A former Ambassador of Sierra Leone to Ethiopia, the Organisation for Africa Unity, the United Nations, a former minister and Presidential candidate writes from Kandahar on his work with UN Volunteers


The moment I arrived in Kandahar from Kabul for the very first time this was my welcome greeting. Scarcely had the UNHAS plane touched down than these words blared out from the UN radio. I still vividly recall my Ghanaian colleague, who had been away on a holiday and was returning that same morning, turning to me with a smile and saying: “Welcome to Kandahar.” We waited over an hour at the airport for the threat to be cleared and for our drive into Kandahar city.

Since that initial welcome to my new life in Kandahar, I have come to expect and live with this signature tune that prefaces security alerts announcing the latest restriction on our freedom of movement and raising our pressure levels. From that first announcement of a suspected Improvised Explosive Device (IED) I have graduated, among other things, to knowledge of the latest edition of and addition to the growing variety and range of IED arsenals: BBIED, RCIED, VBIED, etc.

“Kandahar” and you can sense the unmentioned “poor soul” sentiment. Or often worse, you are left with the leery feeling of being a suicidal maniac or someone with a death wish for knowing no better than to work in such a place.

But coming from a country that went through its own hell and were it not for the “true believers” who did not give up on us, we would have been “Somalianized”. I sometimes believe I was prepared and have the grit for my present assignment.

By dint of circumstance rather than choice, I have lived in all the security compliant guesthouses in Kandahar. Before settling down in my present home, I was baptized into the life of internally displaced persons and returnees. Daily after work I went to the WFP guesthouse, had dinner and had to be taken to the UNHCR guesthouse to sleep and then in the mornings return to the WFP guesthouse to breakfast and get ready to go to work. When I went away for my break I came back only to find that my former guesthouse had closed down, hence my moving to another guesthouse. A day in Kandahar is a long period, indeed, and anything can happen during that brief period. Living in this region is learning to live in expectation of anything happening. It is an exercise in living in readiness, with a 20kgs bag packed ready for evacuation.

But I am in love with Kandahar, the security environment notwithstanding. How I just wish I could see more of the city and interact much more with the people. The mountain ranges that encircle the city remind me of home, just as the chaos that passes for traffic and the casual pedestrianism bring fond memories. It is all so familiar. Of course, it is not convenient living a sandbagged life and in armour: moving in armoured vehicles with armoured clothing and helmets at the ready, and imprisoned in sandbagged guesthouses, where instead of the windows giving you vistas of a glorious universe are rather a reminder of stunted and restricted vision and operability.
Add to this a congenitally narrow- ing security box, you can have a proper sense of the further tightening of our belt of freedom and constraining mobility to carry out even the tasks for which we are here.

We are even advised to be unobtrusive in monitoring those projects that we are, happily, still able to get on with. Above all and even more painfully, the security environment forces on one the dysfunction of being suspicious or distrusting of the people we are supposed to be working with, for, or serving and whom we scarcely know because we hardly have time and opportunity to relate to, interact and communicate with them.

My drivers and guards can only speak the smattering of English I am painstakingly teaching them or my presence is causing them to learn. My learning of Pashto is rendered more burdensome by the various handicaps or hindrances that constitute effective blockages to the normal avenues to social intercourse. I cannot go shopping, nor meet with the average man in the street, nor relate with the kids from whom I would have learnt the language even quicker. The limited time I have with my Afghan colleagues on the project cannot be dissipated in language classes but expended in work related activity, including capacity building, report writing, or discussion of security concerns. One spends most of the day sauntering between an air-conditioned guesthouse or a raging, sweltering inferno in the transit into an air-conditioned, armoured vehicle, to venture into yet another inferno, before entering a conference or meeting room to later emerge and start the whole process in reverse. More than ever before in my life, I must now constantly live always prepared for danger even when the environment and the circumstances, situation and moment seem safe.

In spite of it all, it will be far from the truth to suggest that coming to and working in Kandahar, even under the current challenges, is not rewarding. We all want to believe that we are somewhat and somehow contributing to nation rebuilding and confidence and capacity building. This is true. But what is truer for me is the unique opportunity to build my own capacity as well, to discover myself more, and to experience unparalleled spiritual development. This is a learning and building up assignment and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.


Kandahar’s Appeal, is that Notwithstanding Disaster in Afghanistan and that Human tragedy Are all so Real, they will be surmounted. INSHALLAH!

How did you hear and applied for UNV? How did you decide to volunteer in a post war victim state such as Afghanistan?

