



United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

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Press Conference (*near verbatim transcript*)

Guest Speaker: Salvatore Lombardo, UNHCR representative in Afghanistan

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Dr. Nilab Mobarez, UNAMA: Ladies and gentlemen, good morning and welcome to our press briefing. My name is Nilab Mobarez. I am joined this morning by Mr Salvatore Lombardo, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) representative for Afghanistan. Before I hand over to Mr Lombardo I would like to bring you an update from UN agencies.

LANDMINE CLEARANCE IN OCTOBER

Mine and explosive-remnant clearance was conducted in 24 areas of the country during October, allowing some 1.4 million square meters of land to be handed over for housing, grazing, and other activities and benefiting thousands of people.

The work was carried out by the UN Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan, which is working for achievement of the Ottawa Convention benchmarks and in support of peace in Afghanistan.

As well as clearing land, mine risk education was provided for some 100,000 people including refugees who have returned via UNHCR encashment centers.

Afghanistan remains among the most heavily-mined countries in the world. It became a state party to the Ottawa Convention in March 2003 and is aiming to clear all minefields in the country by 2013.

NATIONAL IMMUNIZATION DAYS

Last week saw the conclusion of the latest round of the National Immunization Days led by the Ministry of Public Health with the support of UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The three day campaign targeted around 7.4 million under five children against polio. More than 48,000 health workers fanned out across the country to reach Afghanistan's children.

Twelve cases of polio have been confirmed so far this year of which 10 cases were reported in southern provinces where security remains a challenge and two cases from the eastern provinces.

Some of you may be aware that only four countries in the world including India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Afghanistan still suffer endemic Polio.

We hope that this successful immunization day brings us a step closer to our goal of eradicating polio from Afghanistan.

In a related development, many of you will have heard of significant improvements in child mortality rates.

Over recent years there have sustained efforts by the Government of Afghanistan and UN agencies to train increasing numbers of health workers, vaccinate more children and provide better medical facilities for Afghan mothers and their children.

This has led to a 25 percent drop in the numbers of children under the age of 5 who perish. In 2002, 257 children out of every 1000 did not survive beyond their 5th birthday.

Today this figure has been cut to 191 out of every 1000 children, meaning that the lives of nearly 90,000 Afghan children are saved every year thanks to improvements in healthcare. We welcome this progress and hope that it will continue over the coming years.

BATTLE-AFFECTED FAMILIES IN URUZGAN RECEIVE ESSENTIAL FOOD

Last week the United Nations World Food Programme distributed 190 tons of mixed food for 1400 displaced families in Dihrawud district of Uruzgan and 220 affected families in neighbouring Tirinkot district.

Most of these battle-affected families are reported to be currently living with family and friends.

We continue to assess the situation together with the local authorities, and will keep you updated on developments as progress is made.

SALVATORE LOMBARDO, UNHCR

Good morning everyone and it is a pleasure to be back with you. It is the third time we have met since I have been appointed as the UNHCR representative in Afghanistan. I consider it a positive sign that I am recognising many faces around the room and, as I said in my first meeting with you, I attach great importance to having regular contact with the press and public in Afghanistan.

I would like to take stock with you today, after a very brief presentation, of where we stand in terms of returns of refugees and internally displaced people in Afghanistan. As you know we have just closed [this season's] repatriation from Pakistan and I thought it was the right time to look at how things were this year.

Last time we met, if you remember, was on the eve of a potential crisis, during the closure of the Jalowzai camp [refugee camp in Pakistan].

You may remember some of the concerns we had at that time. Two and half months later I am pleased to report that we have, with the support of Pakistan and the Afghan government, managed to postpone the closure of Jalowzai. If not it could have been a humanitarian crisis.

More than 350,000 [refugees], most from Pakistan and 6,000 from Iran, came back [to Afghanistan] this year. The eastern provinces, mainly Nangarhar, witnessed this year the largest number of returnees coming back. This has provoked certainly in the east quite a lot of problems in absorbing a large population without mentioning also the security problems in some provinces like Kunar.

As you know, through the year we have insisted on the importance of respecting the voluntary character of return and to make sure that returns are made in a gradual manner. We recognise the difficulties of the socio-economic situation in Afghanistan and how difficult it is for the country to absorb a large number of people coming back from Iran and from Pakistan.

A few months ago, in July, we signed the tripartite agreement with Pakistan. It was in my opinion maybe one of the most significant moments in terms of repatriation for 2007, especially as all the parties agreed that all returns should be in a gradual and

voluntary manner. And I think acceptance of this will be important for Pakistan, Afghanistan and ourselves for years to come.

