

## Charlie Higgins, Head of UNAMA's humanitarian unit and Nilab Mobarez, UNAMA Spokesperson's Office

17 December 2007

**NILAB MOBAREZ, UNAMA (translated from Dari):** Good morning to everyone and welcome to our press conference today. My name is Nilab Mobarez from UNAMA Spokesperson's Office. Tomorrow is the prosperous and happy day of *Arafat* and we wish all a very happy *Eid ul-Adha* for each of you and all the Afghan people. We are joined this morning by Charlie Higgins, the head of UNAMA's humanitarian unit who will give us an overview of the humanitarian situation across the country. Before I hand over to our guest, I would first like to provide you with some news updates from the UN agencies.

### TALKING POINTS

#### **UN REFUGEE AGENCY PROVIDES ESSENTIAL SHELTER TO OVER 70,000 RETURNING AFGHANS THIS YEAR**

As the year 2007 draws to a close, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is nearing completion of a shelter programme benefiting more than 70,000 returning Afghan refugees this year.

Shelter is one of the most pressing needs of returning refugees, along with land, employment and security. UNHCR has allocated a significant part of its budget to its shelter programme. It has distributed 170,000 shelter kits (benefiting an estimated 1.2 million returnees) since 2002, including 10,000 kits in all regions this year.

#### **EDUCATION FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN**

Over six hundred internally displaced children from Badghis province, currently living in Herat, are now attending emergency learning centres supported by the United Nations Children's Fund. The children are aged between seven and twelve years old.

These children, deprived of education due to the recent conflict in Badghis now have access to basic education, literacy classes and social sciences during this eight-week intensive course.

The purpose of the course is to keep these children's education going at this difficult time and so that when they return home, they can resume their studies more easily.

One hundred and fifty of the most vulnerable families displaced from Badghis have also been provided with family kits – with water containers, tarpaulins and warm jackets for the winter.

#### **WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME PRE-POSITIONS FOOD ASSISTANCE**

Food items have been pre-positioned to meet any winter food shortages in three districts in Wardak and two districts in Logar, central Afghanistan.

Wheat, pulses, vegetable oil and salt are now available in these two provinces. The food items cover the needs of over 27,000 people.

WFP also has additional resources available for their regular ongoing programmes and if needed, these food items can be diverted to address any emergency.

**CHARLIE HIGGINS, HEAD OF UNAMA'S HUMANITARIAN UNIT:** I will first talk about Musa Qala (in Helmand province), the recent avalanche in Badakhshan, our progress in meeting humanitarian needs that arise because of the winter, and finally I will touch upon the issue of humanitarian space in Afghanistan.

There is a government response plan to provide assistance to 1,500 families displaced by the fighting in Musa Qala. We do not believe that there has been significant large-scale displacement from the area, and we have seen one report from the government, that 830 families have been displaced.

The needs seem to be mostly for food and medical assistance, as they are being temporarily accommodated in people's homes, and these needs are being largely met by the government through military and civilian channels. I would like to point out that any assistance provided by the PRTs [provincial reconstruction teams] is clearly distinguished from that provided by the United Nations and the NGOs [non-governmental organisations], or this effort will put the staff of these agencies at greater risk of attack in the future, and contribute to further erosion of humanitarian space.

In this case, humanitarian assistance will do no more than temporarily alleviate the IDP's [internally displaced people] situation. What is needed is continuing security in the area so that infrastructure can be repaired or improved, essential services provided and livelihood opportunities open up. Without this, there is a risk that these people could join the 16,000 displaced people living in difficult circumstances across Helmand province.

In the context of the recent fighting in the south, I would like to remind all parties that the real goal of humanitarian action is to avoid death and suffering in the first place, and the protection of civilians is the most pressing humanitarian issue in Afghanistan today.

Turning to the avalanche in Furmuragh village in Badakhshan, which killed 16 and injured 14. This is typical of the kind of threat faced by communities in the most isolated, mountainous parts of the country. Most of the response was carried out by the local people themselves, assisted by one national and one international NGO present in the area, which definitely demonstrated the solidarity of communities, but also demonstrated the scarcity of resources and the difficulty of mounting a rapid coordinated effort in these circumstances.

UNAMA and the international community are currently supporting the authorities in Badakhshan to enhance the effectiveness of their emergency response through better coordination and more availability of relevant resources. This is an effort mirrored at central level and in other regions, through support to the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority, by UNDP and others.

Six weeks ago we pointed to the difficulties of delivering humanitarian assistance in preparation for the winter, given the conditions of insecurity along the main routes in southern and western Afghanistan. There is still an unacceptably high risk to agencies that carry relief along these routes. For example, a WFP contractor's vehicle was looted of its 15 tons of biscuits - the truck was burnt and the driver killed only two weeks ago – however the effort to move supplies into the key vulnerable provinces has been largely successful despite the difficulties.