I heard through a compatriot who was then working for UNAMA in Kabul, after my three-month contract with UNOPS ended. It was easy for me to decide, after my experience in and of Sierra Leone.

How do you find Afghanistan as a duty station?

Very challenging and stressful, but it offers an opportunity to contribute towards sculpting a new Afghanistan.

Alimamy Pallo Bangura, 56, Sierra Leone

A former Ambassador of Sierra Leone to Ethiopia, the Organisation for Africa Unity, the United Nations, a former minister and Presidential candidate
What are your difficulties and challenges that you face to work in Afghanistan?
Restricted movement, inability to interact freely and language difficulty.

What are the positive points about Afghanistan?
Friendliness and dependability of the colleagues I am working with.

Is Afghanistan a better place for UN Volunteers? Comments?
The obvious needs challenge the spirit and ethos of volunteerism, in the face of security constraints.

How would you evaluate how volunteerism brings benefits you?
Focus on goodwill and doing a job well, rather than on financial remuneration is extremely rewarding.

What message would you like to convey for interested candidates to join a volunteer organization?
To be convinced of dedication and commitment to serve humankind, despite the odds and that financial reward may be minimal, if not miserable.

Working in Kandahar
By Alimamy Pallo Bangura

Work for me in Kandahar routinely starts at 8 o’clock in the morning, the time I arrive in the office, although as an early bird, I am normally up by 5 o’clock when I have my early morning constitutional. Once in the office, the first thing I engage in is to check the internet for mails, which I try to respond to immediately or at the earliest opportunity. After this, on Sundays, I have the weekly meetings with my staff to plan, review and assess how our work is proceeding, and address security issues and concerns. On Thursdays, I attend the weekly Security Management Team and Heads of Agencies meetings.

On the whole, the security environment in which we are operating determines the scope of our ability to carry on with, visit and monitor our project work. Presently, we are constructing a Women’s Resource Centre; the main canal; and culverts in the main part of the city. Soon, we shall commence work on the construction of a Disability Access Centre, a slaughter house, and, in partnership with FAO, undertaking some minor projects in selected accessible villages not far from Kandahar. We are able to continue with the current work we are involved in, despite the volatile and deteriorating security situation in the region, because essentially our work is concentrated in the security safe box within the city. It is conceivable that if we were operating outside of the city we would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to continue with our work. The consolation is that the authorities and the population see the quality of work done, and acknowledge and appreciate our efforts, under not too favourable circumstances.

The official closing time is 16.30, but for security reasons we are advised not to stick strictly to a regular time, but to vary our movement from day to day. Once I leave my office and return to the guesthouse, my freedom is now restricted to the confines of the guesthouse. I can no longer go anywhere else until the next morning, when the routine starts all over again. Within the guesthouse, I have just started using the gym, mainly spending up to an hour on the treadmill, after which I take a shower and wait to have dinner. After dinner, I do a lot of reading, then my spiritual exercises, occasionally watch TV, before retiring for a restful sleep.

What are the responsibilities assigned to you as an UNV?
I’m responsible for managing the Regional Project Monitoring Group, delivering predefined construction projects and providing assistance and capacity to the regional authorities, entailing the realization of both infrastructure development and regional monitoring and evaluation goals. I coordinate with government counterparts and UN agencies in jointly analyzing, planning, implementing and monitoring projects. I conduct training sessions in monitoring and evaluation for Government counterparts. I have responsibility for then correct disbursement and accounting of funds and assets of the Regional Office. I’m also the focal point for Regional Office security issues, attending regional Security Management Team meetings, and implementing security measures. I provide monthly monitoring reports with other UN agencies. These responsibilities require creating a harmonious and productive team within the office; development and maintenance of solid working relationships with local government, other UN groups, and related NGOs; ensuring procedures of ethical and transparent tendering are understood and adhered to by the relevant local staff; and, quickly, fairly and diplomatically resolving staff conflicts or other issues that may result in delay of or damage to project delivery.
The end of July marked the first anniversary of the signing of the Anti-Personnel Mines and Ammunition Stockpile Destruction Project. Under this programme, which started as a pilot project in January 2005, 1,061 caches of ammunition have been surveyed while 185,057 anti-personnel mines and 11,643 anti-tank mines have been destroyed with the support of UNDP’s Afghanistan’s New Beginnings Programme.

The Anti-Personnel Mines and Ammunition Stockpile Destruction Project, which was signed on July 31 2005 between the Government of Afghanistan and UNDP, is a two year nationwide programme. It provides that ammunition deemed safe to be moved will be transported to secure storage facilities while the remainder will be destroyed. All mines will be destroyed.

