



United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

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PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

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OCHA: It's a real privilege to be here to present the collective efforts of the humanitarian community which consists of course of appropriate government agencies, the UN agencies and programmes and NGOs, whether international or national NGOs

I'd like to start by posing some significant figures to show the scope of work that we have to deal with.

There are about 400,000 Afghans who are seriously affected by natural disasters. There are about 275,000 Internally Displaced People in the country who are in constant need of medical care, food, shelter, protection and other assistance.

There are more than six million people who are in need of assistance to be able to supplement to reach their food requirement.

Now those are significant numbers that without the collective effort of the humanitarian community, the donor community and the Government we would not be able to serve.

This year we estimated the need of about US\$ 871 million in total assistance required. And we certainly hope that the international community will provide the assistance needed. At the moment the key issue that is preoccupying all of us is the winter and how we are prepared for the winter season.

For winter, we divide our programme into two parts. One is how to ensure that our normal programme continues during the winter season. And the second part is how do we prepare in case there's an emergency during the winter and how do we respond to it? For natural disasters, the Afghanistan Natural Disaster Management Agency (ANDMA) is in charge of the overall planning and coordination. It works closely with the support of UN agencies and NGOs.

We have been able to dispatch 80 per cent of the food and assistance required to continue our winter programming, but we do face two major difficulties. One, insecurity continues to disrupt our efforts. Second, is the timely flow of information and whether its needs assessment or resources available to be able to match the two.

Despite great improvement, corruption and malpractices continue to have a negative impact on our ability to serve communities.

This winter we expect that H1N1 could be a problem. The Ministry of Public Health and WHO are expecting to have in place about 550,000 Tamiflu vaccines in preparation for this winter. We expect to see 1.8 million vaccines available in April. We realize that April is far, but there's a worldwide shortage and we're lucky to be able to secure this amount in the time frame we have.

I will give you some details about food. WFP has reported that they were able to supply 800,000 beneficiaries with a total of 30,500 tonnes of food. And depending on the logistics and security in some areas, we've been able to deliver 100 per cent of food, like in Faizabad. In other areas, as a result of insecurity and logistics problems, we were only able to deliver 60 per cent of food, like in Herat.

With respect to non-food items, IOM in partnership with NGOs and the donor community were able to pre-position 15,600 kits. We're about 3,800 kits short of what

we anticipate we need, and we continue to work with the donor community to try to mobilize the resources needed. UNHCR and its implementing partners have been able to pre-position assistance for about 30,000 families. Overall, we are in as best situation as we can be, given the security implications, limitations in resources and spending needs.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

IRNA: Could you please categorize the region where the most vulnerable people are located?

OCHA: What I can tell you is that there are pockets of vulnerability across the country. If you look at the latest figures from the Central Statistics Office, at the food assessment vulnerability, it will show pockets of vulnerability across the country. But the southern and the south-east areas are the most vulnerable as a result of increased insecurity. We are trying to obviously tailor our response, we are trying to understand the nature of vulnerability and we divide vulnerability into categories. There is chronic vulnerability as a result of malnourishment and people not receiving adequate food. There is vulnerability as a result of a conflict, which is mostly in the south and as we said in the south-east. And there is vulnerability temporarily as a result of ongoing operations where people are temporarily displaced and then they return. And there are areas that are prone to natural disasters like the north and the north-east, where most of the earthquakes, most of the recent natural disasters like floods have occurred.

What is important for us is to be able to access people in a timely manner, to conduct assessments, to mobilize resources and to be able to deliver the assistance. And if you like more details, we can discuss more afterwards and I can give you some of the statistics if you're interested.

HASHT-E-SUBH [translated from Dari]: This is a two part question from 8 AM. The first part is with regards to the money that you need for your programme and you mentioned the amount. Is it only for this winter? And how many donors have already contributed to this appeal? And, second, you mentioned about the corruption that has hampered your activities and efforts. Will you elaborate?

OCHA: Okay, let me start with respect to the US\$ 871 million that is the collective amount needed for the entire humanitarian effort, not just for the winter, for one year, if I may add. About one third of that, US\$ 360 million is for food, and the rest covers healthcare, education, protection of civilians and other activities. We launched this international appeal, I think it was on 20 November in Geneva and based on last year's experience, we expect to be able to raise at least 45 per cent of this appeal, which means we have to double our efforts to try to raise the balance. We need your help as media to highlight the impact of not receiving assistance in the community, so we can continue to convince the donor community to continue to support the humanitarian efforts.

Now, with respect to the corruption question, I know it is a political hot issue and I am going to try to just to tell you the impact on our operations. It is increasing the cost of our ability to deliver and transport goods and services and it makes it difficult for us to target the people who we feel are the priority and not based on any other considerations. Both issues take a lot of our time and effort to try to address to make sure that people who need assistance receive it. I hope that answers your questions.

