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United Nations

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Eliasson reaffirms UN support for Afghans

Reaffirming the support of the United Nations for Afghanistan, Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson emphasized the need to make a difference in the lives of Afghans, in an interview during his five-day visit to the country, which ended in early July.

"You must not fall back into the nightmares of war, extreme poverty and violations of human rights. In that pursuit, the United Nations is there at the side of the Afghan people," said Mr. Eliasson, who also heads a task-force at UN Headquarters in New York on the world body's current and future engagement with Afghanistan.

The Deputy Secretary-General was in Afghanistan to gain a first-hand view of the progress the country has made and to discuss with Afghan interlocutors their priorities and challenges.

Next year will see Afghanistan hold a presidential election, as well as the withdrawal of the majority of allied international military forces, with national forces having assumed full responsibility for security throughout the country.

Amongst those the senior UN official met were President Hamid Karzai, various Afghan Government ministers and senior officials, the Speakers of the Wolesi Jirga and Meshrano Jirga (Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament, respectively), officials from the Independent Election Commission, the Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and representatives from political parties and civil society groups.

Topics discussed in his meetings included the 2014 presiden-



UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson during his UNAMA interview. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

tial election, ongoing peace and reconciliation efforts, humanitarian and development aid, human rights, the rule of law and support from the international community, including the United Nations, during and after the country's transition next year and in the following years.

"The UN will continue to be a close, reliable and sincere partner of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its people in this important phase in its democratic development," Mr. Eliasson said. "Afghanistan continues to be a major priority for the UN, and we believe that we will be able to see progress and success by working together closely."

At a news conference in the Afghan capital of Kabul, the senior UN official echoed that stance.

"We realize that we have a role here in several respects and we are prepared to accept that role in coordination with the Afghan Government, Afghan institutions and Afghan people, and with the support of the international community – both the Security Council and development partners," he said.

"Now is the time for us to deliver, to deliver in the field, in a critical situation," he added. "If the United Nations plays this role constructively, actively, and the people of Afghanistan can see that

there is a difference, [that] this makes a difference in their lives, then we have done something very important."

In his interview, he noted the importance of three pillars for Afghanistan's future progress: peace, development and respect for human rights.

"Because if we have no peace, there will be no development... and human rights will be absolutely crucial to maintain the harmony of any society – otherwise, it is unstable by definition," Mr. Eliasson said. "If we fail to work on peace and development at the same time, then we will have an imbalance."

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On next year's presidential election, slated to be held on 5 April and which he called a "make-or-break" event, the Deputy Secretary-General called for the polls to be conducted in a free and fair manner, with "good participation" from voters.

"I know that this will be watched very carefully and closely by the international community," he said, adding that the organization of a credible election next year is "one of the important ways" to preserve the gains Afghanistan has made over the past 12 years.

Mr. Eliasson said he was glad to hear from the Speakers of the Wolesi Jirga and Meshrano Jirga about progress in relation to two pieces of legislation dealing with the legal framework of future elections, and which are expected to create a strong legal foundation for the holding of credible polls.

"That [passing of the laws] will clear the path for a legal platform for the election," he noted.

Referring to his visit to Afghanistan's southern province of Kandahar – in which he was accompanied by the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ján Kubiš – he said he was concerned by the generally low voter registration reported for women so far. Mr.



Jan Eliasson changes aircraft during his field visit to Kandahar. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

Kubiš has previously stated that a credible election is critical to the country's stability and continued international support.

"I hope that the Government of Afghanistan will, together with their regional counterparts, really come out with the message of the

importance of this vote, of this election," Mr. Eliasson said.

In reference to peace and reconciliation efforts, the senior UN official offered UN support should the Afghan authorities request it.

"This process is a difficult one but it should continue and if we,

the United Nations, can at any stage of this process play a meaningful role, we are prepared to do so," he said. "If we can be a catalytic force representing the international community, being the voice of the international community vis-à-vis the Afghan Government we are willing to do so." ■

UN special envoy Ján Kubiš briefs Security Council

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is ready to support "all peace and reconciliation efforts based on and in full conformity with its mandate," the Mission's head, Ján Kubiš, told the Security Council in late June.

"Among others, it stands ready to facilitate an intra-Afghan Track II dialogue, as well as to engage with the Taliban on issues related to the promotion of human rights, application of humanitarian law and reduction of civilian casualties," the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan added in his remarks.

