From Kabul to NY, A Story of Resolve

Her story is a shining testimony to how one’s fortunes can be reversed once the inner strength has been mustered through inspiration and dedication, how depression and despair can be turned to determination and hope, and how one can climb to the peak starting from the bottom. Her story captured the hearts of many who had not even seen her, but still made her one of the nine winners of “Global Microentrepreneurship Awards”.

Her name is Shakila and she is from Kabul.

She was honoured as a “hero of poverty eradication” alongside her peers at the United Nations on Nov. 8, receiving their awards from world renowned figures like Jennifer Lopez, Walter Cronkite and Richard Branson.

Interviewed upon her return to her hometown, she was both moderate and mindful of the success she brought to her war-ravaged country: “I know I am a good example for Afghan women and I know that I have brought pride to my people”, she said.

She thanked the UNDP and others “for making it possible for her to visit New York to receive her award and said it would always be a memorable experience for her.

Shakila’s award came as part of the activities designed to mark 2005 as International Year of Microcredit, as declared by the UN General Assembly with a view to stressing the role of microfinance in helping hundreds of millions of poor around the world to lift themselves above the poverty line.

In his message to the award ceremony, Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, said, however, “these victories are too rare still in this complicated world of ours”, in reference to the accomplishments of the award winners.

Shakila’s story of overturning her misfortunes begins long before her first application to Parwaz, a microfinance institution, several four years ago for a microcredit of 5000 Afs (roughly $100). In her teens, Shakila was forced to marry her cousin, a marriage she so resolutely objected that, after pouring gasoline on, she set herself alight to commit suicide. She was rescued but the damage had been caused: the fire had not only severely disfigured parts of her skin, but also melted part of her bones in the right arm, rendering her incapable of fully using her right arm. Despite her initial defiance, she went on to marry the same person, from whom she mothered three children.

“It is my children that inspired me to find the courage to rise up to the challenge” she said when asked how she found the valour to start up a business without any asset and any experience. “My husband earned very little and it was not enough for my children” she said. The possibility of having to rely on others to be able to feed her children made her so apprehensive that she set out to establish her own base where she would never have to ask for anything of anybody to be able to provide a decent life for them.

Shakila joined forces with her sister and mother to start their business and with their first micro-loan they bought a sewing machine and a few meters of cloth and launched their tailoring workshop. Now, several rounds of microcredit applications and paybacks and months of campaigning later, she is the group leader of a tailoring cooperative bringing together 35 entrepreneurs like her. They have contracts with shops selling clothing and every month they produce some 30 pieces of traditional Afghan male suits, including the hand-made embroidery lining the suits. Shakila is determined to keep the high quality of their products and refuses to switch to machine-made designs for the embroidery to increase output. And with her income, she can not only feed and provide for her immediate family, but also for her in-laws who now live under the same roof with Shakila.

She is quite sanguine about the future. Having personally persuaded 24 of her partners to join the cooperative, she believes they can reach a number of 100 partners soon, when she says they can run their business without having to resort to microcredit. Jamila Sahak, who has been supervising Shakila’s micro-loan performance for years, is also confident that the cooperative could develop fast to make their self-financing dreams come true. But the best of all is that Shakila is not an exception. “She is just one of thousands working as hard” said Katrin Fakiri, Managing Director of Parwaz, the first creditor.

International Year of Microcredit 2005

Shakila’s visit to New York was made possible thanks to the generous financial support of ING, a Dutch NGO involved in microfinance activities throughout the world and one of the main sponsors of the International Year of Microcredit. ING is also one of the founders of the Afghan National Bank.
Shared Knowledge to Enhance Support to Self-Help Groups of Disabled in Afghanistan

Having returned from Pakistan following the adoption of Islamabad Declaration, Mariam and Sami ul Haq have been quite upbeat about their future contribution to the improvement of the lives of the disabled in Afghanistan.

Ms Mariam and Mr. Haq have represented Afghanistan in a recent regional seminar on “Capacity Building for Self-Help Organizations of Persons with Disabilities” organized in Islamabad. The seminar, which brought together participants with disabilities from 21 Asia and Pacific countries, adopted the “Islamabad Declaration” calling on all the governments of the region to support the UN Convention on Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Declaration also called for, among other things,
- development of a mechanism with representatives from self-help organizations to advocate the governments for inclusion of Persons with Disabilities at all levels of decision-making;
- ensuring equal opportunities for Women with Disabilities through their participation in decision-making processes and the revo-
cation of existing legislation that discriminates against them;

- ensuring that accessibility, including to education in sign language, to information technology mainstreaming and to employment opportunities is promoted through the implementation of the existing legal framework and/or by the enactment of legislation in countries where it does not exist;
- enabling Self-Help Organizations working in rural areas to improve the lives of, and ensuring equal opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.

Ms. Mariam of the Afghanistan Union of Disabled Women said upon her return: “The seminar accorded me a good opportunity to meet other persons with disabilities and especially fellow women with disabilities from the region, I learnt a lot about how we can improve our lives through our self-help groups.”

