonović said. "I welcome the appointment of four women ministers, and the imperative now should be to ensure women's representation in key institutions like the police and judiciary, and participation in the peace process."

Women discuss human rights, peace process

UNAMA officials have been conducting meetings with rural women in and around Kunduz to create awareness about women's rights and the role of women in peace and reconciliation.

As part of its mandated work to assist the government and people of Afghanistan in laying the foundations for sustainable peace and development in the country, Human Rights officials from UNAMA met with rural women in the north-eastern province of Kunduz.

The meeting, conducted as part of the advocacy programme of UNAMA's Human Rights staff, focused on the rights of women and their role in peacebuilding, consistent with the framework of the 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) legislation and the Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace initiative.

The Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace was developed during the past three years by civil society groups, with UNAMA support. Some 6,000 Afghans took part in the process, sharing their grievances and aspirations, and identifying the main drivers of conflict and proposed solutions.

The meeting with rural wom-



The UNAMA meetings conducted in and around Kunduz are focusing on the rights of women and their role in peacebuilding, consistent with the framework of the 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women law. Photo: UNAMA / Shamsuddin Hamed

en in Kunduz was held in Arbab Ramazan, one of the biggest rural localities in the Aliabad district of Kunduz, with a population of some 5,000.

A UNAMA advocacy partner, civil society activist Sharana Aymaq, discussed the findings and recommendations of the Afghan People's dialogue with the rural women. She also discussed the articles of EVAW law on forced and underage marriage, harmful traditional practices and domestic violence.

The EVAW law criminalizes 22 acts of violence against women, including rape and beating, and specifies punishment for perpetrators.

UNAMA officials have been conducting similar meetings with rural women in other parts of Kunduz to create awareness about women's rights and the role of women in peace and reconciliation.

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Civilian casualties the focus of advocacy meet

UNAMA's human rights team presented information about how ground engagements are the leading cause of civilian casualties in the north-east provinces.

The protection of civilians in armed conflict was the focus of a UN-backed advocacy meeting, held in Kunduz, that brought together leaders from the local community.

Organized by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in cooperation with UNAMA, the meeting served as a platform for participants to discuss new findings on civilian casualties in the north-eastern provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, Badakhshan and Baghlan.

AIHRC Kunduz head Hayatullah Amiri described the Commission's recent report on civilian casualties in Kunduz and called on the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to observe the principle of caution in conducting military operations.

UNAMA's human rights team presented information about how ground engagements are the leading cause (68 per cent) of civilian casualties in the north-east provinces. Other causes of civilian casualties in the region included improvised explosive devices, aerial attacks, targeted killings, abduction, threat, harassment and unexploded ordnance.

Members of UNAMA's human rights team shared recent findings and recommendations on civilian casualties. Between 1 January and 31 May, UNAMA documented 145 incidents resulting in 396 casualties, leaving 97 people dead and 299 injured.

"Kunduz, with 250 civilian casualties, has the highest number of all three provinces of the north-east region," said a member of UNAMA's human rights team.

Kunduz Provincial Council member Nafisa Sadeqi stressed the need for community cooperation in reducing civilian casualties, while religious scholar Mawlawi Abdul Baqi pointed to the role of religious leaders.

Attending the meeting were members of the Kunduz provincial council, along with representatives from local government, the religious affairs department, security forces and civil society.

In the first four months of 2015, UNAMA documented a record high number of 2,937 civilian casualties across Afghanistan (974 civilian deaths and 1,963 injured), a 16 per cent increase over the same period in 2014.

UN-backed TV series focuses on Afghan rights

Episodes of 'In the Light of the Law' will cover topics such as legal services, defence counselling, the Afghan Constitution and the roles and responsibilities of legal institutions.

Helping to bridge the gap between Afghanistan's legal institutions and people seeking recourse to justice, UNAMA launched a television series in the north-east of the country.

'In the Light of the Law' is a 10-part series aimed at around 300,000 Afghans in Kunduz and some parts of Takhar and Baghlan provinces.

