

UNAMA YEAR IN REVIEW 2009

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Website: www.unama.unmissions.org

Compiled by the Strategic
Communication and Spokespersons Unit
Kabul, Afghanistan



January - December 2009

2009 – UNAMA Year in Review

As the year draws to a close UNAMA reviews the year in Afghanistan with a series of articles looking back on the twelve months of 2009.

Of the seven years that the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has been in existence, 2009 would probably qualify as the most difficult yet.

As a political mission mandated to provide political and strategic advice for the peace process, and to help the Government implement the 2006 Afghanistan Compact, UNAMA and its leadership in 2009 faced a crucible of purpose and resolve through the challenges that were to confront it in the months to come.

Undeterred by these enormous events, the Mission has continued to cleave to its principles and to serve the people of Afghanistan.

Amidst a worsening security situation in Afghanistan and the rising number of civilian casualties, which stood at 1,013 deaths for the first six months of 2009 – up by 24 per cent since last year – the Afghan authorities and the international community began preparations for the presidential and provincial council elections.

While the elections were Afghan-led and organized, the international community provided funding and technical support through the UN's elections support project UNDP/ELECT, the international military forces supported Afghan security institutions. UNAMA mobilized and coordinated the international support, providing a crucial link between the international community and Afghans on the ground.

In the run-up to the polling day on 20 August, doubts were raised about how many polling centres could actually be opened. Would anti-government elements act upon their repeated threats to disrupt the process? How much fraud would occur? And how many voters would turn out to cast their votes?

There were achievements on Election Day: approximately 6,200 polling centres opened and stringent security apparatus across the country prevented any major attack although, by government estimates, 73 incidents took place country-wide on 20 August. An initial official figure put the turnout at 39 percent of registered voters.

Despite implementing measures as well as processes, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) was unable to prevent widespread fraud. The international community and UNAMA were chastised by the media for being incapable of stopping fraud, although it was not in their mandate to do so.

The mission's reputation suffered a further blow, after the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Kai Eide, was accused by his deputy Peter Galbraith of allowing so-called 'ghost polling' stations in the south of the country to exist on Election Day.

Just days before a run-off election was scheduled terror struck the UN when five staff members were killed in a dawn attack by gunmen, who stormed a guesthouse in Kabul. Survivors and eyewitnesses of the attack have recounted stories of heroism by UN security officers Louis Maxwell and Lawrence Mefful who were killed while saving many lives.

Yet 2009 was also a year of some achievement. While the presidential elections were far from perfect, SRSG Eide had emphasized before the first ballot was cast, that this was "the most difficult and complex election" he had seen. Afghanistan's was a fledgling democracy plagued with insecurity, poor infrastructure and low literacy levels. However, 4.5 million people registered for new voting cards. Men and women and first-time voters came out and voted – even in the embattled south – where they defied the Taliban's threats, bombs, and bullets.



The public debates between candidates and the discourse in the media were robust and civil. Progress was being made by a maturing democratic state. As for fraud, although the country's election body was unable to prevent it, the process was followed, and the mechanisms to detect it worked successfully when the Electoral Complaints Commission threw out 18 per cent of total votes.

In welcoming the IEC's decision to forego a run-off in the presidential race on 2 November, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said: "The United Nations remains committed to providing every support and assistance to the new Government in helping to push forward progress for all peoples of Afghanistan."

This was also the third year where UNAMA spearheaded efforts during a month-long campaign leading up to International Peace Day on 21 September. The campaign not only encouraged civil society to participate in promoting the urgent need for peace in Afghanistan, but also directly led to a substantial drop in security incidents (similar to the 70 per cent fall in 2008 on Peace Day), after pro-government forces declared a 24-hour ceasefire. The Taliban also allowed health workers access to insecure areas by agreeing to support a Peace Day polio immunisation drive.

UNAMA's efforts toward improving the situation in detention centres such as Bagram air base also moved forward in November, when the US military inaugurated a new prison, replacing the existing facility with one that was to provide detainees with improved living conditions and reintegration programmes.

As coordinator of the humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, UNAMA also launched a US\$ 604 million humanitarian action plan to benefit the country's most vulnerable.

The year 2009 in Afghanistan may eventually be seen as climactic, when progress and mistakes were made; and communities were empowered and lessons learnt through the historic elections in August.

The UN in 2010 now faces an opportunity to address these challenges. A high-level international conference to be held in late January in London was to provide an opportunity for the international community to set that agenda, with their Afghan partners.

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA

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UNAMA Year in Review January 2009: UN urges support for agriculture and poppy eradication

The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Kai Eide, began the year urging strong support for agriculture and big infrastructure in Afghanistan.

At a media conference in Kabul on 13 January, Mr Eide, alongside the Minister of Agriculture Muhammad Asif Rahimi and Canada's Minister for International Cooperation Beverley Oda, emphasized that such assistance was essential. Earlier, the Government of Canada contributed 14 million Canadian dollars towards Afghanistan's humanitarian needs in the winter, on top of existing programmes for national and local development.

The Special Representative also took the opportunity to announce that a joint Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) involving the Government and donors and covering some US\$ 600 million in relief projects would be launched within weeks.

Since 2002 Afghanistan's agriculture sector has received relatively little investment and attention, but the Paris Conference of June 2008 made agriculture a priority area for the Government of Afghanistan and its international partners.

Mr Eide also addressed Afghanistan's troublesome drug problem early on in 2009 by urging Afghans to take the lead on poppy elimination. Flanked by Afghan cabinet ministers and governors at a workshop on sustainable poppy elimination, Mr Eide asked for efforts to continue against poppy cultivation and praised poppy-free provinces.