21,000 tons, of the planned 23,000 tons, that's over ninety percent, of the food needed for 326,000 potential beneficiaries this winter, has now been delivered by WFP to its cooperating partner NGOs across 17 provinces.

UNICEF, UNHCR, and the World Health Organisation have also prepositioned non-food items – that is tarpaulins, blankets, jerry-cans, kitchen sets, soap, heaters, and emergency health kits in the same areas – although more could still be provided. For instance, in Ghor, there is estimated to be 6,000 families still in need of these non-food items.

Finally, turning to the issue of humanitarian space. At the end of 2007, humanitarian actors – the UN agencies and NGOs – are operating under much tighter security restrictions. This is the inevitable consequence of insecurity on the ground. These restrictions curtail our access to communities for humanitarian purposes, whether this is the delivery of relief, or efforts to protect civilians from direct harm during conflict.

The main strategy for NGOs to deal with the threat of attack, is to demonstrate neutrality and the impartial provision of aid to those that need it, regardless of their affiliation.

But Afghanistan has lost much of the humanitarian space it had even two or three years ago. This is the freedom that humanitarian actors need to evaluate essential needs, to monitor the distribution and use of relief, and have a dialogue with the affected people and relevant authorities. Effectively it is the freedom of humanitarian agencies to operate safely in this environment.

We need to regain the space that humanitarian action needs in order for agencies to deliver the fundamental life-saving services to the population. The best example of building humanitarian space recently was the three polio vaccination campaigns in conflict areas such as Helmand, where the elements fighting the government agreed to observe "days of tranquility" when they refrained from hindering or attacking the health workers providing the vaccinations. Thank you.

#### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**TAMADON TV (translated from Dari):** I would like to know about the access of UNAMA, in terms of providing humanitarian assistance over the last year. I

would like to know the percentage and the areas where the United Nations could not access and provide and deliver humanitarian support?

**UNAMA:** First of all, I would just like to clarify that UNAMA does not provide humanitarian assistance. UNAMA has a mandate for humanitarian coordination. It is the UN agencies, such as UNHCR, the World Food Programme and UNICEF that actually provide assistance as many of the national and international NGO's. So UNAMA is not in a role of directly providing any assistance itself.

I do not know the exact percentage, but I believe there are 78 districts across the country which are effectively areas where the United Nations - that is both UNAMA and UN agencies cannot go because of security restrictions. This does not mean that humanitarian assistance is excluded from all these areas, but it means that the assessments of the humanitarian needs by UN agencies and the monitoring of programme delivery is made more difficult. It means that it has to be carried out through intermediaries, or by agencies that are still able to operate in those areas.

And organisations such as the Afghanistan Red Crescent Society is able to operate in many more parts of the country, but that is provided that they are able to observe the principle of neutrality within the conflict, and impartiality in the provision of their assistance.

**SAM (translated from Dari):** I would like to know if there is an assessment that has been made or is ongoing about the needs of the people and if so, what are their needs for this winter?

**UNAMA:** Certainly there was an assessment of the needs for the winter and it identified areas within 17 districts where assistance was needed and the largest part of this assistance was for food. But there were other items identified which I listed in the briefings of non-food items. I would say that the biggest risk this winter is for communities to be isolated. They are going to be isolated from essential goods and services and they are also going to be isolated from news. So, if there is any crisis that they face, it is going to be hard to get the information out and hard to get appropriate assistance in.

So whilst the pre-positioning of assistance has been effective, it's most important that the government keeps the roads to the communities open to the extent it can, and the responsibility for keeping them open has been given to two main departments: to the public works department for provincial level roads and to the rural rehabilitation and development department for the district level roads.

For instance we know that the province of Ghor, one of the most mountainous and potentially isolated, needs about 200,000 dollars [US\$] in order to cover the clearance of roads throughout the winter. We know there has been money allocated to this at central level, but we want to make sure that the central government provides the money to the provincial authorities to actually carry out the work.

**AINA TV (translated from Dari):** Can you give us figures of the food and non-food assistance provided throughout 2007 and also how many casualties have been there amongst humanitarian workers?

**UNAMA:** I cannot give you the figures about the total amount of food and non-food assistance provided throughout Afghanistan in all humanitarian programmes this year right now. I could possibly get that, but it would take some time to assemble that information. We do believe that 4.4 million Afghans have received assistance throughout the year so far.

About threats and attacks on humanitarian workers, up to the beginning of this month, there had been 131 serious security incidents affecting the NGO community. This has resulted in the deaths of 11 national staff and four international staff. The threats included direct attacks, violent armed robberies, kidnappings, intimidation, break-ins to their compounds and damage to their properties and vehicles. This is a significant increase over last year and points to the squeezing of humanitarian space that I was talking about earlier. We all believe that it has a very negative effect on the well-being of the general population who live in conflict areas.