In the first live broadcast, the Deputy Chief of the Kunduz Appeals Court, Abdul Malik Rajabzada, the head of the Kunduz Independent Bar Association, Mohammad Arif Mubashir, and public prosecutor Habibu-Rahman Arzbeegi discussed several legal issues and the ways in which ordinary Afghans can engage most effectively with justice institutions.



In the first live broadcast of 'In the Light of the Law,' professionals from judicial institutions discussed legal issues and the ways in which ordinary Afghans can engage most effectively with rule of law institutions. Photo: UNAMA / Shamsuddin Hamed

Among other issues, Mr. Rajabzada detailed the rights of detainees and pointed out that having a defence lawyer is a right. He also pointed out that it is "an obligation on the part of judiciary officials to inform detainees about this right."

The initial programmes run live on Khawar TV on Mondays, with re-broadcasts on Thursdays during the upcoming months. They are also running on Khawar Radio

every Tuesday and Thursday.

Episodes of 'In the Light of the Law' will cover topics such as legal services, defence counselling, the Afghan Constitution and the roles and responsibilities of legal institutions. In addition, the programmes will cover the Kunduz Appeals Court's public trials proceedings, and will offer debates and quiz-show contests for law students at Kunduz University.

Rights experts discuss child marriage



Panellists in a televised debate called on the government to step up efforts to reduce the cases of violence against women and girls. Photo: UNAMA / Fraidoon Poya

At a UN-backed televised debate in Afghanistan's western province of Herat, human rights experts and civil society activists discussed the issue of child marriage and highlighted the negative consequences of this widespread phenomenon in Afghanistan society.

"Child marriage is a violation of human rights," said a member of Herat's provincial council, Sakina Hossaini, who was among six other panellists at the debate. "It is essential to discuss ways that can augment the efforts of the Afghan Government and its partners to eliminate this harmful practice," she added.

Another panellist, civil society activist Fatemah Behboodzade, said that child marriage can result in an increase of violence against women. "It deprives a girl of her right to education and exposes her to marginalization and victimization," added Ms. Behboodzade.

Some 90 audience members, including civil society representatives, government officials and professors and university students, listened to the views of the panellists on the issue. The debate was recorded by Herat's Maihan television station and broadcast in Herat and Farah provinces, reaching an audience of around 400,000 people.

In other comments during the show, the head of the Civil Society Network in Herat, Khalil Parsa emphasized the need to create awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage, with the aim of eliminating the practice.

The panellists called on the government to step up efforts to implement the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law more effectively and to reduce cases of violence against women.

Afghanistan's EVAW law criminalizes 22 acts of violence against women, including child and forced marriages, rape and beating, and specifies punishment for perpetrators.

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

Haysom: Women essential in peace process

In a meeting with civil society leaders, Nicholas Haysom said women should ensure they are present at the table for peace talks and, whether inside or outside the room, should be driving the peace agenda.

Women must play a central role in helping to shape Afghanistan's future, especially with regard to any peace process, said the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, during a meeting with leaders from Afghan civil society organizations.

In the meeting with civil society leaders to discuss ways to strengthen the gains made during the past on women's rights, Mr. Haysom, who is also head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), said that peace is in the interest of all Afghans. It represents the only viable way forward for the country, especially for Afghan women.

Mr. Haysom said "peace is not a luxury for Afghanistan but a necessity." He urged women to "speak forcefully" to use the



In a meeting with civil society leaders to discuss ways to strengthen the gains made during the past on women's rights, Nicholas Haysom said that peace is in the interest of all Afghans, and represents the only viable way forward for the country, especially for Afghan women. Photo: UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

peace process to consolidate gains made so far, and even to advance them further.

He emphasized that any peace process must be characterized by inclusivity, and said that women's rights must be at the centre of any peace-related discussions. Women should ensure they are present at the table for peace talks and, whether inside or outside the room, should be driving the peace agenda.

UNAMA supports the Government of Afghanistan and relevant international and local non-governmental organizations in the full implementation of the fundamental freedoms detailed in the Afghan Constitution and international treaties to which Afghanistan is a State party, in particular those regarding the full enjoyment by women of their human rights.