He said that although progress had been made with the support of the international community, Afghanistan still produces "the largest illegal crop on earth today."

"It is unreasonable to expect the international community to maintain or increase its support unless Afghans take the lead in ending this contradiction," he added.

The Special Representative also pledged to ensure adequate resources were available.

Progress was also made on mine-clearing in Afghanistan. According to a senior official, more than 82,000 anti-personnel mines were cleared in Afghanistan in 2008. However, Dr Haider Reza, the Programme Director of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), cautioned that the funding needed to meet the 2013 demining completion goal – around US \$ 500 million – was threatened by the world economic situation, noting that he would be tapping new donors, such as the Gulf States, in addition to "traditional" ones.

Afghanistan is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, and more than four million Afghans are living in mine-contaminated areas.

According to the Ottawa Convention on landmines, however, Afghanistan must be completely cleared of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs) by 2013, and the Afghanistan Compact calls for 70 per cent of explosive infested land to be cleared by 2011.

MACCA estimates that one third of Afghanistan's territory still needs to be cleared by the 2013 deadline. Dr Reza said he felt the goal was achievable.



As part of its development agenda, UNICEF announced it was building 12 new schools in Baghlan province in the north of which would benefit more than 12,000 students. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) also donated 60 used computers to the Afghanistan Women and Children's Rights Association for the benefit of girls' schools around Kunduz in north-eastern Afghanistan.

Meantime, on the political front, as voter registration entered its fourth and final phase in the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, and Uruzgan, the country's Independent Election Commission declared that the presidential and provincial elections would be held on 20 August.

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA



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UNAMA Year in Review February 2009: Secretary-General visits Afghanistan

The United Nations and its partners launched the Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) for Afghanistan in February and appealed for US\$ 604 million to help meet the needs of Afghans made vulnerable by natural disasters, lack of access to basic social services, increasing food insecurity and the worsening security situation.

About US\$ 354 million of the appeal has been directed towards food aid, while almost US\$ 100 million will be used to rid Afghanistan of landmines. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes told reporters in Geneva, where the HAP was launched.

UNAMA also released its annual report (for 2008) on the Situation of Civilians in Armed Conflicts in February. This report, which was compiled by the Mission's Human Rights Unit, drew on extensive, independent, and impartial monitoring and investigation of incidents involving the loss of life or injury to civilians in conflict zones.

According to the Report, in 2008, UNAMA recorded a total of 2,118 civilian casualties, which was 40 per cent higher than the previous year.

"This disquieting pattern demands that the parties to the conflict take all necessary measures to avoid the killing of civilians," the report observed.

Of the 2,118 civilians killed, anti-government elements (AGEs) were responsible for 55 per cent of the casualties while pro-government forces were responsible for 39 per cent. The report maintained that a majority of civilian casualties occurred in south Afghanistan. The report also noted that the deteriorating security situation and drastically reduced humanitarian access intensified the challenge for the humanitarian agencies to address the growing needs of vulnerable Afghans.

Meantime, earlier in the month, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited Kabul to demonstrate the UN's strong support for Afghanistan. During the visit, Mr Ban met with President Hamid Karzai and informed him that "for the United Nations, Afghanistan remains a key priority in 2009." The Secretary-General also added he was "determined to see Afghanistan enjoy full democracy, full security and full development."

The UN's ongoing commitment to Afghanistan was backed by a US\$ 27 million working plan signed between the United Nations Children's Fund in Afghanistan and the Ministry of Public Health to support national priorities including immunization, school health and maternal mortality.

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA

UNAMA Year in Review March 2009: UNAMA mandate extended for a further year

The United Nations celebrated International Women's Day on 8 March in Afghanistan. Speaking at a function to mark the occasion, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General Kai Eide urged more women to be appointed to senior positions in the country and for leaders to speak out in support of women.

Around 50 per cent of Afghanistan's estimated population of 26 to 30 million is women. Mr Eide noted that the country cannot ignore half of its population: "For the strengthening of institutions, women are needed. For economic growth, women are needed; competent and educated women, in order to lift this country out of poverty."

Secretary-General Ban-Ki-moon also underscored the UN's commitment against violence and harassment of women. "Violence against women cannot be tolerated, in any form, in any circumstance, by any political leader or any government. The time to change is now. Let our voices be heard," he said.

Two major human rights reports were also released in March. Earlier, the annual report on Afghanistan of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was presented to the Human Rights Council. The report observed that "Afghans have continued to suffer significant rights deficits that pose serious challenges to the enjoyment of their human rights and to the country's long term prospects for peace, stability, democracy, development and the rule of law."

The report further noted the rise in the number of civilian casualties and asked anti-government elements and pro-government forces to ensure greater respect for the protection of civilians, including women and children.

Another report on arbitrary detention was released by UNAMA and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights which found that Afghans are often detained without lawful reason and in many instances detainees do not enjoy basic rights that are enshrined in Afghanistan's Constitution.

The report also recommended changes to laws, policy and operating procedures

The Secretary-General Ban released his Report on Afghanistan in March, which acknowledged that the Government and people of Afghanistan, as well as international partners, faced a critical test as they prepared to hold credible Presidential and Provincial elections in August.

While there are reasons to believe that security in Afghanistan may worsen, there are also some reasons for optimism, Mr Ban stated referring to the situation in the country. Despite the reports of violence and instability, there are also some key areas of progress that are "neither accidental nor negligible" and should not be overlooked, he said. These include strengthening Afghanistan's own security services and efforts to lower poppy production.