Sami ul Haq, who is the National Advisor Disability-Rights & Advocacy for UNDP/NPAD, for his part, said “This seminar gave me a lot of insights and skills on how to form, run and manage Disabled Peo-

Counter-Narcotics Trust Fund Comes into Operation

The Government of Afghanistan and the UNDP have taken a major step in the fight against illicit opium cultivation and the entailing narcotics trade by signing the agreement on the establishment of the “Counter-Narcotics Trust Fund” (CNTF), which will put the ownership and primary responsibility of the struggle against drugs in the hands of the Afghan Government.

Years of war and destruction have rendered it impossible to control the expansion of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and the area used for growing opium poppy increased from 29,000 hectares in 1986 to 131,000 hectares in 2004.

According to the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), Afghanistan takes the lion’s share in the global poppy cultivation, as high as 87% in 2004, and the trade of the drugs produced out of poppy crop accounts for 60% of the country’s GDP. Given the role of drug money in financing terrorism, in smuggling of weapons and in supporting militia formations, the impact of the illegal trade can be seen to dominate the security concerns as well.

With the institutionalization of this new Fund, however, the Government will be in the driving seat to identify and execute ways and means of combating the illicit activity.

According to the programme document signed on October 29, the CNTF will be implemented by the line ministries under the coordination of the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics (MCN) with the Ministry of Finance as the Executing Agency.

The CNTF will channel its funds through the Afghan Central bank, to be drawn for use by the Ministry of Finance once the CNTF approves a project for any line ministry. MCN will assess and evaluate the project proposals submitted for consideration from a standpoint of their counter-narcotics impact, among other factors. Once given the green light by the Ministry, the projects will be reviewed by the Management Board of the CNTF, comprising representatives of Government of Afghanistan, UNDP and other international entities.

Specifically, the CNTF will support counter narcotics related projects and activities outlined in the eight pillars of the National Drug Control Strategy which includes (1)Alternative Livelihoods, (2)Building Institutions, (3) Information Campaign, (4)Drug Law Enforcement, (5)Criminal Justice, (6) Eradication, (7)Drug Demand Reduction and Treatment of Drug Addicts and (8)Regional Cooperation.

Raul Gasteazoro, the CNTF Manager, says implementing projects in provinces, particularly those with big areas of poppy cultivation, will likely present serious challenges and will require close coordination among all partners involved.
Human Development month at Kabul University

Kabul University joined with UNDP on November 1 to launch Human Development Month across all faculties. Through a series of events, Human Development Month is seeking to generate awareness among students, faculty and media about the key messages from the Global and first National Human Development Reports.

Dr. Amirsha Hassanyar, Minister of Higher Education opened the first event, stating his commitment to placing human development at the forefront of educational curricula amongst tertiary institutions. Dr Hassanyar acknowledged the integral role that people played in development – that economic progress without raising standards in health, education and quality of life, does not necessarily equate with ‘development’. The essence of the message, not only of Dr Hassanyar but all guest speakers, was that people are essential to progress.

Guest speakers included Frederick Lyons, Country Director of UNDP; Dr. Daud Saba, Author of the Afghanistan HDR; Finance Minister Anwar-ul Haq Ahadi, and Hedayat Amin Arsala Senior Advisor to the President and Minister of Commerce. The central theme of this opening session was to define human development and to place it at the centre of educational and government policy discourse and to introduce the Global Human Development Report and the National Human Development Report as fundamental tools for understanding the issues.

UNDP first launched the Global Human Development Report (HDR) in 1990, with the single goal of putting people at the centre of the development process in terms of economic debate, policy and advocacy. The main goal was both massive and simple, with far-ranging implications, going beyond income to assess the level of people's long-term wellbeing: bringing about development of the people, by the people, and for the people and emphasizing that the goals of development are choices and freedom.

UNDP published Afghanistan’s first National Human Development Report (NHDR) in February 2005. The theme, Security with a Human Face, marks the first time in modern history that objective observers were allowed to gather and tabulate hard data on living conditions among everyday Afghans. It draws a portrait of a nation still at odds—if no longer at war—with itself. And in a novel approach to peacemaking, the unblinking, unvarnished Report concludes that "human security" and "human development," rather than military force and diplomacy alone, are key to resolving Afghanistan’s complex problems. The legitimate grievances of the Afghan people must be addressed before a lasting peace can take hold. Beyond survival, Afghans expect an existence with dignity, a life free of fear and free from wants. Security with a Human Face will be as a major theme for debate throughout the development month.

Around 100 students attended the opening session along with the Ambassadors from the USA and Japan, various NGOs and UNDP staff. UNDP will manage an essay contest for students on the subject of human development, encouraging academic excellence in issues raised throughout the month.

A $500 prize will be offered to the winning student which will be announced in January 2006.

