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*Press Conference (near verbatim transcript)*

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### **YOUTH CONFERENCE IN JALALABAD**

UNDP and the Office of the Deputy Minister for Youth Affairs will be conducting a one day youth conference on 21 October in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar province.

Thirty two youth representatives from youth councils and civil society organisations from different provinces of the eastern region including Laghman, Kunar and Nuristan (four participants from each province) will take part.

The objective is to familiarise the youth with the Joint National Youth Programme, strengthen coordination among civil society organisations, youth councils and the government.

The programme will support community-based youth initiatives and strengthen youth, civil and political participation in local governance, civil society and look at gender equality issues to help young people have their voices heard.

### **MEDIA VISIT IN NORTH EASTERN AFGHANISTAN**

We would like to inform you that UNAMA together with WFP, UNDP, FAO and UNMACA is organising a five-day media visit to north eastern provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan and Takhar starting from this afternoon. There will be opportunities to see and film different UN projects in the north east.

**UNDP:** Good morning everybody. It is a pleasure to be here. This is my first press conference as UNDP Country Director for Afghanistan and I intend to be present with you all here on a regular basis – to update you on our activities and to answer your questions.

Today, I would like to talk about poverty. We all know that Afghanistan suffers from profound poverty. In fact, I believe Afghanistan's biggest problem today is poverty. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world with a poverty rate of 42 per cent. There are a further 20 per cent of people hovering just above the poverty line. 70 per cent of Afghans also face food insecurity.

Twenty per cent of rural households are chronically food insecure and another 18 per cent face seasonal food shortages. 20 to 40 per cent of Afghans need varying levels of food assistance at different times of the year. Poverty rates in areas without irrigation are higher, with 65 per cent of households being food insecure.

A combination of food price hikes, a downturn in the global economy, the effects of climate change, weak governance, and the intensification of the armed conflict, threaten to push even more Afghans into the ranks of the desperately poor. The poor have limited access to clean water and sanitation, adequate nutrition, shelter and other essentials that are fundamental to a life with dignity.

Poverty in Afghanistan is driven by many factors, including low literacy, poor health care, mismanagement of natural resources and social structures that disadvantage particular groups and communities.

However, poverty is not inevitable but a reflection of the way societies are organised and resources distributed.

Afghanistan is now at an important cross-roads and much depends on moving forward with the key poverty-reduction objectives that are part of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy.

Unemployment persists, especially in urban areas as well as amongst other vulnerable groups which remains a major constraint for the overall human security and development of the country.

The National Area Based Development Programme is a UNDP programme which focuses on the challenges of specific areas of the country considered to be particularly vulnerable.

By supporting the establishment of 306 District Development Assemblies in all 34 provinces together with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development we have worked and continue to work to ensure full, open community consultation and participation in the rural development process.

Proper community consultation at this level is the key to success. We must focus at the grassroots level and that means in every district across the country. District Development Assemblies have formulated their District Development Plans which lists their priority rural development projects.

I would like to talk a little about what we call the “Kandahar Model”. This is a model we use of community-based development which allows us to implement infrastructure projects in areas previously thought too insecure for development work. It is currently being rolled out in other provinces, in addition to Kandahar, including Helmand, Uruzgan and Nangarhar.

Community Development Councils and District Development Assemblies have proven themselves capable of implementing technically simple infrastructure projects effectively, with the added bonus of provided much-needed labour days to local people.

Small and medium enterprises are also being supported in Balkh, Bamyan and Herat. They are helped with grants, business plans, and other technical advice. Similar work is about to begin with small and medium businesses in Kandahar, Nangarhar, Badakhshan, Ghazni, Paktya, Kunar and Nimroz.

The National Area Based Development Programme, based on needs expressed in these District Development Plans has completed 520 rural infrastructure projects since 2006. Projects include irrigation systems, roads, schools, clinics, bridges, community centres, and protection walls.

345 projects are currently ongoing, and almost 350 are currently being surveyed and designed for implementation. The total number of rural people benefitting from these infrastructure projects we estimate at around 2.5 million.

These projects are making a real difference to the lives of Afghans across the country.

So in conclusion, the challenges are tremendous, we are all aware of that. But we can move Afghanistan out of its current rank of fourth poorest country in the world if we all work together. And we must continue to focus at the district level.

I would also like to take this opportunity to add UNDP’s voice to the calls from the government and other UN agencies to fund the latest appeal to help address food insecurity. The appeal is still under-funded and winter is fast approaching.

Thank you for your time and now I am ready to take your questions.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**IRIN:** I heard you saying that Afghanistan is the fourth poorest country in the world. According to the 2007 National Human Development Report it was the fifth least developed country. Has Afghanistan slid backwards into the fourth least developed country in the world in one year?