This project will also assist the Government of Afghanistan in meeting its stockpile destruction obligations as a State Party to the Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction. By signing the convention on March 1 2003, Afghanistan committed itself to establishing a complete ban on anti-personnel mines within four years, with all stockpiles to be destroyed by February 28 2007.

With stockpiles amounting to hundreds of thousands of tons, there are justified concerns on the current state of ammunition in Afghanistan. Much of it, which has generally not been maintained, is lying in unguarded locations or stored in populated areas. Its mere presence continues to kill or maim innocent people. In addition, ammunition can be used with malicious intent, in all sorts of Improvised Explosive Devices.

Although, implemented by ANBP, this programme is ultimately under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence. The total cost is US$ 16 million and with a contribution of US$ 5.1 million the Canadian Government is the biggest donor supporting this project.

Visit: www.undpanbp.org

When Haji Ahmad Shah stepped on a mine in Kunar in 1986, the blast ripped off his left arm and mangled his right arm. Shah travelled 36 hours in excruciating pain before he reach a hospital equipped to deal with such serious trauma. Infection had set in by that time, and doctors were forced to amputate his right arm.

Shah now uses a prosthesis on his right stump with a clamp that helps him with rudimentary tasks like holding a fork, but his biggest source of assistance over the past two decades without arms has been family and friends. Shah, 42, is one of Afghanistan’s estimated 675,000 disabled people, of which 52,000 to 60,000 are survivors of mine and unexploded ordnance (UXO) accidents, according to Handicap International.

“There are so many disabled people, and they have nothing,” said 42-year-old Shah. “We are the neediest of society.”

Today, Shah lives in Kabul and is deputy director for the Community Center for the Disabled and works to create awareness about the plight of disabled people. Efforts like his are paying off. The government of Afghanistan, in partnership with organizations like the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan (UNMACA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), held its first National Landmine Victim Assistance Workshop in Kabul on August 6-8.

The workshop drew officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Public Health, Martyrs and Disabled, Social Affairs, Economy and Labour, Public Works, Transport, Energy and Water as well as members of eight international agencies and about 20 national and international non-government organizations.

The participants worked together to develop a nationwide plan that would provide better healthcare and economic opportunities to mine victims.
Women leaders unite to influence political debate

The first Afghan women parliamentarians’ resource centre was opened on August 7 in Kabul.

The centre will support women Members of Parliament to become strong political leaders and equip them with the technical knowledge they need to help shape Afghanistan’s future.

The centre, established by the Parliament and UNIFEM (the UN’s development fund for women) will give women leaders the tools and the base they need to influence the political agenda in a world dominated by men.

Located just behind the Parliament building, the centre has a library; computer room, with internet access; a media room; an area for members to exchange ideas over tea; and conference rooms for meetings with their constituents and key players from political and the wider civil society.

Over 20 female Members of Parliament, excited at the prospect of using the new centre to drive their agenda on national development forward attended the opening ceremony.

As they explored the building for the first time, they eagerly sat down at the computer terminals, with one Member of Parliament saying, “It’s wonderful to have such a space to meet, with the equipment we need to ensure we can make a real difference.”

Meryem Aslan, director of UNIFEM, said: “The centre will allow women to network amongst themselves and with members of provincial councils and civil society and debate the issues of the day in an environment focused on mutual support.”

The Afghanistan National Development Strategy set another ambitious benchmark that states “increased assistance will be provided to meet the special needs of all disabled people, including their integration in society through opportunities for education and gainful employment.”

Although the MAPA has cleared more than one billion square meters of contaminated land since 1989, hundreds of innocent Afghans – almost half of whom are children – fall victim to the deadly devices each year. Mines and UXO kill or injure an average of 62 Afghans each month, or about two Afghans every day, according to UNMACA.

Mine victims and other disabled people are hoping the government’s first National Landmine Workshop and its commitments, both international and national, will lead to a better life in the near future after years of suffering.

“The government needs to help us,” said Imam Jan, 38, who lost his left leg to a mine in Kabul 12 years ago. “It must, because we are unable to help ourselves.”

UNDP’s Support to the Establishment of the Afghan Legislature project (SEAL) has also supported the new centre with the purchase of equipment.