The Special Representative Kai Eide, too, gave his report to the UN Security Council, where he emphasized that although international priorities in Afghanistan, including security and institution-building remained valid, adequate resources and political will was lacking.

While expressing hope on the international conference on Afghanistan to be held in Hague at the end of March, Mr Eide also outlined some of the positive developments in Afghanistan. He said that the Afghan Government is "today better and more competent than ever before." He added that economic ministries are working in a more coherent way, comprehensive police reform is underway and that a national agricultural strategy was ready to be launched.

Meantime, the Security Council extended UNAMA's mandate until March 2010.

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UNAMA Year in Review April 2009: UN opposes Shi'a family law

The United Nations called on President Karzai to abolish the controversial family law applying to the country's minority Shi'a community.

"I want to take this opportunity again, the laws which were taken in Afghanistan, I would urge again that the President of Afghanistan should abolish these laws which severely infringe on the basic human rights of women," Mr Ban told an informal session of the UN's General Assembly in April.

Earlier, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay also criticized the law and asked for it to be repealed. That such a law has been passed in 2009 targeting women in this manner is "extraordinary, reprehensible and reminiscent of the decrees made by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s," she stressed.

Not yet published, the law, which was passed by the two houses of Afghanistan's parliament before being reportedly signed by President Karzai in March, regulated the personal status of Shi'a community members, including relations between men and women, divorce and property rights.

It reportedly denied Afghan Shi'a women the right to leave their homes except for 'legitimate' purposes; forbade them from working or receiving education without their husbands' express permission; weakened mothers' rights in the event of a divorce; and made it impossible for wives to inherit houses and land from their husbands, even if husbands could inherit property from their wives.

Meantime, the World Food Programme (WFP) said it would help nine million Afghans in the year at a press conference to reveal its vision for 2009. The Agency also announced it distributed 21,000 tons of food to more than 1.5 million people in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan in March.

There were other efforts undertaken by other UN agencies to contribute to Afghanistan's food security. Not to be left behind, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), along with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock began to implement a US\$ 2 million project in the north-eastern province of Baghlan to help poor Afghan farmers to become self-sufficient.

As a part of the project, 6,600 fruit trees, including almond, apricot, peach and plum were distributed in over 100 gardens covering 110 acres of farming land.

FAO also announced a dairy project that boosted that boosted the incomes of 1,600 Afghan families as much as five-fold.

The FAO dairy initiative in the capital, Kabul and the four provinces of Logar, Wardak, Mazar and Kunduz, helped increase family incomes from US\$ 130 to US\$ 650 a year. Further, women do the bulk of the work for the scheme and keep 95 per cent of the money.

The initiative started in 2003 and focuses on integrated elements such as improved fodder, access to artificial insemination and improved veterinary services. "Starting from scratch, we helped [farmers] increase their milk production to 10,000 litres a day," said FAO Dairy Officer Tony Bennett.

The Global Action Week for Education was also celebrated in April. On this occasion, the UN called for serious action to improve literacy rates in Afghanistan, one of the most illiterate countries in the world.

"UNESCO and UNICEF are calling on all stakeholders in Afghanistan to take serious action towards overcoming challenges to improve literacy in the country," said Shigeru Aoyagi, UNESCO's country representative.

According to statistics, only 34 per cent of the population in Afghanistan is literate with one out of every two men and four out of five women aged 15 or above cannot read or write. Approximately 34 per cent of the population is literate.

In fact, the UN's Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Kai Eide, also called for new and more strategic thinking about the country's education needs. He added that Afghanistan's economic and social development required the Afghan government and the international community to unite behind a broad and long-term educational strategy.

April was also the month when Afghanistan's first HIV treatment centre opened at Kabul's Infectious Disease Hospital.

The HIV treatment centre, which is technically and financially supported by the World Health Organization (WHO), has medicines for one-year treatment of 30 HIV-positive patients.

Meantime, 1,000 Afghan returnees from two camps in Nangahar province were given the opportunity and resources to build their own houses as a result of action taken by the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) shelter project

Sayed Arif, was one of the returnees who received his land plot and material, and began constructing his new home. "My family lived for one year in a tent and for one year with relatives. But now, after completion of a survey, I will receive construction materials," he said.

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UNAMA Year in Review May 2009: UN expresses concern on civilian casualties

Various United Nations agencies and their partners began assisting thousands of victims of the flash floods that ravaged five provinces of Afghanistan in April and May.

Among the Agencies providing emergency food assistance was the World Food Programme (WFP), which delivered food rations to over 25,000 people affected by flooding in the north, north-east, and west Afghanistan. In addition, WFP also approved projects that would rebuild damaged infrastructure through projects including Food For Work.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that at least 15 people lost their lives and over a dozen of others were injured by floods in Herat, Badakhshan, Parwan, Faryab and Takhar provinces. More than 2,000 families were affected by the floods in Herat, while about 800 families were hit in Badghis province and hundreds more in several other provinces.

WFP also announced it assisted more than 1.6 million across Afghanistan with nearly 19,000 tons of food in the month of April, including 525,000 people affected by natural disasters, IDPs, and high food prices.

World Press Freedom Day was also celebrated in May with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UNESCO urging the government, electoral candidates and the media to join together to protect press freedom.

UNAMA and UNESCO also urged that the "Kabul Declaration on Freedom of Expression in Afghanistan", which was developed and endorsed by a multi-stakeholder group of media outlets, civil society, and government officials to be swiftly put into force, amid concerns about the situation of freedom of expression in Afghanistan.

