



United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

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Press Briefing (*near verbatim transcript*)

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Adrian Edwards, UNAMA spokesman: Salaam alaikum ladies and gentlemen and welcome to this UNAMA press briefing. My name is Adrian Edwards, I'm the spokesman for the UN Assistance Mission, and I am accompanied by Nazifullah Salarzai, press officer.

PEACE DAY IN AFGHANISTAN SHOWING IMPACT ON POLIO

I want to start by extending our congratulations to the people of Afghanistan on the huge support there has been for Peace Day. The response has been countrywide and has continued in some places over the weekend. It has included peace marches, gatherings, TV and radio phone-ins and programming, SMS messages of peace from the major telecoms companies, prayers in mosques, and messages of support from parliament, the president, civil society groups, and individual citizens.

It is clear that the demand for peace in Afghanistan needs answering. We have heard callers to radio programmes over the weekend asking why just a day of peace, why not more? We share this view; there has to be more. By continuing to work hand-in-hand with the entire community we hope the current momentum for peace can be sustained and built upon.

We learned this morning of the latest news on the Peace Day polio vaccination drive. The aim has been to target some 1.48 million children, about a million in the south and the rest in the east where the effort is still ongoing this week. The programme in the south has aimed to reach some 80,000 children in areas that previously were not accessible. If this is achieved as expected and if this exercise can be repeated, just one more time, WHO believes that we may finally be able to interrupt polio in Afghanistan – one of only four countries left in the world where endemic polio still exists. A press release with the details is expected from the Afghan authorities, UNICEF and WHO later today, and we'll send that to you as soon as we have it.

HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON AFGHANISTAN

Yesterday in New York saw the high-level meeting on Afghanistan. The meeting focused on improving strategic coordination across four main areas: security, counter-narcotics, governance, and efforts to strengthen the Afghan National Army and police. Our view is that this meeting has been very positive. There was forceful reconfirmation of the commitments made nearly two years ago at the London Conference on Afghanistan. There was agreement to strengthen the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board. The UN's central and impartial role in leading the international community was stressed. And the international community demonstrated unity behind Afghanistan.

In their press encounter after the meeting, President Karzai and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon spoke of the need for further efforts by the President and Afghan leaders in promoting political dialogue for national reconciliation. In the questions and answers session President Karzai spoke about the importance of ongoing peace efforts vis a vis the Taliban. The text of the encounter and the communiqué is on the side table.

FLOODING UPDATE

There has been recent flooding in the in the Kuz Kunar district of Nangahar Province. The Afghan Red Crescent Society has so far provided goods to help 58 families –

mainly tents, cooking sets, jerry cans and blankets. The Governor of the province is today distributing 220 bags of flour.

A rapid assessment by the Afghan National Disaster Management authorities estimates that recent floods in the east of country have affected around 300 families. Sixty of these families have lost everything they owned. Around 100 houses have been destroyed, livestock has been killed and three people have died so far.

An emergency meeting is being held this morning in Jalalabad on the response needed and actions taken so far. The UN stands ready to assist.

WINTERISATION PROGRAMMES

Ahead of winter, the World Food Programme has begun dispatching 20,000 tons of food for over 330,000 people who will be cut off from markets once the cold weather sets in.

WFP area offices around the country have already begun food dispatches of wheat, pulses, oil and salt to areas that have an early winter. The Faizabad office has completed deliveries as winter begins early there. Around 4,350 tons of food has been allocated to remote and mountainous areas.

Jalalabad has completed 39 percent of its food distribution and Mazar has completed 36 percent. The Kabul area office has just begun deliveries and the Herat office will begin later this week. There have been delays to the Herat dispatches due to insecurity on the southern ring road. As you know, trucks carrying WFP food have been vulnerable to attacks and looting.

People receive the food under a number of WFP schemes, including food-for-work, and food-for-training and school feeding.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Tamadon TV (translated from Dari): We heard from Mr. Tom Koenigs recently that you are ready for direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban – has UNAMA taken any initiatives on this?

UNAMA: As a starting place you should probably talk to the Government on where it is on the question of the proposed talks. Mr. Koenigs did refer to the issue at the UN headquarters press briefing in New York on Friday, making the point that he is keen to see impetus for peace being maintained. Any talks about peace have to be on the basis of respect for the Constitution, and I think Mr Koenigs feels prospects for this may be promising. I understand he also referred in this context to the different tribal and community groups that UNAMA's outreach extends to.

IRIN (translated from Dari): You spoke of an overwhelming support for Peace Day in Afghanistan and said that it was celebrated in a very remarkable way. However, we witnessed some fighting in the Greshk area of Afghanistan, as part of an operation that started two days before Peace Day in Afghanistan. Did you share this issue with NATO and the Defence Ministry of the Afghan government beforehand?