Mr. Kubiš was addressing a regular meeting of the Council on Afghanistan, held at UN Headquarters in New York. The 15-member Council meets every three months – in March, June, September and December – to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, with a report on the situation by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon presented at each meeting.

In addition to Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace and reconciliation efforts, other topics



UN Special Representative Ján Kubiš briefs the Security Council. (Photo: Eskinder Debebe)

covered in the UN envoy's speech included civilian casualties in Afghanistan, which experienced a sharp rise in the first five months

of this year compared to the same time period in 2012; the presidential elections slated for 5 April 2014; and the importance of the

Afghan Government implementing the law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW). ■

Job creation main challenge to Afghan economy

Interview with Bob Saum, World Bank Country Director in Afghanistan

Bob Saum is the World Bank's Country Director in Afghanistan. He has been on the ground for a little more than a year and is "looking forward to several more years here." He has previous experience in the region, having worked for the non-governmental organization Mercy Corps in Quetta, Pakistan, where he dealt with issues related to Afghanistan, some 20 years ago. In 2002, then working for the World Bank, he helped establish the institution's first project mission in Afghanistan, centred on a public financial management project. He also helped set up the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund.

UNAMA recently spoke with him about his thoughts on the outlook and challenges facing the Afghan economy.

UNAMA: What are the general challenges to the Afghan economy?

Bob Saum: I think the number one challenge for the Afghan economy, right now, is jobs. That is the number one challenge for the people of Afghanistan as well. When we are looking at poverty reduction, when we are looking at gender issues, we are looking at people having opportunities to improve their own lives – and jobs very much comes into this. So then when you deconstruct this challenge, what is it about? It is about skills and human capital, and developing them to the fullest extent, which brings you to education – primary, secondary, vocational, technical and higher education – it is about the business investment climate, it is about making it easier for companies in the private sector to set themselves up, to grow, resolving licensing-related obstacles, making it easier to have investments happen. And, of course, access to finance: the banking sector is important so that the companies which want to grow can have those opportunities.

UNAMA: How is the banking sector developing in the wake of the Kabul Bank affair of 2010?



World Bank Country Director Bob Saum. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

"We all need to recognize that in the post-transition, post-2014, we are not expecting a collapse of the Afghan economy."

Bob Saum: The banking sector remains weak. There is no question that the impact of the Kabul Bank crisis remains. So, going forward, there is going to be a need for greater confidence in the system. There is still a need for regulatory oversight in the banking sector to improve so that it can play the role that it needs to play as in other countries – in providing financing, helping the export sector develop and with job creation, as well as helping businesses which need access to capital in order to enable them to grow.

UNAMA: There are concerns that the departure of international military forces from Afghanistan will have a direct and indirect impact on employment. What can Afghan authorities do about this?

Bob Saum: I think, in the first instance, we do need to remember that the commitments made in Tokyo – as outlined in the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, in which the international community and people and Government of Afghanistan came together – does not point to an immediate or drastic pullout or cut in international aid. You have the four-year commitments of international assistance. And any drawdown in international aid should be done in an orderly fashion and predictable manner so that the Government, the people and the private sector can adjust to it as we move forward.

So what can the Afghan Government do going forward? There are certainly areas on the policy

side that it can focus on, such as the mining law, to make sure that this goes through, and create an environment for the foundation of investments in natural resources, which are going to be an important part of the future of Afghanistan in the longer-term. This is step number one.

On the land issue, it can focus on the land acquisition and land management legislation, and its full implementation, because we find that – whether you talk to the private sector, whether you are working on infrastructure projects or whether you are talking agriculture – land is a common issue that arises just as it does for the average Afghan person.

On the fiscal side, the Government's budget remains very important. The focus here should be on increasing its domestic revenue, pushing through reforms, maintaining control over expenditures, concentrating on human capital development activities that are going to improve the skills and the abilities of Afghans to contribute to their own livelihoods, to their own poverty reduction and to the betterment of the country.

UNAMA: In a March report, the International Monetary Fund noted the Afghan Government's underperformance in revenue collection, by 20 to 30 per cent. How do you see that, coupled with a general anxiety about the stability of the Afghan economy after 2014, unfolding?