Religious leaders decry violence against women

The seminar was set up not only to provide a platform for religious leaders to speak about women's rights but also to bring other leaders together to discuss ways to improve women's access to justice mechanisms.

Participants at a UN-backed seminar in Afghanistan's western province of Badghis focused on the important role of the country's religious leaders in the elimination of violence against women.

Organized by UNAMA's regional office in Herat, the seminar was set up not only to provide a platform for religious leaders to speak about women's rights but also to bring other influential leaders together to discuss ways to improve women's access to justice mechanisms.

Some 50 participants, including journalists, civil society activists, government officials and religious leaders, spoke at the seminar. "We should not underestimate the role religious scholars can play in eliminating violence against women," said the Chief Prosecutor of Badghis province, Qaus Mohammad Rahoti.

Moulavi Abobakar Aliza, a prominent religious leader in Badghis, emphasized the need for

sending positive messages about women's rights in Friday sermons. Other participants highlighted the need to strengthen rule of law institutions consistent with the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) legislation, which criminalizes 22 acts of violence, including forced marriages, domestic violence, trafficking, and forced self-immolation.

A UNAMA report released in April this year focused on Afghan women's access to justice mechanisms, and identified the challenges remaining in eliminating violence against women in the country. The report

indicates that the majority of the cases of violence against women are settled through mediation, with only five per cent resulting in criminal prosecution.

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Some 50 participants spoke at the UNAMA-backed seminar, which was set up to provide a platform for religious leaders to speak about women's rights and discuss ways to improve women's access to justice mechanisms. Photo: UNAMA / Fraidoon Poya

Highland girls asked to play strong role in society

The Daikundi gathering provided the young school girls in the area with an opportunity to listen to the success stories and achievements of three of the province's women leaders.

Women role models in Afghanistan's central highlands province of Daikundi encouraged hundreds of school girls at a UNAMA-backed event to continue their education so they can play a stronger role in the country's future.

Daikundi is a mountainous region and one of the most remote provinces in Afghanistan, located 460 kilometres to the west of the country's capital. It became a separate province 10 years ago, but still lacks basic infrastructure, such as asphalt roads.

The gathering in Daikundi, organized by UNAMA's regional office and the Afghan Department of Education, provided the young school girls in the area with an opportunity to listen to the success stories and achievements of three of the province's women leaders.

Nazdana Khaliqi, a Daikundi police officer, Sumaya Mohammadi, a member of the Daikundi Provincial Council, and Latifa Jawadi, a defence lawyer, all talked about their experiences to inspire the young girls.

Sharing the story of her life, Ms. Khaliqi said that she was one of 12 members of a poor family that could not afford to pay for her education.



The gathering in Daikundi, organized by UNAMA's regional office and the Afghan Department of Education, provided young school girls in the area with an opportunity to listen to the success stories and achievements of three of the province's women leaders. Photo: UNAMA / Jaffar Rahim

"One day a police woman visited our district to help women who had suffered from domestic violence," she said, explaining how, at the time, she could not believe that a woman could become a police officer. "That was when I decided to join the police, because I thought it would be the best way to support women in one of the most remote parts of the country."

Ms. Mohammadi, in her comments delivered at the event, which was attended by some 700 girls and their parents, said Afghan women have suffered during three decades of war, but noted that now is the best time for girls to pursue an education.

"If I could get an education during the difficult period of Jihad and civil war, you should be able to do so now because the environment is much more

conducive to it," she urged.

Similarly, Ms. Jawadi cited the importance of girls pursuing an education, especially for understanding and promoting the rights of women. "Without education, we will never understand the rights given to us in the Afghan Constitution and won't be able to defend ourselves," she said.

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Afghan girls the focus of workshop on sustainable development

Participants at a UNAMA workshop called on government officials and the media to help create awareness about the harmful practices that are hindering the ability of girls to get an education.

At a UN-backed workshop in Paktika, religious scholars and community leaders identified illiteracy as a significant barrier to the eastern province's development, and called on women and girls to focus on education in the interest of achieving sustainable development.

Organized by UNAMA's regional office, the gathering was arranged to promote discussion on gender issues in Paktika, where up to 98 per cent of school-age girls do not have access to education.

