



UNDP Afghanistan Newsletter

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ICT helps consolidate national unity and speed up reconstruction efficacy

The ICT project is supported by the EC, Microsoft, CISCO, France, UNDP and USAID

Inside this issue:

UNDP's Support to the Establishment of Afghan Legislature (SEAL) project has adopted an overarching approach in its implementation of activities in support of the Afghan National Assembly. In this special section of the UNDP newsletter, we look at the capacity building efforts under the SEAL project, which continue at an accelerated pace and at various levels.

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The Minister of Communications Amirzai Sangin strongly believes that increased access to information and communication technology (ICT) will not only help further strengthen national unity among Afghans but also render the reconstruction efforts more efficient.

Interviewed in his office in connection with the forthcoming National ICT Conference in Afghanistan, to be held in Kabul on April 25 and 26, Mr. Sangin strongly emphasized his conviction that the conference would make a major contribution to creating ICT awareness among Afghan society.

"There is a belief among the youth that if they can learn a little bit of English and have some computer skills they can get a good job. This is wrong, they need to understand the importance of ICT. This conference will help create an increased awareness in society, including among key government officials, in particular education officials," he said.

"We are in the age of information and Afghanistan should be part of the information society, ICT should be a part of everyday life in Afghanistan," Mr. Sangin continued.

Pointing to the television in his room showing the live coverage of the confirmation hearings of the new cabinet ministers at the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of the parliament), Mr. Sangin said: "Regardless of decades of fighting in the country, regardless of their political allegiances, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, look at our deputies in the assembly, they are discussing issues in a very civilized manner and this process is being followed by

the population. This is how communications are helping national unity." He also said there were now 1.2 million cell phone owners in the country and that the possibility for people to communicate existed. This was a great opportunity for people to understand each other, he said.



Minister Sangin testing a recently installed telephone line

Asked about the state of inadequate infrastructure in the country, the Minister recalled that four years ago only 20,000 telephone lines had existed in the whole country, that it had not been possible to have international telephone conversations and that Internet had been completely banned. Comparing the current situation to that time, Mr. Sangin underlined that major progress had already been made with many private sector companies being licensed as providers of Internet and mobile phone services. According to the Minister, by the end of 2006, the wireless fixed telephone lines will reach 285,000, allowing not only voice, but also data exchange throughout the network, connecting hundreds of thousands of households around the country.

The Minister went on to say that further infrastructure investment plans were prepared

and a major project to establish a national optical fibre network would get underway shortly. The project will create a network along the major highway circling the whole territory of the country and broadband connections will be made possible through links to similar networks in the neighbouring countries. This project is believed to address two serious problems with the currently used satellite-based communication technology: the high cost and limited bandwidth capacity.

As a new Cabinet member, Mr. Sangin said the government was well aware of the need to bring about changes in the lives of families and improve the living standards of the population. He stressed that the efforts on the ICT sector were directly linked to the overall reconstruction effort. "When you have ICT in place, project implementation becomes much more efficient, timely and accurate," said the Minister. "Then the contribution of the ICT sector to the reconstruction effort can be clearly visible in the increased effectiveness of implementation," he concluded.

The National ICT Conference is designed to celebrate and highlight ICT successes, create a forum for increased linkages between the public and private sectors and to assess Afghanistan's readiness to enter the global information society.

The conference will serve as a platform for Afghanistan to prepare for the adoption of the best and latest technologies to realize its goals outlined in Afghanistan's National Development Strategy and to meet its commitment outlined in the London Compact.

SEAL capacity building efforts expand to new fronts

Acquaintance with Globalization

More than one hundred members of the Meshrano Jirga (the upper house) of the Afghan National Assembly have completed a three-cycle study tour to Dubai designed to help them better understand the process of globalization and the UN's Millennium Development goals.

Three groups of up to 34 members each of the National Assembly attended two and half days of seminars, meetings and visits in Dubai organized by the UNDP's SEAL project (Support to the Establishment of Afghan Legislature). All three groups participated in visits to the Jebel Ali Economic Free Zone, Dubai Internet City and meetings with the Afghan business community in Dubai.

UNDP's Advisor on Capacity Building with SEAL, Dennis Sammut, said the meetings with the Afghan business community were vital: "This is an increasingly important group of people as they can be the catalyst for economic activity and help the first steps of development."

Seminars highlighted issues such as the challenges and benefits of globalisation and its impact on values and traditions, using case studies from Malaysia and Jordan. The UN's Millennium Development Goals and global efforts to combat poverty were also discussed.

Assembly members also visited the Emirates Centre for Strategic Defence and Research, a think tank in Abu Dhabi.

The centre is very well known in the region and is a regular stop for many VIPs visiting the UAE.