Bob Saum: In the first instance, we all need to recognize that in the post-transition, post-2014 period, we are not expecting a collapse of the Afghan economy, even though that may go against the conventional wisdom in which people tend to think that during or following the transition, the economy is going to collapse.

We do not see this happening. Our reports on the transition, on the country's economic situation, which we first did for the Bonn Conference in 2011 and updated for the Tokyo Conference last year, lays out much of this information in their analyses. While the Afghan economy has been growing in the eight to nine per cent range for many years in this decade, we do expect that growth is going to decrease to the four to five per cent range. So there will be a significant decrease in the growth of the economy – but there are many countries in the world that would love to have *Continued on page 4 >>*

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growth at even four or five per cent. Now, even with that, there will be pockets of impact from the transition – whether it will be geographical parts of the country or segments of the economy which have had a greater reliance on the military presence or some of the development assistance – that may feel a greater impact during the transition and the withdrawal of the troops. But, at the same time, even with the growth of four or five per cent, it's not going to be sufficient for Afghanistan, with its population and with its low base, to move well beyond meeting its basic needs. This is why we continue to focus on economic growth as being very important.

Recently, the Government has said that especially customs revenues in the first quarter of the fiscal year have decreased, compared to what was being collected last year. The Government attributes this to both economic impact and leakages.

The Government is obviously very concerned about this, as are its supporters in the international community. You have already seen certain action the Government has taken with changes of personnel – a new deputy minister, a new director-general and many other staff members in the customs department. That has been the first step the Government has taken and it is now looking at which actions, within the customs action plan, it is going to implement immediately, bringing in greater transparency and greater revenue collection on the customs side.

The decline in customs revenue is an essential issue to watch, because as when we talk about the stability and sustainability of Afghanistan, its fiscal sustainability and the Government's ability to finance its own development needs are absolutely essential.

UNAMA: what is your overall view on the outlook for Afghanistan from an economic perspective?

Bob Saum: I remain and I am always hopeful! I have an optimistic outlook and I remain cautiously optimistic. I think as the people of Afghanistan, its Government and the international community know: the Afghans need to come out of elections in a very positive way, with a result that is going to facilitate an orderly transition on the security side and that is going to instill confidence in the hearts of the Afghan people as well as the private sector and others, for continued growth. ■

Authorities explore labour rights for street vendors in Kabul and Herat

UNDP project envisions creating legal outdoor markets

Ali Yawar, a fruits and vegetable street vendor, remembers the day not so long ago when police came and forced him and other street vendors to move their trolleys from near the Blue Mosque in the Afghan capital, Kabul. The police, he said, had orders to clean up the area. Over the space of about an hour they pushed the street vendors into a different, more isolated zone of the city where they were told they could operate.

Police say they had orders to clear the area because the press of so many street vendors was reducing traffic circulation and causing congestion. They say they helped move the vendors to a location where they could sell their goods with fewer disruptions.

Street vendors like Ali Yawar tell a different story. He and other vendors say that those who were slow to move, or who objected, were arrested or watched as their trolleys were smashed and their goods taken away. A large number of the vendors in the area are disabled, and they noted it was hard for them to move quickly. The next day, some vendors say, police allowed different vendors to occupy their former location.

"When this happens, I feel dis-honoured and humiliated," said Mr. Yawar, 53, who has been selling fruit in Kabul for the past 30 years.

Among the street vendors operating in Afghanistan's large cities

such stories are common. Vendors work from sunrise to past sunset, often hauling large stalls of goods around the city. Despite collectively being one of the largest groups of workers in the country, their work is not officially recognized. Consequently, they receive no employment guarantees, regular salaries or benefits. Often, it is a fragile existence.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), nearly 700 vendors operate stands alongside the Kabul River in the capital's downtown. The provincial city of Herat, in the country's west, also has flourishing outdoor markets operated by street vendors.

UNDP, along with the Afghan Ministry of Justice and the Municipality of Kabul is trying to resolve the issue. However, in a marked change to previous attempts, their effort involves engaging all the stakeholders to try to create a strategy that is acceptable to each group.

A three-month old venture from UNDP's Justice and Human Rights in Afghanistan Project, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and the Municipality of Kabul, has seen the UN agency and the municipal authorities hold joint discussions with street vendors, municipal officials and the police.

