

# PRESS RELEASE



United Nations Development Programme

Afghanistan Country Office, Shah Mehmood Ghazi Watt, Kabul

## Afghans celebrate disability day for the first time

**Kabul 2 December**– Hundreds of disabled Afghans came via wheelchairs, crutches, sight guides and canes to the Intercontinental Hotel ballroom to mark the International Day of Disability on 2<sup>nd</sup> December. The event marked the first time the day has been celebrated nationally in Afghanistan since its establishment by the United Nations in 1982. Over five hundred people, including the Minister of Martyrs and Disabled (MMD), H.E. Abdullah Wardak, and representatives from NGOs, UN agencies, government ministries and family members of disabled persons attended the event, which was sponsored by MMD, UNDP and UNICEF and featured speeches, dramas, songs and poetry.

“Today we stand up for the dignity of persons with disabilities, we stand up for their rights to live as equal citizens, and we stand up to champion all that they have to offer to a better Afghanistan,” said Minister Wardak.

The Ministry estimates that there are over one million people living with disabilities in Afghanistan. A new study commissioned by UNICEF on public perceptions of people with disabilities showed that they routinely face segregation from society in the form of verbal and physical abuse, lack of access to education and healthcare and barriers to employment and discrimination.

Sarah Dyer, Project Manager for UNDP’s Comprehensive Disabled Afghans Programme, emphasized that the goal of the disabled movement in Afghanistan is not to create special programmes and exceptions for disabled people, but to give them access to the very same services that the rest of the population enjoys: “We all gain tremendously—economically, socially, politically and culturally—from the integration of disabled persons into society. That so many people turned out to mark this day is another step toward a stronger society.”

Shaheen Hassan is a teacher of English and Religion at a Kabul high school for the blind. He lost his sight to glaucoma when he was twelve. In the hall outside the ballroom, he was demonstrating a new computer for blind students that allows them to read anything on the screen in Braille, with their fingertips. Six of these computers were recently donated to the school by the Italian Cooperation. “A blind person can work and move and live by these computers. My students are intelligent, and they are interested to continue their learning and have more information. When we can give them possibilities like this, all our lives can be better.”

Hassan considers it a victory for the disabled to finally have their own day to celebrate everything they’ve worked for and every obstacle they’ve overcome. “Last year I heard on the radio an Indian girl who had no hands, and she was playing music. The second of December means showing the abilities of disabled people—that they can play music without hands.”

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