**UNDP:** There are different estimates in terms of where Afghanistan stands as far as if it's the poorest or less poor. So we might have to be very careful in using this. But I think the issue here in terms of poverty reduction is that the situation is very severe. So the efforts like the example of the National Area Based Development Programme provides give us a very promising approach. I use the example of the "Kandahar Model" but there are efforts going on in other parts of the country. I think the emphasis I was trying to give was in terms of saying how we can use those approaches that have been proven in Afghanistan and that Afghans are leading and implementing themselves to get us out of the situation of the extreme forms of poverty.

**AFGHANISTAN TIMES [translated from Pashto]:** You have said that 40 per cent of the population need immediate food support. Do they need external support? And as the winter is coming soon will they receive this support on time?

**UNDP:** The situation with food security is a big problem. And I think both at the international level as well as the national level these issues are being addressed. Responses have been sought and Afghanistan does have a very severe winter and it can cause additional difficulties to the families that do have food insecurity.

Yes winter is coming and a large segment of the Afghan population is facing difficulties with food security issues. And definitely in discussions we have had ourselves also with the Government of Afghanistan there is a call for mobilisation of both national and international support in order to meet the necessary food requirements. So that process is ongoing and that is why, also in my statement, I have made a call that much more support is required and that it will be appreciated from UN agencies as well as others if this difficulty in the winter-time food needs can be met.

**IRNA: [translated from Dari]:** Regarding the "Kandahar Model" pointed out – to what extent is it consistent with objective realities on the ground? As in Afghanistan, there are similarities according to living conditions socially, economically as well as politically. Like in general if the people of Kandahar are poor, the same applies in Badakhshan.

**UNDP:** On the "Kandahar Model" that works in terms of building the capacity of community development councils. In addition, we are working with the people in the villages. In the villages, you have security as well development concerns, and how the people there have been mobilised or how the people are supported to implement infrastructure projects. I think it is well known that this process has worked and people have been able to undertake some of the infrastructure projects. That approach is being taken now as an experience we could not use in any other areas of Afghanistan as well. In others areas in Afghanistan viable approaches including the linking of security and development issues are taking place. We are trying the approaches in other areas of Afghanistan especially areas where there is a similar situation like Kandahar and the experience of Kandahar is also useful in other areas in Afghanistan.

In this approach the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development is leading the support provided and it is also building the capacity of the district development assemblies and preparing plans that are much more needed and responsive to the needs of the rural population. And it is how in terms of the rural population, how they themselves take on the management of these projects. It is very much based on local ownership, local leadership and very much based on the leadership of the Government of Afghanistan.

We are very happy that these approaches have worked and we would like to support the efforts of the MRRD and work with the districts, development assemblies and other districts of Afghanistan in order to promote this to give viable results. Additionally it is also about the approach of creating jobs, generating income that makes an impact on families and their household economy plus the economy of rural communities as well.

**ARIANA TV [translated from Dari]:** The statistics you raised today have also been mentioned by WFP on World Food Day but the Government of Afghanistan rejects this; that the people below the poverty rates are lower than it is claimed by the United Nations.

**UNDP:** I think there are different ways of analysis with regards to looking at statistics. But the emphasis is not only on a statistical side. Afghanistan does face poverty reduction issues and many people in Afghanistan will be facing the problem of food insecurity in Afghanistan. I hope we are able to emphasise the issue of poverty and how poverty can be reduced in Afghanistan because it has a lot to do with ensuring security and strengthening the security forces and how poverty can be reduced in Afghanistan; how people cope with their livelihoods and how then they are able to contribute to overall development themselves. I would like to highlight that we are on a very common stand with the Government of Afghanistan in terms of addressing the priorities. We understand that poverty has to be addressed in line with other priorities that the country is concerned with. Other priorities, such as how we can work in partnership with the Government of Afghanistan, in fact we are working under the leadership of the Government of Afghanistan, we use to provide people the resources that can create jobs, employment and income so that the people can see a difference in their household economy and the economy of their own villages and districts. This is much more important and there no are differences as far as UNDP or WFP are concerned in terms of the priority issues.

**TOLO TV [translated from Dari]:** Regarding your request from the Government and other international organisations you have called for help from. What is their budget? Has the Government of Afghanistan refused or has failed to provide that help that you have mentioned several times that the government should help you with?

**UNDP:** The issue of food insecurity is quite well known and there has been a call for support for it. The Government of Afghanistan is highly committed to support food security. However much more support will be required. In terms of budget I do not have the figures now but we can update you later.

**UNAMA:** I would like to remind you that as you know a call for help was jointly issued by the Government of Afghanistan and UN agencies. We believe that the pledge is not fulfilled yet and there is still a need for donations. The budget requested for that call is USD 404 million.