The talks boost ongoing efforts of the municipal government to find a mutually beneficial solution

to this problem through community engagement and collaboration with local police. The goal of the meetings is to come up with mutually agreeable solution to protect street vendors and promote economic development. Many of the vendors come from poor and disadvantaged families, and the project aims to turn them into legally empowered entrepreneurs.

So far, the discussions, which have been held in Kabul – with similar talks underway in Herat – have produced a number of recommendations. These include reviewing national labour laws and municipal legislation to ensure workers' rights and tax collection. Officials and vendors have also suggested creating designated zones where vendors can be permanently installed. These zones would become regulated bazaars where pedestrians could shop. To create such an environment, vendors suggested that these zones should have water and sanitation services. They also suggested the creation of an association for street vendors which can advocate on their behalf.

Because they are not registered and operate in the informal economy, no solid figures exist on the number of street vendors nationwide. Some analysts have estimated that over 80 per cent of Kabul's economy takes place in this informal sector, which has been called the 'backbone of the local economy.' ■



Nearly 700 vendors operate stands alongside the Kabul River. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

Afghanistan's railroad plans on track



The rail line linking Mazar-e-Sharif to Hairatan at the Uzbek-Afghan border. (Photo: Sayed Barez)

Long isolated even from its neighbours, Afghanistan may soon find itself at the centre of a Central Asian railroad network that promises to unlock new trade routes and spur economic development. The aim is to use railroads to turn Afghanistan into a regional hub of trade.

The potential of trains to act as a catalyst for growth is so strong that, according to the Deputy Minister for Public Works (MoPW), Dr. Ahmed Shah Wahid, the income from the transit trade could become Afghanistan's second-biggest revenue earner, after the oil and gas sector.

In recent years, Afghanistan has made strides to improve its transportation infrastructure. It developed a highway network of 3,300 kilometres which permits drivers in other landlocked Central Asian capitals to transit through Afghanistan and reach either the Persian Gulf or Indian Ocean in about 30 hours.

Now the focus is on constructing rail networks, which is one of the most economical forms of transporting large quantities of goods.

"Under a 25-year plan, which was developed two years ago, a total of 3,500 kilometres of railway lines will be constructed in Afghanistan while the implementation of a short-term plan

"Income from the transit trade could become Afghanistan's second-biggest revenue earner, after the oil and gas sector."

— under which a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railroad is being developed — will take three to four years to complete," said Dr. Wahid.

On 5 June 2013, the Presidents of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan attended a groundbreaking ceremony in Turkmenistan for a 590-kilometre rail line linking all three countries. Some 450 kilometres will pass through the cities of Aqina, Andkhoy, Shebarghan, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz in northern Afghanistan. The line will end at Kolkhuzobod, in Tajikistan. Plans exist to eventually extend that line to Kashgar, in China.

This and other railway initiatives are part of the Transport Strategy and Action Plan of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC), which aims to open alternative routes of supply for national and international trade, as well as for humanitarian relief coming into Afghanistan. Founded in 1997, CAREC is a partnership of eight Central Asian Countries — Af-

ghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan — and six multilateral institutions, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank.

The technical and financial studies for the first phase of the route inside Afghanistan have been undertaken with financial assistance from the ADB. The ADB is also committing \$240 million to build the part of the railway running through Afghanistan.

Plans also exist to connect the northern line with a rail line running to the western province of Herat. There, it would link with a 124-kilometre track under construction that links the provincial capital, also known as Herat, with the city of Khaf in neighbouring Iran.

Afghanistan completed its first railroad in 2010, a 75-kilometre track connecting Mazar-e-Sharif with the border of Uzbekistan.

From Uzbekistan, travellers can continue to destinations throughout Central Asia and Europe. According to studies conducted by the Afghan Government, the railroad is already a success and has helped to ease a bottleneck of goods at the Hairatan dry port on the Uzbek-Afghan border. Officials say the line serves as a hub for almost 50 per cent of the country's total imports, including essential commodities such as oil, fuel, flour, fertilizers, construction materials, agriculture equipment and products and consumer goods as well as humanitarian relief items.

Plans also exist to build a rail line heading to the country's south. The Afghan Government recently signed a memorandum of understanding with Pakistan to build railway tracks that will help expand trade between the two countries. According to blueprints, a railroad will connect the city of Quetta in Pakistan to the city of Spin Boldak in Kandahar. Another line would connect Peshawar with Jalalabad.