**PAJHWOK (translated from Dari):** You mentioned about 78 insecure districts across the country. Could you please tell us in which province these districts are and also would you please tell us which provinces, where you have pre-positioned food, have received the most assistance?

**UNAMA:** The provinces where the largest assistance has been pre-positioned are in Badakshan, Bamyan, Dai Kundi, Ghor, Nooristan, Ghazni and Wardak. On the first part of your question, they are provinces in the south, east, south-east and in more limited parts of the west and the north.

**IRIN:** Is it correct to say that the year 2007 has been the worst year for humanitarian operations in Afghanistan since 2002? And you said that the Afghan Red Crescent Society has access to more areas of Afghanistan because of its principles of neutrality and impartiality. Does this imply that the UN does not comply with principles of impartiality?

**UNAMA:** In terms of whether this is the worst year for humanitarian assistance, I would like to phrase it in a different way. This is the year when humanitarian needs are most apparent and have risen most significantly. I don't think it is correct to say that this year is the worst as such, because the international community has responded to that increased need. But I think more still needs to be done in this area and clearly more will need to be done next year.

With reference to the second part of your question about whether the fact that the Red Crescent Society is able access areas of Afghanistan and UN agencies are not. First of all, one of the reasons is quite great constraints we are under when it comes to operating in insecure environments because of our own security management systems, which have to be observed for the safety of all staff. This doesn't imply that the Red Crescent Society doesn't have the same concern about its staff, it does. But its staffs are Afghans and they are usually from the area where they are working, they are volunteers and they are part of the communities which they are serving. They have a longer, more established presence and longer history of assisting people than almost anyone else. So they are able to judge the situation and give, and I believe, a higher degree of protection, by the nature of who they are and what they understand.

The UN is most definitely very aware of and very concerned about maintaining its neutrality and its impartiality in the provision of humanitarian assistance by UN agencies or through NGOs. I can assure you that the agencies are watching this all the time and they judge each situation on its merits. That is why they wish to often carry out an assessment before they will get involved in delivering relief.

**RADIO KILLID (translated from Dari):** I'm sorry if this is a repetition as I was late. But, in the provinces where it is difficult to access during the winter there should have been a programme to pre-position food and non-food items before the winter approaches. Secondly, is there any coordination with the emergency response committee of Afghanistan when you are providing this assistance for the people?

**UNAMA:** There definitely was a plan for providing the food and non-food items to those provinces before the winter onset. The plan was designed some months ago, long before onset of winter. Problems were faced when it came to delivering sufficient quantities of relief items, in particular around the ring-road - from Kandahar to Herat for instance due to insecurity along the road. So, the plan was already in place, but there was a problem in moving the necessary amount of resources. There were indeed sufficient resources, but there was a problem of insecurity along the road that delayed some of the deliveries into the areas.

This is what lay behind the call about six weeks ago by the Special Representative of Secretary-General here, to allow unimpeded, free access of humanitarian relief deliveries around the country, in particular in insecure areas. I have to say that although there has continued to be insecurity, the effort to pre-position the food in particular, has largely been successful.

There is national emergency response committee, it is chaired by the Vice President and it is the point where all the various initiatives of the international community and within the government come together. So, that committee does exist. It does meet and it does function.

**BBC (translated from Pashto):** Regarding the Musa Qala situation, how do you assess the humanitarian situation in this district and what are the initiatives and plans to provide the people with humanitarian assistance there?

**UNAMA:** First of all, we have not been able to carry out what we would like to do in the area, which is a comprehensive assessment of the humanitarian situation and the needs resulting from the fighting there. This is due to security restrictions. However, we have received reports from government sources and international military sources, which indicate that the resulting humanitarian situation is not alarmingly severe. There has been a report of 830 families displaced and our belief is that this is likely to be a fairly localised displacement, they have not moved very far, so far about 20 kilometres from their homes and that they would probably not be displaced for very long.

But the longer, they are displaced and the further away, they are displaced, and the more dispersed they become - the greater the likely negative effects on these people. While some humanitarian assistance is being provided and this was under military auspicious - between 1,500 and 2,000 families - we see humanitarian assistance in these circumstances, as a temporary measure to alleviate suffering. Once the military operations have stopped and when there can be separation between military operations and the activities of UN agencies and NGOs, then there will be some continuing assistance of a humanitarian nature. What is needed, obviously there, is for security to be assured for the longer term after the fighting and for this to be followed by proper development work - as I mentioned repair and reconstruction of infrastructure and better quality governance applied in the area. Thank you.