The centre is located at Shora Street, opposite the Food and Agriculture Organisation’s new office, Karte 3, Kabul. It is open from Saturday to Thursday, from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm. You can contact the centre administrator on +93 (0) 798 26 32 55.
The Afghanistan Experiment
By Demaree J. B. Raval, SEAL Technical Advisor

I have just come back from Afghanistan, after another six weeks of immersion in its National Assembly, and my friends are surprised to see me alive and in one piece, given the incessant negativity about the peace and security situation in that country.

To anyone who relies solely on international media coverage, Afghanistan would seem to be one where the faint of heart should never dare to set foot on. But I have been there, and I can say it is not as dire and forbidden a place as just anyone would like to speculate about. Except for Southern Afghanistan, where there are sporadic attacks on the US-led coalition forces, and isolated incidents of violence in Kabul, the capital, all the handiwork of the Taliban to send the message that they are not yet a spent force, the rest of that country is peaceful and is the focus of development efforts.

Afghanistan is on the verge of breaking free from its ignominious recent past. Various agencies of the United Nations are seeing to that, providing assistance to the rebuilding of institutions and the reconstruction of this post-conflict country. Many Filipinos connected with the UN system are at the forefront of this massive effort at nation building under a democratic set-up.

With the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, the UN took the lead role in guiding Afghanistan toward a peaceful and stable self-rule. One crucial area of development where the UN has been pretty successful is the strengthening of democratic assemblies, encompassing the National Assembly with its two chambers and 34 provincial councils.

For a country that has not had any semblance of democratic participation of its citizens in a working parliament for the past 35 years, the present state of the National Assembly of Afghanistan is pretty amazing. The UN experimentation for a working parliament in Afghanistan has been achieved through a project of UNDP called “Support for the Establishment of the Afghan Legislature” (SEAL). In a short period of 15 months, SEAL put in place a working parliament that can compare with the more established parliaments in other democratic countries.

Housed in a complex of modern buildings, fully-automated and equipped with the latest in technological devices that make for an efficient and effective lawmaking, the National Assembly is manned by a secretariat of dedicated civil servants eager to learn from experts of other countries who have had the benefit of being exposed to parliamentary practices. The members of the National Assembly, 249 of them in the Wolesi Jirga (lower house) and 102 of them in the Meshrano Jirga (upper house), are just as eager to adopt the practices of other jurisdictions consistent with the Constitution of Afghanistan.

SEAL is pushing the immediate adoption of Rules of Procedure akin to those we are observing in our own Congress of the Philippines. We have the advantage of many years at experimentation with democracy, in the area of executive-legislative relations, and we have to put forward in Afghanistan the best we have here in our country. The rules of our own Congress are broad enough to cover the excesses of the executive, and tight enough for the legislature to rein in such excesses, and these have proven to be effective going by our experience with the Senate where nothing that Malacañang (Presidential Palace) and its minions have shamefully done have not been spared going through the crucible of public investigations and eventual prosecution. The National Assembly of Afghanistan is beginning to be very much like our own Senate, flexing its own muscles to curb corruption in accordance with a set of rules.

The Constitution of Afghanistan authorizes the creation by the Wolesi Jirga of special commissions to investigate government actions. These work in the same fashion as the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee and the Committee on Good Government of the House of Representatives. This is a rich area for experimentation by SEAL, and already the proposed rules governing these investigations have been submitted to the leadership of the Wolesi Jirga under President Qanuni for consideration.

The members of the National Assembly are starting to dabble in investigations in aid of legislation, an arsenal of our own Congress we are very familiar with. In a country whose one-year-old constitution calls for the enactment of laws in at least 116 areas of concern, investigations in aid of legislation certainly are effective devices to flesh out the bills to eventually form the corpus of laws of this new democracy. The legislative agenda is dictated by the national government of Afghanistan by what are called “Government Bills,” but this does not preclude initiatives from members of the National Assembly called “Members Bills.” The committee system of the National Assembly is undergoing an overhaul, to see to it that the committees effectively discharge their role at lawmaking given this peculiar arrangement.

The Wolesi Jirga is even doing one better than our own Commission on Appointments. It rejected during the confirmation process five nominees for minister of Afghanistan President Karzai, and his nominee for Chief Justice.

The provincial councils of Afghanistan are likewise the beneficiaries of SEAL’s efforts at capacity building. Local government administration in the hands of professionally-trained local executives is fast becoming the norm, replacing the decades-old system of governance under local kingpins who wield military power and have control over substantial local revenues from the poppy trade.