Meantime, the UN's Special Representative to Afghanistan Kai Eide expressed serious concern over reports of civilian casualties that took place in the western province of Farah on 4 May.

Some media reports suggested that up to 100 civilians, including women and children, were killed in air strikes carried out by United States and coalition forces against Taliban fighters.

With presidential and provincial elections just months away, the UN's envoy Mr Eide joined Afghanistan's human rights commission in asking all Afghans, including those who opposed the Government, to take part in the process scheduled for August.

"I believe that the opposition should know that those who wish to take part in the elections and respect the Constitution should have an open door to do that," Mr Eide told reporters at a news conference in Kabul.

"I don't underestimate the difficulties, but I think it is important to stretch out a hand and say it is better we compete at the ballot boxes than to fight in the battlefield," he added.



In late May, Mr Eide addressed the NATO Parliamentary Assembly session in Norway, where he told delegates that the international presence was yielding results.

The Special Representative also highlighted some improvements in Afghanistan, including the efforts of the Interior Ministry and the Afghan National Army, the reinvigoration of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the increased revenue collection by the Ministry of Finance.

On poppy cultivation Mr Eide said the prospects for 2009 show there will be a "significant decrease" in production and "a further increase of poppy free provinces."

Meantime, UNAMA opened two new offices in the north and south, in Sar-i-Pul and Tirin Kot, respectively, to promote development across the country. This brought the tally of offices to 20 in Afghanistan.

Finally, in May, Deputy Special Representative Chris Alexander left Afghanistan after spending six years in the country. He joined the Mission in 2005 and was previously Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan.

Speaking on his last day in Kabul, Mr Alexander said his message to the people of Afghanistan was to "work with us. The UN certainly believes in this. And work with the international community on a partnership of mutual accountability where Afghans lead, but in providing support where the international community has the right to hold Afghans accountable."

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA



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UNAMA Year in Review June 2009: Preparations in full swing for August elections and Afghanistan sees its best wheat harvest

Campaigning for the presidential and provincial polls kicked off on 16 June 2009, with 41 presidential hopefuls and over 3,000 provincial candidates competing for the 20 August elections.

On the eve of the campaign, the top United Nations official in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, stressed the need to ensure that the elections would be credible and their results accepted by all, noting that the candidates could contribute by campaigning with "dignity and fairness."

"It is the shared responsibility of all candidates to ensure that these elections strengthen Afghanistan's democratic institutions and people's confidence in the democratic process," Mr Eide noted in a statement issued in Kabul.

As thousands of colourful posters and banners lined the streets of towns and cities across Afghanistan, the Independent Election Commission (IEC), the body constitutionally assigned to manage the first Afghan-led elections, and the international community, also, began their own preparations for the forthcoming polls.

The IEC, for instance, commenced a huge country-wide voter education campaign with more than 1,600 civic educators speaking to groups of people about the election. A special elections telephone hotline that was set up grew in popularity, receiving as many as 25,000 calls a week from a questioning electorate.

The UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) also began training its staff and sent out 76 provincial complaints officers into the 34 provinces of Afghanistan to start the process of receiving, reviewing and adjudicating on complaints.

Not to be left behind, the Media Commission, composed of five members started keeping a watchful eye on televisions, radio stations, and newspapers everywhere, as they covered the August polls.

With the elections only two months away, training for election observer groups also commenced in June. The Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), one of the biggest organizations in the country observing the elections was supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP/ELECT), employed about 8,000 people.

"We will be able to cover about 70 per cent of all polling stations," said FEFA's Jandad Spinghar.

A major UNDP/ELECT and European Union Police Mission (EUPOL) programme to train 35,000 police officers in time for the elections also got underway, with officers being readied to tackle security threats and to provide the necessary cover to enable voters to come out confidently and cast their ballots.

While election preparations were in full swing, progress was being made in other areas as well. The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) announced Afghanistan was seeing its best wheat harvest in 32 years.

According to MAIL/FAO estimates, overall cereal production in 2009 would rise to 6.3 million tons in 2009, up by 74 per cent from last year. Of this, wheat would account for a majority of the produce, with yield up by 63 per cent.



"The main reason for this year's bumper harvest is the heavy rainfall in March and April," said Asif Rahimi, the Minister of Agriculture.

The United Nations also marked World Refugee Day on 20 June. This day has great importance for Afghanistan, which is the world's largest returnee-receiving country. Since 2002, more than 4.36 million refugees have come back to Afghanistan with the assistance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Afghans have been returning from Iran and Pakistan since the fall of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001.

"In December, this year, it will be 30 years since the start of the Afghan refugee crisis. It is among the most complex and protracted of all refugee situations, except the Palestinian refugees," said Nader Farhad, UNHCR's Spokesperson in Kabul.

Meantime, the new Deputy-Representative of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Peter Galbraith, arrived in Afghanistan to lead UNAMA's political arm. Mr Galbraith, who was the first US Ambassador to Croatia in the 1990s, took over from Canadian diplomat Chris Alexander.

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA



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UNAMA Year in Review July 2009: Election preparations and an Afghan climbing record

July was election-preparation month for Afghanistan, with UN envoy Kai Eide calling for a stop to the interference by officials in the electoral process, and urging Afghans to participate in the upcoming 20 August elections.

The UN Security Council stressed the need for free, fair and secure Afghan polls.

Mr Eide visited the warehouse of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) to lend his support to the huge logistical operation in preparing for the elections.

Two Afghan climbers reached the top of the country's highest peak, Mount Noshaq, on 19 July; and Afghan artists organized the Fourth Kabul International Documentary and Short Film Festival which screened 50 films, 27 of them Afghan. Organizers said both events were meant to show the world that there is more to Afghanistan than just the security concerns, explosions and the drugs trade that the West usually hears about.