Dr. Shah said that the long-term plan is to link the cities of Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad and Kabul by rail.

"The transit trade will have a positive impact over the economic condition of the Afghanistan and its people," he added. ■

Singing for peace and women's rights

Interview with Afghan female singer, Paradise Sorouri, who aims to inspire youth

Although she was born and raised in Iran, where her family fled during this country's civil war, Paradise Sorouri considers herself an Afghan singer. She began her singing career in 2007, in the western city of Herat, where she played in a band called the '1, 4, 3 Band.'

When her singing led to death threats she moved with her fiancé to Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in 2010, to pursue her dream of a career as a musician. There she found artistic freedom and safety. But as a foreigner it was hard to find legal employment.

After three years abroad, Ms. Sorouri and her fiancé returned to Afghanistan. Since then her musical output has soared. She has recorded several albums, filmed videos and performed in concerts. Her chosen style of music is rap and the subjects she sings about include the search for identity and love in a time of war, as well as social issues such as corruption. She likes to deal directly with some taboo subjects, and she believes women must not allow themselves to be mistreated or disrespected. However, she is finding this challenging in her home country.

Ms. Sorouri recently spoke with UNAMA about her singing career and the difficulties faced by female artists in Afghanistan.

UNAMA: What made you want to be a singer?

Paradise Sorouri: I was an active girl in my childhood. My father used to play the keyboard and string instruments at home and I would sit and listen to the melody. It soothed me. My father encouraged me a lot and at family parties he would play music and ask me to sing. My family members, relatives and friends always praised my voice and encouraged me to become a singer. As I grew up, my eagerness to play music increased. In Iran, I sang in a choir for a year and learnt a lot. In Iran, I also recorded an album but never released it because I felt it was too simple. Later, I wrote poems that I didn't publish. When I returned



Singer Paradise Sorouri during her interview with UNAMA. (Photo. Eric Kanalstein)

to Afghanistan, friends suggested I audition for 'Afghan Star' [a television programme that spotlights new singers] but I decided to make my name through my own efforts, at my own expense. My fiancé and I created a band.

UNAMA: Where has your music been showcased or featured?

Paradise Sorouri: Unfortunately, we did not become famous in Tajikistan. We sent our songs to TV stations in Kabul but they weren't accepted. TV channels in Herat were good and are still very good. They supported us and I am thankful to them. In Tajikistan, we participated in a concert. Since returning to Afghanistan we have performed in four concerts—three were live.

UNAMA: Can you tell us about your music?

Paradise Sorouri: We sing in Farsi and Dari. In the future, we will try to sing in other dialects as well. We sing rap, hip hop, R&B and pop, in four styles, because this provides enough ground to express ourselves. Our first song was 'Awalin Bar,' (transl. 'The First Time'). It was written by my fiancé and it's about the war in Afghanistan. We recorded it in Herat but the quality was poor so we re-recorded it in Tajikistan two years later. We decided that alongside happy songs we should also sing about political and social issues, such as women's and children's rights and other social issues. Our song, 'Hamwatan,' (transl. 'Coun-

trymen') was about the conflict in Afghanistan. Our first album has four political songs and three songs about romance. In the future, we intend to record the political songs as separate pieces and our albums will only have happy songs. The reason is that political songs need a lot of hard work! My song 'Nalistan' (transl. 'The Land of Crying') took four months to get ready. I am happy that we can express our ideas through songs despite immense financial constraints because we are paying the cost of everything by ourselves. Fortunately, our families are very supportive.

UNAMA: What kind of challenges do you face as female singer?

Paradise Sorouri: It's very difficult. It is not easy for me to go out of the house. In the beginning, I was alone in Kabul for three months before my fiancé or other family members came to live with me. It was difficult for me to walk on the street and I had to take taxis everywhere. My friends suggested I leave Afghanistan. But I insisted that I would resist as much as I can before I leave my country. I want to show women and girls here that we can struggle to achieve our dreams. I want to show people that I am a female rap, hip hop, R&B and pop singer – and this is what I want to be known as.

Women are under huge stress in Afghanistan. Even ordinary

girls who aren't even wearing makeup will be told impolite things on the street. When you go home at night you think: 'Why was I treated so badly? Just because I'm a woman? Is it a sin to be a woman?' Sometimes I cry and get very scared when people tell me that I might be kidnapped or killed. The conditions are very difficult for women in Afghanistan.