It provides a visual example to visitors of how tradition and technology can coincide, with a prayer room sitting next to an impressive high tech media monitoring room where fifty television screens broadcast images from all the main media outlets of the world.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union supported the Dubai meetings with two senators from Malaysia and three MPs from Jordan attending.

The trips are designed as part of the overall capacity building efforts based on a needs assessment. Before the National Assembly of Afghanistan opened on December 19 2005, the SEAL project conducted a survey among the members of parliament in which 87% of them responded. In their responses to the survey, an overwhelming majority of the new members of the legislature stressed the need for acquiring international experience as well as foreign language training.

Further international exchanges in Kabul

The study tour to Dubai was only the first stage of interaction for the Meshrano Jirga members. It is to continue with the *International Conference on Effective Legislative-Executive Relations* organized by the Meshrano Jirga in close collaboration with the SEAL project.

The Conference is being held in Kabul from 15-17 April 2006.

The conference is expected to deepen the understanding of legislative-executive relationships with an explicit aim to strengthen the legislative capacity of the upper house. It will also explore the critical issue of parliamentary oversight of the executive within the framework of the Afghan Constitution.

The conference will create an opportunity for Afghan senators and senior government representatives to learn lessons and good practices from other parliamentary jurisdictions on legislative-executive relations, the e-parliament initiative and parliamentary oversight. It is hoped that the conference will contribute to the growth of a functional relationship between the legislature and the executive.

The core participants of this conference will be the members of the Meshrano Jirga, key staff of the parliament's administration and relevant ministries particularly the State Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs.

Moreover, members of selected parliaments and some senior government and parliamentary officials from various countries (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Canada) have been invited to contribute to the process. Resource persons from the UN Democracy Fund, the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU), the Canadian Parliamentary Centre, UNDP HQ and the SEAL Project will also join the discourse.

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Afghan Assembly now has a library

The US Library of Congress is known as the biggest library in the world with some 29 million volumes located in its shelves reaching 530 miles in length. When the retired President Thomas Jefferson offered his own book collection in 1814 to the US Congress, which constituted the basis for today's biggest collection of publications in numerous languages, he said: "...there is, in fact, no subject to which a Member of Congress may not have occasion to refer," underlying the importance of relying on knowledge for any legislature.

Almost 200 years later, a newly established legislature is taking the initial steps to building up its own base of knowledge, thanks to the SEAL (Support to the Establishment of Afghan Legislature) project's support.

Appreciating the importance of the event, Mohammad Arif Noorzai the First Deputy Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house) of the Afghan National Assembly, said at the ribbon cutting ceremony for the legislature's new library that it had a "great and

positive meaning" for the Assembly and its members. The second Deputy Speaker of the Meshrano Jirga (the upper house), Burhanullah Shinwarai, said he was sure the library would "play a good role as an archive and place of knowledge."

At the April 12 inauguration, the SEAL project donated 231 titles to the library, some of them up to 16 volumes, just as the first step in the creation of at least the basic information pool that the Assembly members can refer to in their legislative endeavours. But the book donation was not the only contribution. A number of desktop computers with Internet connection and a LAN configuration were also installed in the library to allow members of the assembly or their staff to search information on the world wide web.

On the way is another batch of 415 titles, again from SEAL.



Mohammad Arif Noorzai (left) opens the library

The National Assembly will, however, be looking forward to receiving further donations of books from donors or other legislatures around the world.

For the time being there is enough space to accommodate 6000 volumes and storing the new donations will create no problems.

Assembly staff trained in keeping record of parliamentary proceedings

Rodney Mees has been travelling to Kabul frequently since December 2005 to address one of the major issues that has to be tackled in the functioning of a legislature: record keeping. But his assignment has taken an unexpected twist to take its current shape.

Mr. Mees, Director of the Reporting Department with the Chamber of Representatives of the Federal Parliament in Belgium, was first invited to Kabul by the UNDP via the International Parliamentary Union to support the inauguration of the Afghan National Assembly which was formed as a result of last year's parliamentary elections. With the unforeseen delays of a few days in the inauguration, he found enough time not only to inform himself in detail about the process of the establishment

of the institution, but also to spot an aspect of the SEAL (Support to the Establishment of Afghan Legislature) project that needed some beefing up: the documentation of the parliamentary proceedings.

So the SEAL project invited Mr. Mees to come again in February 2006 for one week to be followed by a ten-day stay in April to train the Afghan National Assembly staff on how to draft and edit the transcriptions of the parliamentary proceedings.

Prior to departure from Kabul at the end of his April training sessions, Mr. Mees said thanks to new technologies, it was not difficult to digitally record all the proceedings at the assembly and then to have the recording transcribed. But he said it was a challenge to find qualified individuals to carry out the task.