RFE/RL: Recently Kai Eide has expressed his unwillingness to continue his mission in Afghanistan and asked Ban Ki-Moon not to extend his mission in this country. I want to know has the UN Secretary-General accepted Kai Eide's request and who will be his successor in this country? You pointed to corruption – if the Afghan government fails to tackle the corruption in this country, what will be the future consequences on your programmes?

UNAMA: To answer the first part of your question, indeed the Special Representative of the Secretary-General has now informed the Secretary-General of his intention not to renew his contract in March of next year. He has asked the Secretary-General to begin the search for his successor. That process is continuing as we speak. When the Secretary-General is ready to make the announcement, that announcement will come from our headquarters in New York. This is in line with Kai Eide's original intention when he took up the post to remain in the post for two years. Now that it is approaching two years since he took up the post. He would like to return to Norway to his family. And like you, we will be looking forward to the Secretary-General announcing his successor in due course.

OCHA: We need to look at the impact of corruption on community not on our operation. Our operation is meant to serve people. When you look at the impact of corruption on people: One, we will not be able to target people who are most in need of assistance. Second impact would make it difficult for us to convince the donor community to continue to provide the level of the assistance or the increase that we need. And fighting corruption is the collective responsibility of not just government but also UN agencies, community leadership and community members.

RTA [translated from Dari]: My question is with regards to the winterization programme. You mentioned about H1NI that we might experience this year and you also mentioned the amount of vaccines that have been received by the Ministry of Public Health and that 1.8 million more vaccines are expected to be received. If the Ministry of Public Health has already received these vaccines, why does the Ministry not give this vaccination to the people who need it?

OCHA: First of all, I think this question should be addressed to Ministry of Health. I cannot answer that on their behalf. But I will share with you what I know. I apologize if I confused people. The 1.8 million vaccines are expected in April. They are not here yet. As far as we know, the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) is following the international standards of prioritizing who will receive the vaccines first. The first category is people who are providing healthcare – doctors, nurses and people who are working in the hospitals and medial facilities. Second category, people who support them so they can continue to do their work – administrative, finance and logistics, to make sure that that health care system and law and order system can continue. The third category is the most vulnerable in the community – children, women and the elderly. We are assured that even if people do not receive the vaccine – if they continue to take appropriate precautions such as covering their faces, washing their hands, we will be able to reduce and mitigate the risk. We really appreciate the role the media has played in conveying those key messages to the public.

SABA TV [translated from Dari]: My question has two parts. With regards to the statement that Kai Eide, the Special Representative, recently made that people can't afford to have warlords in the cabinet, but there are some warlords already in the cabinet, and it is at a time that the UN supports that. I just want to know why the United Nations withdrew its previous statement or position?

The second part is with regards to the continuity of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. If this assistance will not continue this year, do you think there will be human casualties?

UNAMA: Let me pick up from the first part of the question. As you've heard me say many times in this room, Afghanistan is a sovereign country and the choice of the new cabinet members is entirely the prerogative of the president of this country.

Our mandate in this country is as an assistance mission, not a substitution mission for the sovereign government.

Our job is to advise and to support the government of this country and not to make decisions for the government of this country.

We do that in a very frank and open manner with the government – and you've heard me and the Special Representative repeatedly say what type of a government we would like to work with.

The Special Representative and UNAMA have made perfectly clear on many occasions that we need to see more reform-oriented ministers in the new Cabinet that are able to live up to the expectations of the Afghan people and the international community.

And the President will no doubt listen to the concerns of a wide range of audiences, including the international community, including the Afghan people and his political support in forming the decision to bring together that cabinet.

Will our advice to the government change in light of the recent announcement of the cabinet? Absolutely not. We want to see more reform-oriented ministers in that cabinet. Those are the types of cabinet ministers that we would like to work with. That advice to the president and to the government remains the same.

OCHA: There is no doubt that there is a large number of the population that are dependent on humanitarian assistance, and the continuity of that assistance is crucial. To be able to provide assistance, we need a security environment that allows us to operate and we need the resources to be able to provide assistance.

If I can take your question as an opportunity to plea again, to all parties to the conflict to facilitate and protect communities, aid workers and the delivery of humanitarian assistance, we will continue to do our role of trying to mobilize resources, but we need the cooperation of all parties to the conflict.

NOORIN TV [translated from Dari]: As you witnessed last week, the media family witnessed a violent attack by security officials and this attack was, of course, condemned by media organizations, media advocate organizations as well as others. I would like to know UNAMA's position on that.

UNAMA: I am not quite clear on the incident that you are referring to. But, generally speaking, UNAMA and the UN has been one of the biggest and strongest advocates for press freedom in Afghanistan in recent years, and our position is perfectly clear.

We believe the media should be allowed the freedom to operate within the Constitution of this country. The Constitution of this country guarantees press freedom, and journalists need to be allowed to conduct their work in a peaceful

manner without harassment from any party to this conflict, and this is the position that we have made perfectly clear to the authorities – both privately and publicly – and that remains our position

The development of media in this country, as you well know, has been remarkable in recent years. I believe there are now over 400 media outlets across Afghanistan. And if you look at this region, Afghanistan is a beacon of hope – I can't think of a neighbouring country that has a freer press than Afghanistan does.