There was unanimity among participants in concluding that



Participants at the meeting called on government officials and their partners to pay special attention to girls' education in Paktika, and appealed to the media to help create awareness about the harmful practices that are hindering the ability of girls to get an education. Photo: UNAMA / Dilawar Khan Dilawar

while education is fully in line with Sharia law, harmful traditional practices and the lack of qualified female teachers remain the key challenges affecting girls' access to education in the province.

Religious leaders, community elders, government officials, representatives of civil society organizations and journalists from the provincial capital Sharana and districts around Paktika

made up the 25-person group of participants.

Those participants called upon government officials and their partners to pay special attention to girls' education in Paktika, and appealed to the media to help create awareness about the harmful practices that are hindering the ability of girls to get an education.

In 2009, Afghanistan enacted the Elimination of Violence against Women (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 implementation of the EVAW law found that Afghan authorities registered more cases of violence against women, but the number of prosecutions and convictions under the law remained low, with most cases settled by mediation.

Mine action programme making progress across Afghanistan

One of the largest mine action programmes in the world is making significant progress in tackling the aftermath of a decades' long war that left Afghanistan littered with landmines and explosive remnants of war.

Freeing Afghanistan from landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) has been a massive undertaking. But since 1989, the UN-supported Mine Action Programme, overseen by the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), has cleared more than 80 per cent (or 2,000 square kilometres) of minefields across the country.

This vital work has significantly reduced the risk to civilians. In addition to helping protect vulnerable civilians, the clearance process has contributed to development and economic recovery. The Mine Action Programme has cleared roads along with historical and mineral sites. As a result, movement has been less restricted in these areas and the development of infrastructure and farmland has flourished.

Figures from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees show

that, since 2002, more than 5.8 million Afghan refugees have returned home. The Mine Action Programme's work has enabled most of these people to resettle in their chosen home areas. Without clearing their communities of mines and ERWs, it would have been impossible for them to return to their former residences.

In another key advance, the Mine Action Programme contributed to an improved power infrastructure in Kabul by clearing a heavily mined route that had prevented power lines being set up. The land cleared stretched from Pul-i-Kumri to Hairatan in the northern region of Afghanistan. This achievement is a classic example of how demining is a crucial first step in development. If this route had not been cleared, the country would not have been able to build-up its power infrastructure, which in turn has led to development in several sectors.

In spite of the programme's achievements, however, mines and ERWs still remain at large in some areas, with some 20 per cent of the minefields in the country still intact. Afghanistan is classified as one of the countries most affected by landmines and ERW, with nearly one million Afghans still living within 500

metres of landmines and ERW, and nearly 1,600 communities remaining affected across the country.

To raise awareness about landmine, Afghans and their international partners marked Mine Awareness Day at a United Nations-backed event in Kabul in April, which included demonstrations on demining procedures.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in a video message broadcast during the event, urged member states to remain committed to the cause of mine action through

financial contributions and political support.

Afghanistan is a signatory to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty—officially known as the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction—which is designed to eliminate anti-personnel landmines around the world. In December 2012, the State parties to the treaty approved Afghanistan's request to extend its 2013 deadline for becoming mine-free to 2023.



Where infrastructure is lacking, deminers must rely on donkeys to transport their equipment to areas contaminated by mines and explosive remnants of war. Photo: MACCA

Midwife project transforming Afghan maternal healthcare

An innovative community-based maternal-health programme set up to provide midwifery services to families in remote Afghan villages is making significant improvements to maternal health there.

Tahera Hussaini is a midwife in the Hesar Robat village of Miramor district of Daikundi, one of Afghanistan's most remote provinces in the central highlands region. As one of 80 midwives trained by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) under a pilot project set up to ensure that women have access to reproductive health services, Ms. Hussaini takes pride in serving the women of her village by providing reproductive, maternal and child health services.

In 2009, UNFPA conceived the model project—a community-based health structure designed to serve 1,500 to 4,000 people in remote villages—to provide midwifery services to Afghanistan's most underserved and marginalized women in remote areas.