This year confirmed once again the end of the mass returns we have seen in 2002 and 2003. As you probably remember, a large number of Afghans came back in these years. I think what we have seen in 2006 and 2007 is a sort of stabilization of the returns which have been much lower than we have seen in the past.

We expect 2008 to be very similar to 2007 precisely because we do not see a major breakthrough in resolving on the one hand the security hurdles but also the socio-economic situation for those who eventually decide to come back. Hence the importance of continuing in 2008 with gradual and voluntary returns, as with this year.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

BBC: How do you assess the socio-economic conditions for those returnees coming back to Afghanistan?

UNHCR: Each year we publish with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) a report which gives the status of the returnees: how they are doing, what are the problems they are facing when they come back. It's a very good report because it covers thirty provinces [of 34 Afghan provinces]. It covers quite a lot of places where the United Nations does not have access and it also has a very large sample of interviewees, approximately 12,000 returnees are interviewed every year.

Let me highlight four elements that have come out clearly from these interviews. Access to employment remains the greatest preoccupation of those returning to Afghanistan. The issue of land/shelter is also a very prominent issue for returnees and there I would like to say that one of the problems we are experiencing since the closure of camps is the return of large families, families that left Afghanistan 30 years ago and that over time have become much larger and therefore do not see or find upon their return the same economic and social match that they should expect after 30 years. Another issue that might be surprising, but I also see very often during my regular visits to the provinces, is water [the lack of supply]. It still figures very prominently in the needs of those returning, particularly in rural areas. Last but not least one element that also came up in this report is that many of the people coming back are hopeful about the future. This feeling is also mirrored in other reports. If you go to a UNHCR encashment centre and you see the joy of the people who want to come back to Afghanistan regardless of the social and economic circumstances, this is certainly something that has touched all of us [at UNHCR] and is something that is brilliant about the way that the Afghan people see their return.

Good Morning Afghanistan [GMA] : Why have only 6,000 Afghans returned from Iran this year? There have also been reports of deported Afghans, why didn't you count them with registered Afghans returning. At the same time the Afghans who are still in Iran have been treated very badly by the Iranian government, what is UNHCR's position regarding this issue?

UNHCR: What we are seeing, not just in Iran and Pakistan, is a large group of Afghans living in Iran and Pakistan for a very long period of time. I'd say 99 percent of Afghans living in neighbouring countries have been in exile for 30 years or more. Because of this, and 50 percent of these families have children under the age of 18,

the decision to return or not to return is a very complex decision where different elements are considered. They [refugees] consider the socio-economic conditions, access to jobs, access to education, access to health. And we found that this group is hesitating about returning to their country of origin because they don't feel the country can provide them with the access to these services that they need. So there are no 'pull' factors for this group to make that decision to return.

To answer your second question, there is a clear distinction between a large number of people who have been living in Iran for 30 years – who we know very well and who have been registered in Iran for 30 years – and the significant number of people who cross the border, either with a short-term visa or through illegal means to find a short-term occupation in Iran. And that's the difference between being registered and not being registered.

VOA: About the planning figures that you expect to return from Pakistan: You said the number may be similar to this year, but realistically speaking the Jalowzai camp is scheduled to be closed in March next year so a large number of people may have to return in 2008. Do you not think that UNHCR should be more prepared to receive them?

UNHCR: Yes you are absolutely right. First of all, already 30 percent of the population, which is about 25-30,000 people from Jalowzai, have returned back between June and October this year. So basically 70% (around 70,000 people) may return. With the Government of Afghanistan we are working on our preparations for this group of potential returnees. We are in regular contact with these people. They are mainly coming from the southeast, especially from Paktya province. There has also been contact with the local authorities to [make preparations to] receive them. The most complex issue facing those who come back is that many do not have land to go back to, particularly those returning to Kunar province. There are approximately 3,000 families in this situation and we are working with the authorities to find a solution to this problem. And last but not least is that do not forget that out of those 70,000 people some may not come back.

TOLO: How sure are you that the repatriation of Afghans who returned from Iran so far, was voluntary? Because the repatriation of Afghans by Iran has been by force and also the Iranian Government has been putting pressure on refugees to force them to return.