UNAMA: How do you see your future as a singer in Afghanistan?

Paradise Sorouri: The situation may force me to leave the country. If I give a concert and get 500 people in the audience, only 200 of them might understand my art while the rest will speculate on negative things about me. The environment for music doesn't exist in this country. The situation might be better for male singers, but for female singers it is very difficult, particularly if the woman has the courage to sing political songs. I regularly receive warnings and threats through email and Facebook that I should stop singing, otherwise I should be ready for the consequences.

UNAMA: What is your message to Afghan women?

Paradise Sorouri: I want to tell Afghan women to struggle for their rights and fight to live their dreams. Don't allow anyone to let you down because you can only reach your goal if you want to reach your goal. No one else can help you reach your goals.

VOX POPULI

In this issue, UNAMA asked the following question to Afghans in different regions of the country: *“How important is freedom of the media for transparent and fair elections in Afghanistan?”*

Bamyan

Sayed Mohammad Sadiq, shopkeeper

“My understanding is that the media has an effective role in the transparent conduct of the next presidential election. The media can encourage people to go to the polling stations and cast their vote, which is a national obligation. People’s participation in the elections is quite critical for the future of Afghanistan.”



Laghman

Sharifa, civil society activist

“The media is the spirit of a society. It is like a mirror for the people. It is a good source for information. Considering all these points, the media can play a very important role for raising public awareness which can pave the way for conducting a transparent election, with a high turnout. On the other hand, the media can report fraud and intimidation and draw the attention of the relevant entities, such as security organs, the Election Commission and observers.”



Balkh

Shah Jahan Ahmadi, university professor

“The media is a pillar of a successful state. More freedom of speech means the next election will be more broadly supported by the public. A free media is what gives an election legitimacy, dignity, and a real winner. In Afghanistan, the independent media has gained more value and will be important for the next election.”



Kunduz

Ahmed Naved, police officer

“My understanding is that the more that the media is independent, the more transparent and trustworthy the election will be. The media advocates on behalf of the people of Afghanistan and creates awareness among them so that they can make decisions affecting their future. If people can elect a president with complete awareness, there would be fewer problems and their hopes could be fulfilled.”



Kandahar

Ahmadullah, rickshaw driver

“I don’t have that much knowledge of elections and I only see or hear about them through TV or radio. The media is the only source through which I and other ordinary Afghans can get to know about elections and other affairs; it can play an important role in spreading information to every Afghan in the country.”



Nangarhar

Talwasa Nahid, university student

“The media is a bridge between the government and the people. The first step the media should take on the eve of the election is to explain the significance of the election and the importance of people’s participation. If the independent media is involved in the whole election process, if they are in close contact with the people, if the reporters are trained on how to report on the election, and, if they really intend to reflect the facts, they may ensure transparency in the election.”



Paktya

Haji Qasam Khan, chemist

“I think elections, freedom of speech and democracy are interdependent, which means that fair and free elections are not possible without freedom of speech, and free and fair elections are a necessary fact for having democracy. So, since freedom of speech is a fundamental element for a free election, the media needs to play vital role – mainly in raising public awareness on the importance of elections, public participation, election laws and to watch the whole process.”



Herat

Akhter Mohamad, university student

“To have a transparent and fair election, a free media is crucial, because independent media are able to help people select the best candidate and help supervise the election. The media shouldn’t be influenced by foreign countries and they need to draw a positive picture about the election and try to convince people to vote for the future of Afghanistan.”



Afghan women break new ground through sport

On a hot sunny afternoon in May in Kabul, over a hundred schoolgirls, ranging between 13 and 16 years of age and wearing sports clothes and headscarves emblazoned with the flag of Afghanistan, ran as fast as they could.

The girls were competing in races for one of three spots on the national running team.

The event, which took place at the National Olympic stadium and featured female athletes from ten schools from around the capital, lasted several hours and involved a number of races. Afghanistan's first female Olympic athlete, Tahmina Kohistani, who competed in the 100-metre sprint at the London Olympics in 2012, was on hand to offer encouragement.

Only 12 years ago, under the Taliban regime, women were barred from participating in public sports events. On a broader level, women were not allowed outside of their homes without being escorted by a male member of the family. But the last few years have seen a widening of the space available to Afghan women with, for example, women now being much more involved in fields such as politics and civil society.