And as a sign of the country's growing adherence to democratic practices, Kabul witnessed the first-ever television debate between two presidential candidates broadcast over Tolo TV on 23 July. Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Dr Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai debated for two hours while incumbent President Hamid Karzai declined the debate invitation.

The UN envoy delved on five other important Afghan issues: urging donors to help manage Afghanistan's water resources and calling for discussions on the issue with Afghanistan's bordering countries; proposing a permanent and predictable greening of Afghanistan; urging Afghans to challenge the prevailing violence against women; calling on donors to back Afghanistan's own vision for a civilian 'surge,' telling some 30 donors and international organizations that their support had to be aligned behind the needs identified by the Afghan people and their own Government; and challenging the international community, including the United Nations, to increase the value of local procurement by 10 per cent within a year.

UNAMA was also busy with preparations for Peace Day some two months away, organizing a huge campaign under the theme "What are you doing for Peace?"

On 7 July, Mr Eide tackled the election process and stressed that interference by officials in the electoral process must stop. "Unfortunately, we have seen an increasing tendency over the last few weeks of greater interference of some government officials, governors in particular, but there have been others including high officials... – that is the kind of interference that must come to a stop," said Mr Eide at a press conference unveiling the first AIHRC-UNAMA Joint Political Rights Monitoring Report.



"It is interference not only in favour of one candidate but there has been interference in favour of several candidates and – I repeat – that is an interference that must come to an end," Mr Eide warned.

By 13 July, with the elections a little more than a month away and with a major military offensive underway, Mr Eide released an opinion editorial on Afghanistan's critical elections, noting that "the current situation in Afghanistan is the most complex we have experienced for many years."

UN envoy Kai Eide appealed to Afghans to "use the ballot, not the bullet" in choosing their next set of leaders.

"We appeal to those who use the bullet to make use of the ballot," said Mr Eide in his 13 July opinion editorial where he called on all Afghan citizens – "without any exception" – to take part in the election process. "Such participation is essential to the legitimacy of the election results and to the future strength of democratically elected institutions," he stressed.

In his editorial titled "Afghanistan's critical elections," Eide stressed that the elections for the country's next president and provincial council members is not just about choosing the country's future leaders but more about "legitimacy of leadership."

At mid-month, the UN Security Council joined in, stressing the need for "free, fair, transparent, credible, secure and inclusive" elections.

The Council called on the Afghan people "to exercise their vote in this historic opportunity for all Afghans to make their voices heard"; and stressed the importance of a secure environment in which to conduct elections, condemning groups who resort to violence to obstruct the electoral process.

UNAMA issued a set of guidelines for the conduct of all those who are engaged in the elections – government officials, candidates, supporters, electoral officials and media and international representatives – related to the election campaign, the election day and the immediate post-election day process.

Amidst all these on 27 July, the UN offices in Herat in western Afghanistan were targeted by militant rocket fire. "Some seven rockets were fired last night in a deliberate attack against the UN, with two of the missiles landing inside the compound," UNAMA said in the statement condemning the attack.

"Thankfully, no UN staff were harmed or otherwise injured in this attack and our offices remain open," added UNAMA.

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA

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UNAMA Year in Review August 2009: Afghanistan holds much-awaited elections

Finally, the month of the 20 August elections with 41 aspirants running for the post of president and more than 3,000 candidates in the fray for the provincial council polls.

The head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kai Eide, started August by urging election calm and calling for anti-fraud measures and by testing himself the indelible ink to be used.

Condemning the violent attacks on presidential hopefuls, Mr Eide asked all parties to instead concentrate on political debate, noting the country had never "witnessed such a vibrant political debate in this country, and we have never seen such involvement by the public, as we have seen during these few weeks."

"There has been much talk about fraud but there are a number of measures set in place to avoid fraud on Election Day, and these measures are based on international best practices to avoid fraud and to detect fraud... So let me repeat, everything is being done in order to detect irregularities," assured the UN envoy.

"The [Independent] Election Commission (IEC), security institutions and the United Nations are doing whatever can be done to make sure that a maximum number of polling stations are open on polling day," added Mr Eide who reiterated: "It is tremendously important that we are able to open as many centres as possible, so that the elections are open to all Afghans."

Two days before the elections, Mr Eide lamented that insecurity was impacting on the preparations for the Afghan polls, voicing his concern that insecurity will affect voter turn-out.

"I am concerned that security will affect the turnout on voting day. So my appeal to everybody is don't block the road for Afghans, male or female who want to do what the Constitution entitles that person to do," Mr. Eide appealed at a news conference in Kabul.

The UN envoy also called on all groups threatening violence in Afghanistan on Election Day to allow their fellow Afghans to choose their future leader.

Tragically on the same day, 18 August, two UNAMA national staff members were killed following an attack on a military convoy on the Jalalabad Road in Kabul.

The UN Secretary-General, the Security Council and UNAMA condemned the attack.

On Election Day, 20 August, after the close of voting stations nationwide, Mr Ban congratulated the Afghan people on "largely peaceful polls," pointing out in a statement that "by exercising their constitutional right to vote, the Afghan people have demonstrated again their desire for stability and development in their country."

The Secretary-General also commended the IEC and all other Afghan institutions and international stakeholders for having supported the electoral process and organizing the elections in an "extremely challenging" environment.



On the same day, the UN Security Council praised the holding of the "historic" Afghan elections and condemned the actions of those who sought to disrupt the 20 August polls.