The need for the programme is clear. Despite significant progress in maternal health in Afghanistan, which has shown a fourfold decrease in maternal mortality during the last 15 years, one in every 50 women in Afghanistan dies from

a pregnancy-related condition.

So far, the UNFPA pilot project has successfully contributed to women's health in three provinces: Bamyan, Daikundi and Faryab. To date, UNFPA has established 80 facilities in remote villages where trained midwives provide maternal health services.

All of the midwives in the project have graduated from a UNFPA-supported training course. The comprehensive, 26-month course includes midwifery skills and treatment of basic illness.

"The beauty of this particular model is that the midwife actually serves in the community and women do not need to go to a major health centre unless there is a complication," said Annette Robertson, UNFPA's Country Representative in Afghanistan.

The success of the programme relies on an integrated sense of ownership among the communities. Midwives are nominated and supported by residents, and selected for training through a competitive examination. In addition, there is a financial buy-in, as communities contribute one-third the cost of setting up one of these maternal facilities in their respective areas.

According to UNFPA, the services are cost-efficient and have been accepted by the communities where they are offered. Once trained, the midwives return to their villages

with life-saving skills, along with a sense of status and empowerment. Afghans have great respect for their services and some communities have come up with their own name for the midwives: angels.

Given the success of the programme so far, UNFPA officials have scheduled to extend the project to other provinces, and incorporate the programme in the Afghan Ministry of Public Health's Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS).

"We are getting positive feedback from the Ministry of Public Health," said Ms. Robertson, who expressed satisfaction that the

Ministry has taken an interest in ensuring that rural, disadvantaged and underserved populations are reached with maternal services.

While the UNFPA-supported programme is making a significant contribution to maternal health in Afghanistan, there is still a long way to go before the country will achieve maternal health targets. Currently, about 23 per cent of maternal needs are being met. If the country as a whole continues with the current rate of progress, however, the positive trend will reverse, as only eight per cent of the needs in maternal and child health are expected to be met by 2030.



In a UNFPA-backed pilot project, Afghan midwives are trained to provide reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health services to women in remote communities in three Afghanistan provinces. It is expected the programme will be extended to other provinces. Photo: UNFPA

Planning for Afghanistan's resilience to a changing climate

Establishing protected areas represents an increasing recognition of the vulnerability of fragile landscapes to climate-related events, such as natural disasters.

In June, Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) declared the Shah Foladi region of Bamyan province as the third protected area in the country. In 2009, NEPA declared Bamyan's Band-e-Amir—an area containing six sky-blue lakes separated by natural dams—a national park. That was followed in 2014 by the declaration of another national park, Wakhan Corridor, which is widely appreciated for its landscapes and natural beauty.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in a joint statement with NEPA, said that the declaration of Shah Foladi as a protected area represents the latest positive move in a series of measures designed to build national understanding of environmental issues.

While the country's varied vistas include mountains, lakes, deserts and woodlands, climate change,



Afghanistan is rich in living resources; its diverse landscapes include mountains, lakes, deserts and woodlands. Pictured here is one of the lakes in Bamyan. Photo: UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

prolonged conflict, instability and population growth have had far-reaching impacts on the country's natural environment.

Afghanistan is ranked as one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, both because of the potential impact of climate change on the country, as well as its limited institutional capacity to plan for and respond to these impacts. The country is currently experiencing an increase in the number and intensity of droughts, along with frequent flooding and landslides.

In February this year, avalanches and floods caused hundreds of

fatalities, destroyed homes and cut off villages. Environmental experts say that the increased flooding and landslide events, along with intense droughts, are directly correlated with climate change. "We have witnessed that droughts have affected rain-fed agriculture, which has a direct impact on the economy, as 85 per cent of Afghans are directly or indirectly connected to agriculture," says Saeeda Gouhari, an official working in UNEP's knowledge management department.

To cope with the challenges of climate change and its impact,

UNEP and NEPA are implementing Afghanistan's first climate-change-adaptation programme. The four-year project, which started in 2013, is designed to increase the resilience of especially vulnerable rural communities and build the capacity of national and local institutions to address climate-change risks, particularly those related to precipitation and temperature fluctuations.