This new freedom has also extended to female athletes. Although Afghanistan remains a deeply conservative society, women say that social attitudes towards the place of girls and women, at least in urban areas, have loosened. In this way, the country is catching up with other neighbouring Muslim countries, where women enjoy the right to compete publicly in sports. Indeed, these days in Afghanistan, girls playing sports outdoors is no longer an unusual sight.

"Before, it wasn't possible for me or for any girls to do sports. People thought we shouldn't even go to school and being indoors all the time was like living in a prison," said Fatema Ahmadzai, a female member of Afghanistan's national karate team, which has grown from five girls to 120 in the past couple of years. "But slowly the mentality of people is starting to change. I think that things are slowly getting better for girls. I hope this door will never close."

Throughout Afghanistan, women's teams exist for handball, football, volleyball, basketball, judo, karate, taekwondo, hockey, cricket, chess, powerlifting and other games that are compatible with Afghan and Islamic culture



In Kabul, female athletes compete for a spot on the Afghan running team. (Photo: Eric Kanalstein)

and traditions.

According to the head of women's sports at the National Olympic Committee of Afghanistan, Shukriya Hikmat, around 3,000 Afghan women compete in leagues for 22 organized sports throughout Afghanistan. Some 1,000 of these girls and women compete in Kabul while the rest play in provincial centres.

The United Nations considers sport to be an important part of development. The right of access to and participation in sport and play has long been recognized in a number of international conventions. In 1978, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization described sport and physical education as a 'fundamental right for all.' But until today, the right to play and sport has too often been ignored or disrespected.

The world body has established the UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP), based in Geneva, to help bring the worlds of sport and development closer together. According to the UNOSDP, sport has a unique power to attract, mobilize and inspire. By its very nature, sport is about participation, and about inclusion and citizenship. Also, it stands for human values such as respect for the opponent, acceptance of binding rules, teamwork and fairness, all of which are principles which are also contained in the UN Charter.

"The link between sport, peace and development grows stronger by the year," Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said on the is-

sue. "By working as a team we can use the power of sport to build the peaceful, prosperous future we want."

That sentiment was echoed by Ms. Kohistani, who has seen firsthand how sports can promote national unity, bring cohesion and a greater sense of brotherhood and sisterhood to Afghan society.

"Time changes everything; when six Afghan athletes represented Afghanistan in London Olympic Games in 2012, it created a feeling of patriotism, unity and equity among all Afghans throughout the country," she said.

Afghan women athletes are beginning to make their mark on the world stage. In addition to Ms. Kohistani's participation at the Olympics, Afghan sports-women have scored achievements in football, cricket, taekwondo, boxing and powerlifting. In 2010, the female football team defeated Pakistan 4-0 at the South Asian Football Championship. In 2011, Afghan female powerlifters won three gold and two bronze medals at pan-Asian games held in Kazakhstan. Last year, the women's cricket team won a major competition in Tajikistan. In total, Afghan female athletes have won around 100 medals at regional and international tournaments.

These results are helping women's sports clubs to grow. For instance, Diana Barakzai, a member of the Afghanistan Cricket Board and the coach of the national team, said that within a year there will be two more national female cricket teams – one for girls under the age of 19, and a second for

girls under the age of 15.

Despite these successes, female athletes say that they continue to face pressure to modify their interests to conform to conservative views on the role of women held in some parts of society.

"My family is open-minded about my playing sports but still face problems outside, on the streets, and when I practise people often stare at me in an uncomfortable way or they scream bad things at me and threaten me," said Sohila Mobasher, a cyclist on the national team. "It makes me scared and sad but I will continue to do it because it's my right and that motivates me."

Female athletes also complain that they face a shortage of facilities, and the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) echoes those concerns.

"UN Women calls upon the National Olympic Committee of Afghanistan and other relevant entities to react to the needs of Afghan women and provide amenities for female athletes," said the UN Women Country Representative in Afghanistan, Ingibjorg Gisladottir.

Authorities acknowledge the need for greater investment in sports for women, but say it is a long-term investment.

"We are working on a plan to construct an academy for which the Ministry of Women's Affairs has provided land, to allow women players to practice in a more conducive environment," Mrs. Barakzai noted. ■