There are thousands of Filipinos working in Afghanistan. They are as much the beneficiaries as the citizens of that country, of laws enacted by a working National Assembly and by effective local governments. The UNDP-SEAL is committed to see this experimentation succeed. And I am as much committed to see that Afghanistan adopts our best parliamentary rules and practices and at governance.

This article was recently published in the Daily Tribune in the Philippines.
UNDP Afghanistan Newsletter

UNDP global Annual Report published

Foreword by UNDP Administrator Kemal Dervis

Since its creation in 1966, UNDP has been at the centre of the United Nations' operational development system, working both at the grassroots level to help build national capacities for sustainable development, and as a leader in development thinking, as demonstrated by its flagship Human Development Report and its contributions to critical issues such as global public goods and democratic governance. In many ways, it is this important nexus—connecting countries to knowledge and ideas and working with them to strengthen the capacity needed to tackle development challenges—that is UNDP's hallmark.

With the advent of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the last few years have seen UNDP scale up its activities in a major way. UNDP is working at the conceptual level with a wide range of partners to advocate for the policy and institutional changes needed to fight poverty more effectively and achieve the MDGs. From elections support in Liberia and Haiti, to recovery efforts after decades of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to helping countries deliver services to their citizens in countries with much stronger economies but huge social challenges such as Brazil and Indonesia, UNDP also works with countries in a very practical way to help build the institutional capacity needed to promote, support and accelerate human development and sustainable growth.

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the volume of resources given to support UNDP's work. The greatest amount has come from a rise in country level non-core co-financing, an important affirmation of the confidence partners have in UNDP's role and performance. But we face the challenge of a ratio of un-earmarked regular resources to earmarked resources that is too low to support the unity of strategic management and the flexibility required to respond to the challenges and opportunities UNDP faces. Public finance theory, as well as lessons learned around the world, are clear on the need to protect public expenditure and the budgetary process from excessive earmarking; indeed, it is something international development organizations and experts always warn developing countries against. I, therefore, hope that UNDP can have the support of donors in our efforts to strengthen the integrity of our resource base.

Despite these constraints, UNDP continues to make an important contribution to achieving the MDGs, working increasingly closely with our sister organizations in the UN system. Such cooperation should not mean a lack of competition in ideas or methods, but it should mean that there is a synergy in our actions which allows each organization to take advantage of its comparative strengths, pool resources when needed, and work in partnerships, which enable developing countries to steer their own development.

2005 was an important year for the development agenda, with the international community reaffirming its commitment to the MDGs. In 2007, we will be mid-way towards the 2015 deadline. UNDP remains committed to doing its part to translate the ambitious new partnership for development launched in 2000 into better policies, stronger institutions and greater resources more effectively deployed, all with the aim of achieving concrete improvements in the lives of those who need and deserve our strong support.

Visit: www.undp.org

Kemal Dervis meets high school students in Albania
Royal recognition for UNDP’s parliamentary support project in Afghanistan

The work of the United Nations Development Programme in Afghanistan in supporting the establishment of the country’s new National Assembly has been officially recognised by the Father of the Nation and former King Zahir Shah.

Afghanistan’s “Malalai Qahraman” medal was awarded to Thusitha Pilapitiya, Manager of UNDP’s Support to the Establishment of the Afghan Legislature project. A Presidential Decree in recognition of Mrs. Pilapitiya’s efforts for making the UNDP legislative support project so successful was also presented, along with the medal, at an official ceremony in the Presidential Palace in Kabul.

The Malalai medal is the highest award for women in Afghanistan and is named after the Afghan heroine who took up the flag from an injured Afghan soldier and led the successful attack at the Battle of Maiwand against the British in 1880.

The UNDP’s parliamentary support project, with a budget of US$ 15.5 million, was launched in February 2005 and has worked closely in assisting the National Assembly Secretariat and the elected members of parliament perform their duties. The project’s support has included the provision of equipment for the two houses of parliament, training for all the members of parliament and staff, legislative advisory services, a library and trainings for committee members, secretariat staff and accredited journalists.

Afghanistan’s first parliament in more than three decades was inaugurated in December 2005.

UNDP’s parliamentary support project is funded by the EC, France, Italy, SIDA (Sweden), GTZ (Germany), Denmark, CIDA (Canada) and UNDP.

On the road to the provision of alternative livelihoods in Badghis, Baghlan and Takhar provinces

Two hundred protected agricultural greenhouses and 61 kilometres of roads and a bridge will be built as part of two recently approved projects by the Counter Narcotics Trust Fund of Afghanistan.

The rural roads will be constructed in Badghis and Baghlan provinces and the bridge with be built in Takhar.