In order to further the understanding of human development throughout the country, UNDP held a media training session during October where journalists were introduced to the concepts that underpin human development and discussing how the media can cover the subject more accurately. Journalists at this training session expressed their frustration at the current legal framework for media whereby they are forced into silence by State and self-censorship, which has created a tendency for Afghan journalists to avoid tackling challenging issues. However, the two-day seminar was the first of its kind to bring journalism and development experts head to head in identifying remedies to sensitise key Afghan media practitioners to the issues of development. It also served as a golden opportunity for information sharing and establishing a network of dedicated, talented Afghan journalists and media practitioners to join the Human Development debate.

The second event, which took place on Nov. 16, saw a completely full auditorium and a very lively discussion involving Abdul Rashid Fakhr, the Deputy Minister of National Economy and Head of Office of Statistic and Dr Daud Saba with students asking inquisitive questions about the human development concept. The Human Development month will climax on Nov. 30 with the final event at the same auditorium.

Destruction of Anti Personnel Mines

On November 9th a ceremony was held at the HALO Trust Central Demolition Site (CDS) to destroy a significant quantity of anti personnel mines, which were gathered by the ANBP ammunitions survey team operating in the central region of Afghanistan during ammunition survey operations.

The ceremony was attended by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Mohammad Haider Reza, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense General Azimi, Christina Green, First Secretary of Canadian Embassy in Afghanistan, officials from ANBP, The Halo Trust and the media.

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New Capacity Development Priorities for Afghan Government Worked out

“Even if the kitchen is very sophisticated, you can not produce good food unless the cook knows what he is doing.”

Senior level managers within Afghanistan’s governing structures, deputy ministers, directors-general and heads of department, identified at the end of a three-day workshop in Kabul, a list of 15 priorities for capacity development to be incorporated into the Public Administration Reform strategy.

The workshop, “Development of a Strategic Framework & Priorities for Capacity Building,” was organized by the UNDP’s “State Building and Government Support Programme” with a view to empower senior level Afghan officials to strengthen their grip on the capacity development needs within Afghan state institutions.

Frederick Lyons, UNDP Country Director, stressed the importance of the workshop, concluding that the participants that “even if the kitchen is very sophisticated, you can not produce good food unless the cook knows what he is doing.”

Throughout the workshop, participants worked in groups, frequently coming together in plenary sessions to share their findings. Peter Reed, who conducted the workshop, said he was very impressed with the enthusiasm of the participants. “They were back around their roundtable even before their lunch break was over, and this was everyday of the seminar” he said.

Mr. Reed said the 20 participants from 11 ministries and other institutions like the Afghan National Bank had identified 180 points of weakness in the governing processes to be dealt with through capacity development.

These 180 points were then refined and regrouped under five major headings:
- Leadership;
- Human resources Management and Development;
- Strategy and Planning;
- Process improvement;
- Working with partners.

As the final product of the workshop, a list of 15 priorities has been identified to make up the basis for the most immediate capacity building projects to be presented to donors and to be incorporated to the Public Administration Reform programme.

Mr. Reed said he hoped, following their consideration by the Afghan government, the results of the workshop would be discussed with international donors throughout the month of December and that the Afghan Government could present a structured capacity development strategy framework to the London Conference in January.

New Steps for Protection of Afghanistan’s Environment

Cutting back on wood consumption by turning to alternative energy sources, intensifying targeted and selective reforestation, assigning the task of combating desertification to a national organization to be founded and raising awareness on the importance of preservation of forest areas were some of the recommendations that came out of a recent seminar in Kabul, organized jointly by the Government of Afghanistan and the UNDP.

The event was part of efforts undertaken under the leadership of Afghan government to arrest the process of continuing land degradation and desertification. Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry and Forestry (MAAHF), the Ministry of Irrigation, Water Resources and Environment and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation & Development are all involved in the endeavour.

UNDP’s contribution to the struggle against land degradation and desertification came as a result of Afghan Government’s request for assistance in streamlining the combat of desertification and sustainable land management into a national programme, in continued phases, to protect the environment and improve the living condition in rural areas.

This contribution includes the facilitation of attracting financial and technical assistance from the interested stakeholders, particularly GEF (Global Environment Facility), and other donors in support of upgrading the environment.

The Government of Afghanistan has already made clear its commitment to the goal through a letter dated 20 June 2004 and signed by the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Livestock, requesting GEF funding for a Medium Sized Project Proposal (MSP) for capacity development and mainstreaming of sustainable land management.

Currently, under the lead of the MAAHF and with the support of the UNDP Environment Officer, a
national team is currently collecting information and compiling data on sustainable land management, land degradation and desertification in preparation for the formulation of a MSP proposal for GEF by an international consultant. The GEF, in turn, will assist in preparation of a National Action Plan (NAP) for Sustainable Land Management and Combating Desertification to be implemented by the Government of Afghanistan.

‘Deh-i-Kalan, a village midst of the gentle hills of Kunduz. Cultivated fields on step slopes now bare of crops are prone to erosion.

An image of Afghanistan

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