UNHCR: I will certainly agree with you, as a whole, that what we have seen this year is pressure vis-à-vis the Afghan population to return. There is no doubt about that. Vis-à-vis Iran if you look at the numbers of the assisted and registered returnees, if you look at 6,000 people coming back, I have no doubt that Iran vis-à-vis registered Afghans has respected the voluntary character of returns because the number is really insignificant. In 2004 half a million people came back. So the number is always significant in helping us to determine the nature of returns and if the returns are voluntary, and here I am talking about registered Afghans. Your question is more about the illegal population. As you know very well, the voluntary aspect doesn't count in this case because the Iranian Government has the right to expel any people who live illegally in its country. What I would agree with you is about the treatment of how this happens and when this happens – and I think these are the matters the two Governments have to discuss more often to make sure that this happens in a way which respects basic human principles and also respects the vulnerability of the people in question.

AP: Can you give us the number of unregistered Afghans and what are your estimates of how many people returned this year? You also spoke about pressure on refugees? What sort of pressure are they applying and who applies these pressures both in Iran and in Pakistan?

UNHCR: First of all the number of illegals is pure guesswork. The number we are certain of is the number of registered Afghans which is more than 900,000. The Government of Iran claims that there are more than one million illegal Afghans in Iran. That is the only number [that exists]. That is the figure which the Iranian government is using. I don't know whether or not this number is correct. I can tell you that in the last two years the Government of Iran has issued a very high number of short-term visas for Afghans. If my numbers are correct in 2006 there were something like 300-400,000 visas issued in Afghanistan for people who wished to visit Iran. So I would say there is a large number of Afghans going back and forth with visas and also illegally. It is difficult to come up with an exact figure. About the pressure, foremost is the fact that both Pakistan and Iran constantly, coherently and repeatedly declare they do not see a future for the majority of the Afghan population in their respective countries. Basically they have made it clear that 'we want you to go'. This has been repeated in international symposiums, conferences and through repeated statements in the press in the last years. I have not seen a great change of this position. At the same time they say they cannot foresee the reintegration of the Afghan population and basically they say you must go. My last point is that many Afghans live in urban areas, in Karachi and Tehran. They survive through daily wages. By limiting access to work, access to socio-economic situations both in Iran and Pakistan you are also making their lives difficult and this is a form of pressure. When you don't have the possibility to survive then you ask yourself can I continue to stay here or not.

Press TV: The reason behind the reduction of the number of Afghan refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan is a lack of employment opportunity in Afghanistan and the fact that a majority of Afghans live below the poverty line. Can you comment on this please?

UNHCR: I think I have already answered your question when one of your colleagues asked why refugees from Iran do not want to come back. Every Afghan family and every individual, when they make a decision to return, they make a very clear calculation. I think what you mentioned about jobs and access to land is on the top of that list.

Pajhwok: This week the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan expressed its great concern about the start of the expulsion of Afghan refugees from Iran and they wished to have a meeting with Iranian officials. I wonder is there any meeting to prevent the deportation of Afghans from Iran?

UNHCR: We support any continued dialogue between Iran and Afghanistan to make sure that all instances of deportation are carried out in a way that is humane and orderly. As you know, this policy will concern mainly [Afghans living in] Sistan and Balochistan [province of Iran] and most likely some areas close to Sistan and Balochistan. The statement by the Iranian Government is not clear enough to indicate which areas people will be asked to leave from. You certainly know that there has been a very long [Iranian] preoccupation about the security situation in Sistan and Balochistan. It concerns all foreigners regardless of whether they are registered or not. We have a concern about this too, especially about the timing which will fall during the winter months. It is also in the middle of the school term.

Last but not least, we have very good reason to believe that the great majority of the registered population comes from certain districts of Farah which are highly insecure. We are diplomatically very active, we are asking the Iranian Government to reconsider this policy or at least defer this policy until all the modalities are discussed. We also have been active as the UN system, not only UNHCR, but WFP, IOM, UNICEF, UNHABITAT, and certain departments of the Government to make sufficient preparedness if or when this situation occurs. And we all hope that in the months to come the discussion between the two governments and also UNHCR and Iran will produce good results.

Radio Farda: You mentioned that both the Iranian and Pakistani governments want Afghan refugees to return to their country. In view of the current situation in Afghanistan, what will happen if these two countries deport all refugees?

UNHCR: I think between statements and realities, fortunately, there is always a margin for discussion, dialogue and also for an understanding of what the situation is in Afghanistan. In that space there are principles, and that is why I stressed in my introductory remarks the voluntary and gradual character of repatriation. I think the public opinion, the press, UNHCR and the UN system will continue to stand for these principles. I can assure you that we will try to ensure that between statements and between realities, at the end of the day, Afghans find a humane and dignified solution for their future.