UNAMA: We discussed at length the Peace Day campaign with all our counterparts and partners. We appealed to all individuals and institutions to support the Peace Day effort in whatever way they could. We wanted to mobilise support, to get children vaccinated; we wanted people to have a chance to show that they want peace. The success of a campaign like this can't be measured by whether there was a bomb on a bridge outside the city or whether there was fighting in Greshk. Violence happens almost daily in some parts of this country. Success is being able to save even a single life. As you heard, 80,000 children were targeted for immunization against polio in areas that previously had been beyond reach. That and the fact that there was such an enormous mobilisation of the community is how we see the success here.

Working for peace is never going to be easy. It's tragic that incidents of violence occurred, but nonetheless we have to continue the effort to work towards the ultimate goal of there being complete peace across the country.

AFP: How serious are the recent statements on talks from the government and the Taliban? Some experts say that they are a manoeuvre by the government or the Taliban to try to achieve some play in the media.

UNAMA: There have been a number of peace initiatives over the past weeks here, from the Peace Jirga to the discussion of possible talks between the government and the Taliban, along with the Peace Day initiative and other things too. We take these seriously, and I think we have to. Overcoming a long period of conflict will require overcoming large doses of scepticism about whether these things can be real, about whether they can succeed. Nevertheless, we believe that there is a chance of success and we want to push forward on this.

BBC (translated from Dari): My question is about talks with the Taliban. The UN said yesterday that they are ready to mediate between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Have you started initial work on talks yet?

UNAMA: We've just had a nine-week peace campaign – that's what we have done. There is, no doubt, more to be done but we really have to take stock of the situation now before we start to explore next steps. And I expect we will be doing that over the next few days.

Radio Azadi (translated from Dari): Have you received Taliban support for talks? Have they contacted you about these peace talks?

UNAMA: The UN is not in direct contact with the Taliban.

Killid Radio (translated from Dari): Yesterday, Tom Koenigs, in his speech, said that only a specific group of the Taliban is ready for talks, and that some others are not willing. The people's view is that if we leave out some of the groups, they will gradually gain power and mobilize and undermine security. Why doesn't the international community target their resources in the countries where they [Taliban] get support and where their camps exist?

UNAMA: These questions you are all asking show I guess that all of us want more progress on peace. There is appetite, and people want quick and fast progress. Look at how much has happened on peace in the last few weeks. It has been unprecedented and quite remarkable. But it does take time, and we have to take proper stock of what has happened. As soon as Mr.Koenigs comes back from New

York, we will no doubt be looking at this to see what we should do. As we have said all along, cooperation is needed among groups in the country as well as at the regional level.

8:00 am newspaper (translated from Dari): During the three past decades of war, the UN has several times offered to mediate between the warring parties in Afghanistan – but these offers have not reached solid conclusions. What do you think are the possibilities this time? Will it work?

UNAMA: Let's roll things back a little bit on the question of mediation and return the story to where we actually are now - which is, as I said, taking stock of the situation and then working out next steps. We've just concluded the high-level meeting in New York. There is very strong desire in the Afghan community, the United Nations and the international community to see progress on peace.

Yes, it has been nearly three decades of conflict, and in the past peace initiatives have not made progress that we would all have liked to see. But peace is never going to be easy to attain. It's far easier to start a war than it is to stop it. What we have to do is to gather the community with us to see if there is support in Afghanistan across communities; across parties; amongst groups who are maybe for or against the government, to find a way forward towards peace. We have to build on that. That is where we are right now. It's going to take time, it is going to take overcoming obstacles, and it requires a clear sense of a way forward to emerge. We are still in the very early days, but let's hope that now this progress can be maintained.

Shamshad TV (translated from Dari): Recently the Hezb-e-Islami party stated that if the international community could dispatch Islamic troops to Afghanistan the situation would be much better. What is your view on this?

UNAMA: I can't comment on the Hezb-e-Islami proposal, but if you read the recommendations in our recent study on suicide attacks, you would have seen a similar recommendation there. Greater involvement of Islamic countries may be one measure that may help in Afghanistan.

Ariana TV (translated from Dari): Could you please tell us clearly what type of mediation role you will play between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban?

UNAMA: I will certainly tell you clearly once we have clearly decided how to move forward. As I said, we have to first take stock of the situation after this high-level meeting in New York. It ended less than 24 hours ago. And we will no doubt discuss this when the Special Representative of the Secretary-General is back from New York.

It is important for us all to understand precisely where we are now. These are very early days indeed. We have had quite dramatic developments over the last month to do with peace. To plan a detailed effort on how to go forward now will take time. Our job, with the support of entire community is to make sure that the impetus that has been started is built upon and it is sustained. We had successes over the last few days with peace. As I said at the beginning of the conference, one Peace Day is wonderful – we now need more.