The four-year project is being implemented in Kabul and the four provinces of Balkh, Bamyan, Daikundi and Badakhshan. In Kabul, the project is mainly focused on increasing the capacity of relevant government institutions for assessment, monitoring and forecasting climate change.

In the provinces, the project is designed to build community resilience to climate change through developing irrigated agriculture in Badakhshan; dryland agriculture in Balkh; watershed management in Bamyan; and hybrid urban-rural landscapes in Daikundi.

UNEP and NEPA officials have expressed hope that by implementing these projects across the country, the pilot projects will pave the way for more widespread environmentally friendly strategies and policies for the country as a whole.

With UN backing, thousands attend school in remote districts

Remote, mountainous terrain and ongoing conflict prevent some children from attending school, but a UNICEF community-based school programme is opening up learning opportunities to thousands of children.

Providing children with access to education in remote and conflict-affected areas, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently completed 52 new community-based schools in Afghanistan's southeastern province of Paktika.

Bismillah Enayat, a UNICEF programme officer, says that 1,158 girls and 782 boys are now enrolled in the schools. These newly-enrolled pupils add to the previous total of 5,512 students who have been receiving education in the 184 UNICEF community-based schools already running across the province.

Paktika, one of the most remote provinces of Afghanistan, is characterized by insecurity that impedes children from traveling long distances to attend government-run schools. To implement the community-based schools initiative in Paktika, UNICEF officials have worked with the Ministry of Education at the regional



UNICEF's community-based schools initiative relies on strong partnerships. Local Afghans assist in identifying out-of-school children, especially girls, and introducing them to the remote-schooling programme. Photo: UNICEF

and provincial levels, and directly with local community leaders.

In addition to supporting the programme through coordinating partnerships between community leaders and government officials, UNICEF provides the salaries to the schools' teachers, along with educational materials and tents used as classrooms.

The UNICEF initiative relies on close community partnerships. Local Afghans assist in identifying out-of-school children, especially girls, and introducing them to the remote-schooling programme. UNICEF officials provide teachers with specialized training and guidance.

"In a conservative society like Paktika, religious figures like Mullahs and other community elders play a crucial role in mobilizing the community and encouraging people to establish community-based schools in their district," said Hazrat Shah, an official working for the Education Department.

UNICEF monitors the progress of students enrolled in community-based schools in all districts. Last year, nearly 2,000 students who passed through the community-based schools programme were integrated into the government's formal schools.

In addition to the work in Pak-

tika, UNICEF this year established 20 new accelerated-learning courses in the Jani Khail, Yahya Khail, Sharan, Giyan and Sarobi districts of the province for out-of-school children wishing to learn the Afghan primary-school syllabus in three years. Last year, 560 students, both girls and boys, graduated from the programme.

The community-based schools initiative started in 2004 in the southern and eastern regions of the country. The programme then expanded to Afghanistan's central region, where nearly 10,000 students are enrolled in 268 community-based schools.

"Since 2004, a total of 3,700 community-based schools and a total of 607 accelerated-learning centres have been supported by UNICEF Afghanistan, benefiting more than 1,847,772 children, 56 to 60 per cent of whom are girls, across the country," said Pawan Kucita, UNICEF's chief of education.

Mr. Kucita said that UNICEF is currently working with the Ministry of Education to establish 3,132 new community-based schools and accelerated-learning centres in 10 provinces: Bamyan, Daikundi, Paktika, Paktika, Helmand, Kandahar, Urozgan, Zabul, Ghor and Badghis.

"This will contribute to reduce the number of out-of-school children in the country," he added.

UN envoy welcomes Afghanistan's commitment to eliminate torture

Participants at a two-day Kabul conference discussed the implementation of government planning related to the human rights of detainees, among other issues, including the rights of Afghan women.

The top United Nations official in Afghanistan welcomed the Afghan Government's initiative in developing and implementing a national action programme for the elimination of torture, saying that it is the time for reform plans to be put into action.

"We reiterate that despite some improvements, the treatment of conflict-related detainees held in Afghan Government facilities remains of great concern," said Nicholas Haysom, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA, in comments at a press event held to launch a conference in Kabul.