According to Mr. Mees, a team of at

least six should be trained and prepared for keeping records of the parliamentary proceedings for each one of the houses of the bicameral legislature.

Another significant challenge is finding the time for training of the existing staff. Although the parliament's working hours have recently become more or less regular, unlike the initial days after the inauguration (with sessions lasting as long as eight or nine hours), Mr. Mees says there is still not enough time to schedule the whole training programme. He says out of the 130 or so slides he has to show to his trainees, until now he could hold discussions on only a quarter of them.

Mr. Mees will be back in June to continue his efforts to ensure that Afghanistan's parliament's work is properly documented and archived.

Three provincial CISCO Academies formally inaugurated

Mindful of the fact that one can never be too early to prepare for the head-spinning fast developments of the IT world, UNDP, CISCO and USAID have long joined forces to prepare Afghan human resources for computer networking and IT-related careers in the public and private sectors and for higher education in engineering, computer science, and related fields.

The Cisco Academy Networking Programme, launched back in 2002, but confined to Kabul until recently, is now expanding its outreach to Afghanistan's provinces in an effort to take the service to where it is needed. The goal is to help bridge the digital divide in Afghanistan and to create a core group of specialists who contribute to a modern workforce, moving the country into the Information Age.

The last six weeks witnessed the official launch of the CISCO Academy Programme in the provinces of Herat, Balkh and Khost with the attending dignitaries stressing the importance of the inauguration of the CISCO academies for the future development of their and neighbour-

ing provinces. In all three provinces, actual lessons in the CCNA1 (Cisco Certified Networking Association) courses had already started back in December 2005, but the official start of the programmes had to wait for organizational reasons.

The first launch on February 27 at the University of Khost could not be accompanied by an inaugural ceremony due to security concerns.

On March 14 2006 UNDP launched the Herat University CISCO Networking Academy on behalf of the collaborating partners including CISCO Systems, USAID, ITU and the Government of Afghanistan. The CISCO Networking Academy Manager and Coordinator travelled to Herat for the official launch ceremony and for monitoring and site evaluation. The UNDP team also delivered a CISCO lab bundle, consisting of 6 CISCO routers and 3 switches, to the Herat University CISCO Academy so that students can begin practical lab exercises in CCNA2 course.

Dr Naim Asad, Herat University Vice Chancellor and Faryeh Amin, Head of Herat University's Faculty of Eco-

nomics were on hand for the inauguration ceremony as well as the Deputy Governor of the province, who all expressed hope that the CISCO Academy programme would help prepare the ground for IT development in the province.

Then on April 3 2006 came the official start of the Balkh University CISCO Networking Academy programme with Nematullah Mohsab, the Deputy Balkh Governor, thanking UNDP and other project partners for taking this initiative to support Afghanistan in an area where such support is much needed. Habibullah Habib, Balkh University Chancellor echoed the Deputy Governor and said: "Afghanistan is a member of the international community and as part of the world community, we must do all in our power to join the new world of technology, otherwise we will get remain far behind other countries." Mr. Habib expressed the hope that the CISCO Academy and the IT centre accompanying it would help Afghanistan to achieve that goal.

All three new CISCO Academies have achieved the originally set enrolment goal of girls making up at least 40% of the trainees.



CISCO students at the Herat Academy listening to the lecture

"Afghanistan is a member of the international community and as part of the world community, we must do all in our power to join the new world of technology, otherwise we will get remain far behind other countries."

**Habibullah Habib
Chancellor
Balkh University**



Computer networking will provide them with employment and contribute to the development of Mazar-e-Sharif

Explosions mark International Mine Awareness Day activities



Mines first displayed, then destroyed

Afghanistan, home to one of the world's most mine-laden territories, was rocked by two days of thunderous explosions on April 3 and 4. But this time it was without casualties and aimed at reasserting a commitment that Afghanistan should not lose any more of its people to mines any longer.

The events in Deh Sabz, 25 km northeast of Kabul on April 3 and in Sheberghan, Jawzjan province, on the next day were organized to mark International Mine Awareness Day. Appropriately for the occasion, thousands of mines were destroyed in remote-controlled explosions in front of the TV cameras.

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary General

in Afghanistan, Tom Koenigs, was on hand to witness the April 4 event, alongside General Hans Werner Ahrens, the Deputy Commander of ISAF, and Elizabeth Baldwin-Jones, the Deputy Ambassador of Canada to Afghanistan. Juma Khan Hamdard, the Governor of Jawzjan province and General Rashid Dostum, received praise from Mr. Koenigs for their support to the de-mining and disarmament process in general.