The road building US$ 5,293,238 project will be implemented over a year by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

The 200 greenhouses will be built by the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation over two years, at a cost of US$ 1,477,193 in Nangarhar and Balkh and either Ghor or Uruzgan for the production of high value cash crops.

“The CNTF has been established to support projects that the Afghan Government thinks are priorities in the Government’s overall Counter Narcotics strategy,” General Khodaidad Deputy Minister of Counter Narcotics said. “We want to see more of such important projects funded and implemented. We also ask the donor nations and institutions to increase their donations to the CNTF.”

Established officially on October 29 2005 by UNDP, the Counter Narcotics Trust Fund (CNTF) aims to support the Government of Afghanistan in its efforts to fight poppy production and the drug trade. The CNTF is designed in a way that the Government of Afghanistan retains the overall responsibility for the programme, with the Ministry of Finance as the executing entity and the Ministry of Counter Narcotics as the programme directorate and also as one of the implementing entities. The line ministries are other implementing partners for projects funded through the CNTF.

The fund supports counter narcotics related projects and activities outlined in the eight pillars of the National Drug Control Strategy, which include: alternative livelihoods, building institutions, an information campaign, drug law enforcement, criminal justice, eradication, drug demand reduction and treatment of drug addicts, and regional and international cooperation.

Visit:
www.mcn.gov.af
You may question why I should write about HIV/AIDS now when the country has so many other priorities that need dealing with: the insurgency in the southeast, law and order, corruption, unemployment and good governance.

As yet Afghanistan does not have an epidemic. But the real problem is that no one knows for sure how many people are HIV/AIDS positive in the country; who they are and where they are. Proper surveillance and ways of estimating and monitoring the HIV/AIDS situation are just not available. Nor is the information and analysis to hand which is essential for making policy and programming decisions. If all this is available it is too often incomplete.

Here’s an example: The National HIV/AIDS Control Programme has reported 54 confirmed HIV/AIDS positive cases in the country. But this is based on information from the blood banks and from the four Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centres. The numbers have only come from people who have donated blood or been tested.

Blood donors and people who have been to the testing centres do not represent all sections of society and communities. However, it is a widely accepted fact that Afghanistan does have an overall low HIV/AIDS prevalence.

That’s only good enough if the country can maintain this low prevalence. However, this is unlikely as Afghanistan currently faces a high risk of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in the near future if it is not prevented now.

The vulnerabilities that trigger an epidemic and the risk factors that fuel it are sufficiently prevalent in today’s Afghanistan: There is a large number of injecting drug users (according to the Afghanistan Drug Use Survey 2005 a minimum of 7,500), perhaps as high as 19,000; refugee returnees from Pakistan and Iran; internally displaced people; sex workers; homosexuals; people in uniform such as the police and military; people in prison; high illiteracy and ignorance; low status of women; low awareness of HIV/AIDS; low safe sexual practices; low priority of the issue in terms of policies, high level commitment and resource allocation; weak public health system and capacity.

Experience shows that once the virus enters in these population groups, it then rapidly spreads there first and then it crosses over to the general population. More than 3% of the injected drug users who went to the Kabul Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centre in 2004-2005 were tested HIV positive. It is now just a matter of time before the epidemic hits the general population.

Just as insurgents and suicide bombers attack, HIV/AIDS invades the society stealthy and emerges as no less a threat to the country’s security and sustainable development. It then becomes too late and too costly to fight it back.

Afghanistan may take advice from this proverb: “An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.” A window of opportunity is available for Afghanistan to actively pre-empt the threat of a looming HIV/AIDS epidemic by acting now. A pro-active vision and high level leadership on the issue is needed; a policy and HIV/AIDS information campaign; a national HIV/AIDS policy; and action at all levels to start a multi-pronged HIV/AIDS response. If Afghanistan does act now there is the chance to avoid what has been happening to many countries in the world and in the neighbourhood.
UNDP is the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life.

United Nations Development Programme, Shah Mahmood Ghazi Watt, Kabul, Afghanistan
tel: +93 (0) 20 212 4000 or +93 (0) 20 212 4076

For more information on any of these stories, or to make contributions, please contact:
Dominic Medley, Media Relations Officer; tel: +93 (0) 70 691 985; email: dominic.medley@undp.org
Aziz-u-Rahman Gulbahari, National Public Information Officer; tel: +93 (0)799 370 567; email: aziz.gulbahari@undp.org

www.undp.org.af

An Image of Afghanistan

Photo: Nasirudin