Participants at the two-day conference, organized by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in cooperation with Amnesty International, discussed the implementation of

government planning related to the human rights of detainees, among other issues, including the rights of Afghan women.

Regarding women's issues, Mr. Haysom called on the government to ensure that all acts of violence criminalized under the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) legislation, and other relevant laws, are duly investigated and prosecuted.

"The National Unity Government has consistently stated a commitment to a reform agenda,

which would consolidate and expand human rights protection," said Mr. Haysom. "The United Nations warmly welcomes the public commitments made by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah to achieving this goal, especially their support for the empowerment and protection of women."

The UN envoy also said that UNAMA recorded a 19 per cent increase in civilian deaths and injuries last year, and urged all parties to the conflict to make protect-

ing civilians their "first priority."

On peace and reconciliation, UNAMA's chief reiterated the importance of human rights and noted that women must play a strong and active role in any peace process. "Both are critical if peace is to be sustainable," he added.

"Participants here are all leaders, working to advance human rights," Mr. Haysom noted. "This conference is an excellent forum for you to think about practical ways to ensure this vision becomes a reality."

Mr. Abdullah, also spoke at the press event, reiterating the pledge of Afghan Government to protect and defend the rights of Afghans. "Without protection of human rights and enforcement of social justice, Afghanistan cannot achieve peace," said the CEO.

An estimated 500 Afghans and their international partners gathered to hear the conference's opening speeches, including those delivered by Afghanistan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani, Afghan High Peace Council Chair Masoom Stanikzai, AIHRC Chair Sima Samar, European Union Ambassador Franz-Michael Skjold Mellbin and Amnesty International Secretary-General Salil Shetty.



Ahead of the two-day conference, organized by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), an estimated 500 Afghans and their international partners gathered to hear opening speeches. Photo: UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

UNAMA stresses international obligation to support Afghanistan

At the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, a top UN official underscored the crucial requirement for the international community to continue its strong support to Afghanistan.

Strong international commitment and support remain crucial to facilitate a successful Afghan transformation, said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan, speaking on behalf of UNAMA at a NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in Antalya, Turkey.

"To their great credit, the two leaders of the National Unity Government have clearly stated their will to implement an ambitious reform agenda that brings into reality Afghanistan's tremendous potential," said Mr. Yamamoto, "As an international community, it is our collective obligation to support them fully in this effort."

NATO Foreign Ministers met at the two-day conference in May to discuss the fluid global security environment. Among issues



NATO Foreign Ministers met at the two-day conference in May to discuss Afghanistan's security environment. Among the issues addressed was the strengthening of the Alliance's partnership with Afghanistan beyond the end of its current Resolute Support mission. Photo: NATO

addressed was the strengthening of the Alliance's partnership with Afghanistan beyond the end of its current Resolute Support mission.

Mr. Yamamoto welcomed the Afghan authorities' goal of asserting primary responsibility for all facets of governance and pledged the UN's full support to this Afghan lead and ownership, while also commending NATO's readiness to continue to play its part towards this same goal.

Through its good offices mandate, UNAMA strives to facilitate solutions, whether to maintain National Unity Government cohesion, to promote peace and reconciliation, to enhance regional cooperation or to support electoral reform and the next round of elections.

Additionally, the UN in Afghanistan focuses on supporting the government's economic reform agenda. The UN coordinates donor efforts to promote

sustainable development and Afghanistan's ability to increase its state revenues, both of which are crucial to allow the government to perform key functions and deliver services.

The protection of civilians in armed conflict remains another core UNAMA priority as part of its human rights mandate. In the first quarter of 2015, UNAMA documented a record high number of civilian casualties. Mr. Yamamoto welcomed Afghanistan's strong commitment to prevent civilian casualties and NATO's vital support in that regard, in particular for counter-IED efforts and civilian casualty mitigation.

Combating pervasive violence and discrimination against Afghan women and girls and enabling women's full participation in the public sphere are also critical, as is the need to end torture and ill-treatment in government detention facilities. Mr. Yamamoto welcomed the Government's commitment to implement a new national plan to eliminate torture and ill-treatment, including of conflict-related detainees, and called on NATO to support these efforts.