**SABAH TV [translated from Dari]:** Concerns have been expressed about Afghanistan and the coming winter. Given the problems facing Afghanistan such as poverty, unemployment, and insecurity don't you think that a human disaster could be possible?

**UNDP:** I think the whole call to appeal and the whole effort being made is in order to minimise the difficulties that we are facing. To respond to your question, and to put optimism into the efforts that all organisations are making, the Government and the international community are managing the difficult food security situation during the wintertime and the international community and the Government are responding. I am sure the results will be positive. Now coming to the question about poverty and employment: we are all committed, including the UNDP to doing everything through our different projects including the area based projects and even though it might be winter and it might be difficult, to keep on providing the assistance through capacity-building as well as making sure that people do have access to resources in difficult times and even if this means in winter. The best thing is when it is being led by the Government, when it is led by the communities themselves, they are able to access resources so that they are able to plan and manage their own development. The model that we have been talking about - the area based development model - which is also something that we are using in other projects and programmes, should be able to address some of these critical issues. It might not be able to address the totality of the issues but it should go a long way to making the efforts so that we are able to overcome the difficulties.

**XINHUA:** I wonder if you can give us an idea of how many of the Afghan population live under the poverty line and how UNDP compares it with the previous years in Afghanistan?

**UNDP:** In terms of the exact figures, we know that around 42 per cent of the population of Afghanistan faces poverty-related difficulties. Now if we look into the food security side of it, then the approximate figure is around five million Afghans who are facing food security issues. I hope that gives you a size in terms of the seriousness of the issue of poverty and food insecurity. Now having talked about the figures, I hope you are also able to understand that the key emphasis is that minimising poverty, bringing more prosperity to the people of Afghanistan, especially in rural areas and rural urban centres and others, is the key to prosperity and is the key towards linking it up with the different security situation in Afghanistan as well.

**UNAMA [translated from Dari]:** Twenty per cent of Afghans are constantly facing food insecurity problems and around 18 per cent of them face seasonal food shortages which makes a total of around 40 per cent of the population and that is not equal to 20 million people. We could say that five million Afghans are constantly in need of food assistance and WFP and other UN agencies are trying their best to help them. I would like to ask you to use extra caution while using fact and figures. They are very critical.

**VOA [translated from Pashto]:** This morning we have heard of a foreign woman being shot dead in Kabul city. What is UNAMA's position on that?

**UNAMA [translated from Dari]:** We are aware of report that a woman might have been shot dead this morning in Kabul. We have no further information available at this point.

**SHAMSHAD TV [translated from Pashto]:** The fact is that 42 per cent of Afghans live under the poverty line. When will this misery end and what do you think should be done for them so that they are not poor anymore?

**UNDP:** Very good question. I think what we should aim to look at is how we can reduce poverty from 40 percent as fast as possible. Now if you look at what opportunities exist in order to have a rapid pace of reducing poverty then we can use some Afghanistan experiences as well.

From 2003 to 2007 the growth rate of Afghanistan was pretty high and that was because a lot of rehabilitation and economic development activities were taking place. Employment was on the increase and it has been a bit affected during 2007 and the beginning of 2008.

With the experience we have in the area based development projects, plus other similar projects. I think the pace of the poverty reduction initiative can certainly be increased given that the people themselves are ready to take the lead in managing their own effort. I cannot give you that “in exactly this many number of years we will be able to reduce this”; what I can tell you is that with the initiatives that are launched, with the experiences we have and also with the experiences of the past several years that the Government of Afghanistan has accumulated, reducing poverty in Afghanistan can be achieved

The pace at which poverty reduction can be achieved is something that we need to make sure that the resources we have increasingly get to the people.

Afghanistan does have a very promising strategy - the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS). Objectives are clearly set out in that. If you also look at the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) the aim is to reduce poverty by at least three per cent per annum. If that could be achieved it is already according to the plan we have. What I was also trying to say is that if we are able to bring together the resources that are already obligated to the people in the rural villages, or you take the villages that are at the centre, like area based approaches have done, where you emphasise local level planning and management of these resources, then the pace of poverty reduction can increase.

**RTA [translated from Dari]:** Have you carried out any general survey and identified provinces with priority to address their problem, if yes in which provinces?

**UNDP:** I will give you an example of the area based programme and other programmes of UNDP. We are active in most of the districts. The area based project is active in all 34 provinces. While we are present in all provinces, we are also working according to the capacity of the local authorities and also the communities to undertake development projects that can vary across the country. In terms of resource allocation, resources being allocated as part of a project but being disbursed into the different districts according to the projects that have been identified: I think it is a matter of working in all provinces but at the same time working according to the capacity that exists there in using the resources. What we intend to do is to intensify these efforts so that more and more resources get to those areas that are of critical need. This is what we are planning in the coming months and years.

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