



UN ideally placed to help Afghanistan in transition to full sovereignty – top envoy

17 March 2011 –With its 30 agencies, funds and programmes providing aid in every one of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, the United Nations stands ready to support the country's assumption of the lead role in all aspects of governance, development, and efforts to achieve peace, a senior UN envoy said today.

"Our strength and comparative advantage lies in the fact that we are diversified," Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Representative to Afghanistan Staffan de Mistura told the Security Council, citing what he said were the Government's increasing and legitimate demands to assume this sovereign role.

"The UN attaches great importance to its partnership with the Government of Afghanistan, and its institutions, to manage a successful transition process. We believe that our long experience in the country positions us to serve as a partner to the Government and the International Community to support transition."

Mr. de Mistura noted that the primary focus for the coming months will be on the gradual transition of lead responsibility for security to Afghan forces from international troops, who have been in charge since the United States-led invasion drove out the former Taliban government in 2001 after the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which Mr. de Mistura heads, is not a peacekeeping mission and is accompanying the transition, which it welcomes "constructively as active observers," he said.

He cited the "formidable challenge" of preparing Afghan forces to shoulder the increased responsibility for military operations, sustaining gains made in the past year with the surge in foreign troops, and the need to obtain the confidence of the people despite persistent violence, intimidation campaigns and "horror-inducing" attacks across the country.

But he stressed that for the transition be sustainable, it requires a political and development process, in particular peace and reintegration, in which the UN has experience and expertise.

"We have all the while placed emphasis in their capacity-building and ownership. And we are now positioned to assist the government and the Afghan people in key areas as long as needed and if as such requested," he said, citing help for Afghan-led efforts to resolve peacefully the conflict with the Taliban and other groups, and the UN's moral authority on human rights and protection of civilians.

"Given its neutrality and humanitarian contacts the UN will also continue to reach out to all segments of Afghan society. The UN can provide legitimacy to the process by accepting to meet with those who signal they are open for dialogue," he added.

Turning to humanitarian and human rights issues, Mr. de Mistura noted that since 2007, 9,000 Afghan civilians have died in the conflict – "a great source of concern to the Government and people." The greatest annual toll of 2,777 was recorded in 2010. "The key is to make 2011 also the year of a surge in protection of civilians," he stressed.

He highlighted the issue of women's protection, suggesting that a mix of publicly and privately run shelters may be the best way to ensure that women and girls fleeing domestic violence have available safe and secure places of refuge. "It is equally important that they are not subject to any form of punishment, including imprisonment, for running away from such violence," he added.

Citing the role the UN plays in the country, he noted that last year spending totalled \$904.5 million in programmes that: provided more than 300,000 tons of food aid for some 7.3 million vulnerable Afghans; helped vaccinate 7.5 million children under five against polio on every round of immunization campaigns; and expanded access to basic health care to 600,000 people in remote areas not currently covered.

UN agencies have also worked with the Government to assist in the voluntary repatriation of at least 4.5 million Afghans since 2002 and have helped clear hazards in more than 2,500 communities, removing 300,000 mines last year alone.

Finally he called on the international community to build capacity within the Government to enable its counter-narcotics bodies to cope decisively with the "exceptional situation" posed by the drug trafficking which threatens Afghan and international peace and stability. The issue warrants a shared responsibility among international stakeholders, he said.

"Progress has been made by government over the recent years. The situation however remains dire and the Government needs our full support. The facts speak of a dramatic situation with addiction in Afghanistan rising fast and the treatment infrastructure falling short," he added, citing soaring prices, with drying opium now fetching almost three times the average \$95 per kilogram it brought just a year ago.

"What is required is a social contract between farmer communities and aid providers," he said. "To induce political will at the sub-national and community levels, this is not to be relegated solely to alternative livelihoods. It should encompass the entire support package delivered to specific districts vulnerable to conflict and the cultivation of illicit crops."

Afghan Ambassador Zahir Tanin stressed the essential role of the international community in the transition process. "As the lead international civilian coordinator, the role of the United Nations in Afghanistan over the transition period and beyond will remain crucial," he said.

Mr. de Mistura was formally presenting to the Council Mr. Ban's latest report on Afghanistan, in which he recommends a one-year extension of UNAMA's mandate, which includes fostering national dialogue, supporting regional cooperation, and coordinating UN and international aid by helping to identify priorities and putting in place an Afghan-led coordination framework.

Mr. Tanin called for reshaping UNAMA's mandate to make transition its central focus, greater coherence and efficiency in the work of UN agencies, funds and programmes, and channelling aid through the Afghan budget. While recognizing that UNAMA's coordinating role in delivering humanitarian aid is crucial he said the focus now the focus must be on strengthening the "central coordinating role of the Government."



UN envoy calls for military review after air strikes kill Afghan children

3 March 2011 –The United Nations envoy for children and armed conflict today called for a thorough review of procedures after NATO air strikes killed nine children in Afghanistan’s eastern Kunar province on Tuesday.

“Children killed in Afghanistan by air strikes is a cause of serious concern,” said the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Radhika Coomaraswamy.

According to media reports, the boys – aged 12 and under – were killed while gathering firewood. NATO commander General David Petraeus has reportedly apologized for the fatalities, which he said occurred due to a communication error about the location of militants.

Ms. Coomaraswamy, in a statement issued by her office, welcomed Gen. Petraeus’ apology for the incident and his commitment to investigate.

At the same time, she urged a thorough review of procedures “to ensure that all necessary precautions are taken to prevent children from becoming casualties in the complex and volatile situation in Afghanistan.”

The Special Representative noted that early last year, the international forces introduced technical directives aimed at better protecting civilians during air strikes, which had resulted in a significant decrease in the number of children killed by pro-Government forces in 2010.