Violence again erupted five days after the elections, with at least 41 civilians dead and over 80 others wounded in a suicide truck bomb attack in a residential area in Kandahar.

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UNAMA Year in Review September 2009: Peace Day 2009 campaign for Afghanistan

After feverish preparations, Afghanistan celebrated Peace Day 2009 with the release of peace doves, the flying of kites, and other related activities around the holy time of Eid.

UN agencies all over Afghanistan led the preparations for various Peace-related programmes that were held around 21 September – the UN-declared International Day of Peace since 2001.

On the days leading to the much-prepared-for international celebration of Peace – as the 20 August election results were still being tallied – the UN's Special Representative in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, called on the Afghan polling bodies to be vigilant about irregularities.

"In light of the concerns that have arisen over irregularities, I am calling today on the IEC (Independent Election Commission) and the ECC (Electoral Complaints Commission) to redouble their efforts to ensure full rigour in their work at every stage. This includes excluding from the preliminary count results from ballot boxes where there is evidence of irregularities.

"The integrity of these elections is of the utmost importance to Afghanistan and to its international partners. I look to both the IEC and ECC to carry out their mandated work to high standards and to ensure that the final outcome faithfully reflects the will of Afghanistan's voters," said Mr Eide in his 8 September statement.

On 14 September, one week before Peace Day, the United Nations and Afghan NGOs called for a ceasefire among all armed groups in Afghanistan on 21 September.

Two days later, the UN's top envoy in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, joined representatives from UN agencies in Afghanistan in releasing peace doves ahead of Peace Day. On the same day, Mr Eide called for a stop to the escalating conflict in the country, hopefully starting with the proposed 21 September ceasefire.

"I appeal to all those who fight, to demonstrate on that one day – 21 September – that there is a readiness to seek peace, and to do that by stopping the fighting across the country, at least on that one day," urged the head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

He enthused that the level of hostilities dropped by 70 per cent on Peace Day a year before: "That was an achievement! I would like us to reach at least that figure this year. This is not a political act. First of all, this is an act of humanity. It is an act of respect to the Afghan people and I appeal to all to demonstrate that respect for the Afghan people and for those who suffer from the conflict."

But the UN envoy stressed that it is the Afghans themselves who have to stop fighting against each other: "The burden of bringing the conflict to a halt is, of course, first of all on the Afghans – they must find their way to bring peace to their country, and we must be there to support them and that is why the United Nations is here."

"Stop the fighting on 21 September and demonstrate that there is a readiness from all of us to move into a peace process," reiterated Mr Eide who lamented that "since we last marked Peace Day, the conflict in the country has intensified, and more and more have suffered – more and more people have felt the need for peace to be re-established in the country.

"And when you see all this suffering – not only in the south or the east, but increasingly in other parts of the country, I think we all see one thing: This must come to a stop. I repeat: It must come to a stop."

On the same day of the UN's dove-release ceremonies, President Hamid Karzai ordered a ceasefire on Peace Day.

In a statement, Mr Karzai said: "I order every member of the Afghan Armed Forces not to resort to force on this day, except when attacked."

President Karzai also called on "international forces, stationed in Afghanistan, not to resort to force, but for defensive reasons. Taking this opportunity, I would also call on those who are fighting against our country, for whatever reason, to cease fire in honour of this day."

A year ago in 2008, a similar ceasefire was declared by the Afghan government and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Taliban in 2008.

By the end of September, the latest report on Afghanistan was published by the UN Secretary-General. "The level of alleged electoral irregularities has generated significant political turbulence leading to fears of a return to violence when election results are announced," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wrote.

"When the entire electoral process is completed, it will be of critical importance for the results to be accepted by all so that the election of Afghanistan's future president can be certified and a new Government can be formed," added the UN chief.

Mr Ban echoed his envoy's Afghan ownership stance: "The Government must be enabled and determined to assume all the responsibilities that belong to a sovereign State... The international community, for its part, must play a role that is clearly one of support."

At UN HQ on 28 September, Afghan Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta called on the international community to keep supporting Afghanistan despite the election's deficiencies.

Speaking on the 5th day of the General Assembly's 64th Annual General Debate, Spanta stressed: "As with any emerging democracy, undoubtedly, there were (election) irregularities. But one should not assess a young terrorist-inflicted democracy with the criteria of stable, prosperous, and centuries-old democracies."

"This is not a call to condone fraud and irregularities. But in passing judgment, we should be conscious of the context, the process and the full picture, rather than of only one aspect or issue," urged Dr. Spanta, adding that the Afghan people are "rightly fearful of being abandoned once again to lawlessness, extremism, and external interference."

At the end of the month Kai Eide gave his regular briefing to the Security Council when he noted: "This is decision time in Afghanistan and for Afghanistan... A number of critical decisions will be made over the next weeks. Together, they will determine the prospects for success in ending a conflict that has become more intense over the last months."

By Aurora V. Alambra, UNAMA

UNAMA YEAR IN REVIEW 2009

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

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UNAMA Year in Review October 2009: UN mourns five staff killed in Kabul attack

The end of October brought the biggest shock of the year to the UN Mission in Afghanistan when five international staff were killed in a suicide attack on a Kabul guesthouse on 28 October.

"I am deeply shocked and outraged by the cowardly attack on a guest house in central Kabul today, which killed five UN staff and injured a number of others," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as he condemned "in the strongest possible terms the despicable and brutal killing for which the Taliban has claimed responsibility in an apparent effort to disrupt the second round of the presidential election."