And it is imperative that, that progress is protected and respected by all parties to this conflict, and also by the authorities, and that is the point we are making very clear in all of our conversations with all our partners on the ground.

NOOR TV [translated from Dari]: I'm referring to the recently announced cabinet by the President. As we see there are some ministers who used to be in this position in the previous government. I would like to know UNAMA's vision? Whether these ministers will be able to tackle or address the challenges that Afghanistan is facing now?

UNAMA: Your question goes back to comments that I made earlier in the press conference. It's entirely the President's prerogative to choose those people he feels are best able to serve the needs of the Afghan people and deliver the progress that the Afghan people need to see over the coming months and years.

Now, UNAMA and the UN have made it very clear on the type of the people that we need to see to form that new cabinet. However, we must bear in mind that this is a proposed cabinet list at the moment. As we speak, this cabinet list is being debated by the Wolesi Jirga and we must allow those deliberations to continue and the Afghan people and the Afghan parliament will decide whether those people are best suited to serve the Afghan people.

It is only right and proper that we allow the Afghan parliament to decide whether those cabinet ministers are able to serve those needs and it would be wrong for the UN to pre-empt those deliberations by the Afghan parliament.

More important than our opinion is the Afghan people's opinion and the Afghan parliament's opinion, so let's see what they have to say over the coming days.

PAJHWOK [translated from Dari]: Given the appeal that has been requested – if this money has not been received for the most needy people, don't you think that there will be a human catastrophe at the end?

OCHA: There is no doubt (that) if we do not receive the amount that is needed that there will be consequences. In consultation with the partners, we will try to prioritize the money that we will receive in order to minimize the impact on communities.

The UN, as a result of experience, have created a system, where if there isn't sufficient money to help everyone, (there is) a reserve fund that we can ask from headquarters to meet most urgent needs.

Our concern is that the continuation in insecurity, lack of investment in basic infrastructure and services to people will slowly erode the people's ability to cope with future problems. Therefore, every effort will be made to raise the funds and deliver services to the people.

ARIANA TV [translated from Dari]: My question has two parts and the first one is addressed to Aleem Siddique. We are approaching the end of 2009. It was said when Special Representative Kai Eide took office that he would solve many of the problems because of his talents. But we are still facing insecurity, poverty and violence. Please tell us about your achievements and challenges during 2009.

The second part of my question is addressed to Mr Wael Haj-Ibrahim. Do you spend the donations, through governmental channels or through the UN channels? And with both channels are you concerned about corruption?

UNAMA: I could speak on for hours in answer to that question, so you really have to narrow that down for me if I am not going to keep you in this room for the whole day! So let's speak after the press conference on that. Meantime let's talk about the pressing issue of the day which is humanitarian affairs and I'll hand over to Wael on that.

OCHA: The money we are asking for is a part of the Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) that the UN in partnership with the NGOs, the humanitarian bodies and appropriate bodies of the Government has put together.

This amount has to be entirely spent by the UN system and the partner NGOs because our mandate is to make sure that we find the fastest way to deliver assistance to people and that is through working in difficult areas with the communities. As mentioned earlier, corruption is everyone's concern and it should be dealt with on all levels. Whether it is at a community level or it is at the local official level or it is at a central level or at a UN level, it's a concern for all of us. And we all have to play a role in resolving it rather than just continue to talk about it as an abstract and pointing the finger at a particular individual or institution. It's a problem that we all face and we all have to deal with it.

TOLO [translated from Dari]: You mentioned about the lack of reaching people due to corruption. I would like to know if this corruption is within the Government or within the UN system.

OCHA: You do not have easy questions do you? Let me qualify: I said corruption is hindering our ability to reach all people. To be particularly honest, I think there's corruption at all levels. There are some at the level of official institutions, some within the UN and at the community levels. I think it is a part of human nature to take advantage of the resources that are at your disposal. But what is more important is to have the commitment to combat it. The UN has systems in place to make sure we're accountable to the community to the Government and to the donors. We continue to work with the community leadership to try to address the corruption issues to make sure that the assistance gets delivered to the people where they need it. With respect to the broader corruption issue I think that there are enough politicians to talk about it that I don't have to add anything to.

KILLID RADIO [translated from Pashto]: The question is focused on the regional aspect of humanitarian assistance. I just want to know if you have categorized those vulnerable regions and how many of these regions have received assistance? How much more assistance is needed to be delivered to vulnerable regions and which agencies or NGOs have assisted you in the preparation of the winter programme? Could you name those agencies?

OCHA: There is no doubt where there is conflict it is difficult for us to be able to reach and to deliver assistance to the people. In general we can say the south and south-east are more difficult to serve than other areas. We are working with a number of partners to deliver it. I think for safety reasons I don't think it is appropriate to mention in public their name and their location. If you would like more details, we can chat after this.