Expressing his deepest condolences to the families and friends of the victims "who were viciously killed as they sought to serve the people of Afghanistan," the UN chief nonetheless vowed that the UN "remains committed to continue its work in the country as the Afghan people strive for a better future."

Only 20 days earlier on 8 October, a car bomb had exploded outside the Indian Embassy in Kabul, killing 17 people and injuring at least 80 others. It was the fifth such explosion in the Afghan capital since the election period in August, and the second such attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul in the past two years.

UN headquarters expressed its alarm, with Mr Ban calling it a "senseless attack" while the UN Security Council "reiterated their serious concern at the threats posed by the Taliban, Al-Qaida, and illegal armed groups to the local population, national security forces, international military and international assistance efforts in Afghanistan."

The month began with the 5 October kick-off of the elections audit process by the Afghan government's Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC). Set to be audited were 358 suspicious ballot boxes earlier randomly picked in the presence of UNAMA head Kai Eide and candidates' representatives and election-monitoring groups, both national and international.

The audit results would determine whether or not there was need for a run-off election between the two leading presidential contenders. The Afghan Constitution requires the winning presidential candidate to garner at least 50 per cent of the votes.

The audit process was conducted under the eagle eyes of the candidates' representatives at 10 each for the presidential frontrunners, with each camp expressing satisfaction with the process.

Ahmad Zia Kechkenni, head of Mr Abdullah's delegation, said the campaign was "satisfied with the transparency of the level of random sampling... Everything is happening in front of our eyes. We have some minor concerns about access of information – and we have told the IEC about it."

Arsala Jamal, overseeing the audit process on the President's behalf, enthused: "We are happy that the process has begun. It was a bit slow on the first day, but things are speeding up. However, we also have some concerns about the process, such as clerical errors that are taking place, along with others, which we hope the IEC and ECC will address."

The international monitors echoed the sentiment. Stefan Coman of the National Democratic Institute said the audit had been "satisfactory" so far but that "as expected, some issues have come up, which are being dealt with."

On 7 October, as the contested ballots were being audited, senior UN officials denied unfounded accusations of favouritism in the Afghan presidential polls, with the UNAMA stressing that the top UN envoy to Afghanistan "only ever sided with electoral institutions in the country's recent presidential ballot, and never with any of the candidates."

On the same day following the deadly Taliban attack on the Indian Embassy right beside the Afghan Ministry of Defence, the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of the 42-country International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The Security Council had earlier established ISAF to help maintain security across the nation following the ousting of the Taliban regime by United States-led forces.

Some two weeks later, on 19 October, UN spokesperson Michele Montas told reporters in New York that the Secretary-General had "urged (Mr.) Karzai to respect the constitutional process, and he was pleased to hear that the President will fully respect the constitutional order."

Earlier that day, the UN-backed ECC submitted its findings to the IEC, and ordered the latter body to invalidate 210 polling stations around the country where the panel found clear and convincing evidence of fraud. "It is for the Independent Electoral Commission to take the orders of the Election Complaints Commission and apply them to the preliminary results and draw a new tally and announce final certified results... If a second round is called for, we need to scrupulously abide by the law."

On 20 October, Afghanistan President Karzai went public about agreeing to a run-off via a Palace press conference. Mr Eide, who was in the said event, said: "For me throughout all these months, there has been one consideration that has been the centre of all my attention and my work and that has been the respect for the Afghan constitution, the legal frameworks and institutions that have been put in place to help move the election process forward – and I look forward to a dignified campaign over the next two weeks between the two candidates and a fair end result to this long election process."

In New York, Mr Ban warmly welcomed Mr Karzai's move. "He (Mr Karzai) has made it clear that the constitutional process must be fully respected... I commend President Karzai for the leadership he has displayed and for his commitment to ensuring full respect for Afghanistan's Constitution and its democratic processes."

On UN Day on 24 October, the UN chief said: "On this United Nations Day and every day throughout the year, the United Nations is at work – for the planet, for jobs, for 'we the peoples.' We deliver more humanitarian aid than anyone -- and to the toughest places."

Also on UN Day in Kabul was launched the US\$ 4 billion UN Development Assistance Framework or UNDAF for Afghanistan. The key document which plans out the four-year development assistance from 2010 to 2013 was prepared by 28 UN agencies in cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan, and focuses on three priority areas: Governance, peace and stability, with emphasis on human resources development/capacity development; agriculture and access to income, which targets rural communities and aims at building marketable skills through vocational training programmes; and health and education.

On 26 October, UNAMA Spokesperson Aleem Siddique said the UN wanted to see a better and cleaner run-off election with less fraud. "We do want to see a better run-off than we saw in the first round. We want to see less fraud in the (7 November) run-off. There will be no let-up on the part of the United Nations in supporting the electoral institutions in this country so we can get the best possible run-off that we can."

In response to the attack on UN staff, Mr Ban appealed to the General Assembly for rapid action on the UN security budget, asking for a supplementary budget of US\$ 50 million, in addition to the proposed US\$ 5 billion regular budget for the 2010-2011 biennium, to better screen and protect access to vulnerable UN locations.

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UNAMA Year in Review November 2009: UN chief meets staff in Kabul and IEC declares Karzai as winner

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon met UN staff in Kabul at the beginning of November to express his sympathy and solidarity, following the deadly attack on a guest house in Kabul that killed five UN staff members and injured nine others.

He said his main goal was to “insist on the security of all staff, Afghan and internationals.”

Furthermore, both Mr Ban and his special envoy to Afghanistan Kai Eide, pledged in the aftermath of the attack that the UN would continue its work in the country.

The Secretary-General also met with President Hamid Karzai and former presidential candidate Dr Abdullah Abdullah, who had announced that he was to withdraw from the second round of Afghanistan’s presidential election that was scheduled for 7 November.

Mr Ban requested President Hamid Karzai to beef up security for UN staff in Afghanistan and also urged the president to ensure good governance, “including the eradication of corruptive practices prevalent in Afghanistan, controlling drug trafficking and forming a unity government with experienced ministers and government officials.”

On the same day, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) declared Hamid Karzai as the winner of the 2009 presidential elections.

The Secretary-General vowed that the United Nations would provide every support and assistance to the new Government and millions of Afghan people as he congratulated Hamid Karzai on his re-election.

He empathized that “the new President must move swiftly to form a Government that is able to command the support of both the Afghan people and the international community.”

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council acknowledged the IEC decision and reiterated their commitment to support Afghanistan on its path towards peace, reconciliation, democracy and reconstruction.

On his inauguration as president for a second term on 19 November, President Karzai detailed a work programme for the new Government, and pledged to fight corruption and to bring increased good governance, security and services to the country.

In light of the 28 October attack against UN staff in Kabul as well as further ongoing threats, the UN announced that it was taking additional steps to reduce risks to its national and international staff serving in Afghanistan.

“We are not talking about pulling out and we are not talking about evacuation,” said Kai Eide, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative in Afghanistan.

“We’re simply doing what we have to, following the tragic event last week to look after our workers in a difficult moment while ensuring that our operations in Afghanistan can continue.”

On 11 November, at a UN Security Council debate on protection of civilians in armed conflict, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, said: “There is an urgent need to improve accountability, including through criminal prosecution as well as redress for victims” in Afghanistan, where the continuing conflict has repeatedly caught civilians in the cross-fire.

Meanwhile, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed Japan’s intention to increase its assistance for Afghanistan to a total of up to US\$ 5 billion over the next five years, and said he hoped other nations will follow suit.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in Afghanistan warned that the H1N1 flu pandemic could affect more people during the looming winter as the disease spreads rapidly in cold weather.

The United Nations also called on all Afghans to take part in the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

On 28 November, the Secretary-General said that the upcoming conferences on Afghanistan in London and Kabul in 2010 would help outline a framework so that Afghans can play a greater role in shaping their own destiny.

As Afghans waited for the president to announce his new Cabinet and for parliament to ratify the names, UNAMA Spokesperson Aleem Siddique said at a press conference at the end of the month that “Afghanistan needs competent cabinet ministers who are able to deliver for the Afghan people. And in this respect the Special Representative, in particular has made it clear that we do need to see more reform-orientated ministers and we need to see technocrat people who are able to deliver public services for the Afghan people.”

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UNAMA Year in Review December: UN envoy calls for transition strategy, agencies deliver aid to vulnerable Afghans

The UN envoy to Afghanistan Kai Eide called for a “transition strategy” in Afghanistan, ahead of a new US plan for the country announced by President Barack Obama at the beginning of December.

Mr Eide said the building up of Afghan institutions was vital to a transition strategy, a process which could ultimately ensure sustainability.

He emphasized more responsibilities should be given to the Afghan authorities and the international community should “get together behind an Afghan programme that is sustainable” in a long-term commitment.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) launched a winterization programme to assist Internally Displaced People and returnees by distributing relief items in Kabul as part of a nationwide programme to help some 200,000 vulnerable Afghans survive the winter.

Statistics reveal that around 400,000 Afghans are seriously affected by natural disasters such as droughts, floods and extreme weather conditions each year.

For the winter, too, UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNHCR, and IOM procured non-food items, while the World Food Programme (WFP) continued with its regular winter programming that includes feeding 863,000 Afghans.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) took the first delivery of 550,000 Tamiflu vaccines, with an additional 1.8 million to arrive by April 2010 while swine flu was expected to increase throughout the country during the winter.

Despite the deteriorating security situation and challenging operating environment for the UN, other UN humanitarian and development activities continued throughout the country.

A new road between Sar-i-Pul and Sosma Qala supported by the Swedish Embassy and implemented by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) was opened at the end of December.

A US\$ 560 million plan to double the number of higher education places was launched in Kabul and US\$ 1 million was contributed by UNESCO and the Government of Italy to develop the capacity of educational radio and television in Afghanistan.

A new vaccine against polio was used for the first time by UNICEF, as a campaign to immunize some three million children got underway.

In other developments, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) made its first visit to Afghan prisoners held by the Taliban and according to a UNODC report the potential export value of Afghanistan's opium dropped 18 per cent in 2009, but the agency cautioned that further progress hinged on rooting out corruption in the South Asian nation.

The head of UNHCR in Afghanistan Ewen MacLeod, stated at a press conference that some 54,000 Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran in 2009 and the key factors to attracting more returnees were an improvement in economic growth and employment opportunities.

Human Rights Day 2009 focused on non-discrimination with the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan Robert Watkins saying: “The most manifest example of discrimination today in Afghanistan is, unquestionably, the “second class” status of the women and girls of this country....We need to confront this issue head on. We need male voices to say that violence against women is neither tolerable nor excusable.”

22 December 2009 marked the eighth anniversary of the inauguration of the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA) following the Bonn Agreement of 2001.

A staff member of the World Food Programme was among the eight people killed in a suicide bomb attack in central Kandahar on 24 December.

As the year ended, UN envoy Kai Eide voiced concerns over the mounting civilian toll and appealed to all of the armed actors “to make every effort to minimize harm to civilians and want to underline the importance of taking all precautionary measures to distinguish between civilians and combatants.”

By Kangying Guo, UNAMA