In his speech during the ceremony Mr. Koenigs said the Afghan government and the United Nations Development Programme had jointly located hundreds of ammunitions and mines caches around the country and to date destroyed over 34,000 anti-personnel mines and

over 4,000 anti-tank mines.

He said: "In the space of just twelve months the surface area contaminated by landmines in Afghanistan was reduced by one-half, and it continues to fall. And last year, over two million Afghans received mine awareness education. These steps have together resulted in a significant drop in landmine casualties."

Mines in Afghanistan, however, continue to kill or maim 100 individuals a month.

As a party to the 1997 Ottawa Convention banning all land mines, Afghanistan, as the other 150 signatory nations, is striving to destroy all landmines in its borders by March 2007.

Disability of the invisible kind discussed at NPAD



Mohammad is waiting to benefit from disability support programmes

The people of Afghanistan, apart from the tragedy of having had to deal with the physical wounds of decades of war, have been traumatized by the experiences that they had to endure in the course of successive conflicts. Unlike those shrapnel or bullet wounds that can be visible, the traumatic experiences that they have lived through, are most likely to have left much deeper but invisible scars in the psyche of the people of the war-ravaged country.

UNDP's National Programme for Action on Disability (NPAD) has recently had the opportunity to hear an expert view on the issue, possibly paving the way to consider developments of new activities to address the issues of mental disorders.

In her presentation to NPAD, Dr. Inge Missmahl, a psychologist with Caritas Germany, an international NGO, spoke of her findings that she had distilled after conducting 1600 hours per month for 11 months in 17 centres around

Kabul.

The conclusions were stark: be it from personality or a result of post-war trauma, women are the main victims of psychological disorders in society and their suffering mostly comes from domestic violence.

Coupled with other sociological features of Afghan society, this appears to be a clear threat to the cause of human development in the country. While 2 million are thought to be disabled in Afghanistan, only one in four is estimated to be disabled as a result of war or military activity. The rest are mostly victims of intra-family marriages or of other social malaise.

When the people traumatized as a result of war or domestic violence are factored in, the resulting picture shows that Afghan society, already suffering from the lack of an adequately educated work force, is deprived of the potential that 10 percent or more of its population can contribute to

its development.

Rudy Rodrigues, an advisor to the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled, says disabled people in Afghanistan are among the five most marginalized groups and expresses his concern that Afghanistan's progress may not be complete if this issue is not dealt with.

There is, however, some good news. The Afghanistan Compact, the development blueprint agreed by the Government of Afghanistan and the international donor community at the London Conference in February, does include a commitment: "By end-2010, 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."

The NPAD project is supported by USAID, UNDP, Japan and the French Trust Fund.

RISE gets underway to provide comprehensive development support to three provinces

UNDP's Urban Development Group (UDG) is taking a major stride in expanding its activities under a major new project, RISE (Regional Initiative for Sustainable Economy), with Japanese funding and the cooperation of the Government of Afghanistan and two sister UN agencies, FAO and UNMACA.

The project document allowing for the launch of RISE was signed by Obaidullah Rameen, Minister of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food (MAAHF), Yusuf Pashtun, Minister of Urban Development and Housing (MUDH) and Marcia de Castro, Senior Advisor to the UNDP Country Director, on April 12 in a ceremony at the MAAHF premises.

Mr. Rameen, speaking at the ceremony, expressed his appreciation of the donation of the Japanese grant for the implementation of the project and the hope that the project would provide much needed support to vulnerable farmers. Mr. Pashtun, for his part, said he expected the project to make a major contribution to capacity development at both provincial and national levels. Ms. de Castro, quoting the message by Anita Nirody, acting UNDP Country Director, said the project was designed to assist vulnerable sections of the population in particular and that the effort would also contribute to the enhancement of project implementation capacity on the part of the partner ministries representing the Afghan government.

The US\$12.7m project is to continue for a year and targets three provinces: Kandahar, Nangarhar (Jalalabad) and Balkh (Mazar-e-Sharif).

Project activities are designed



From left: Marcia de Castro, Obaidullah Rameen, Yusuf Pashtun

mainly to create an environment conducive to sustainable economic development by addressing the fundamental livelihood issues in these regions. While UNMACA, for example, coordinates mine risk survey and de-mining activities around the project sites in the three provinces, FAO will provide inputs to encourage increased farming activity for the most vulnerable farmers and UDG will undertake infrastructure work involving such vulnerable groups as returnees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), disabled, women and ex-combatants in employment generation and skills development/consolidation programmes. Project monitoring and evaluation capacity building for local authorities will also be carried out alongside those activities.

In the course of the implementation of activities, RISE will cooperate closely not only with municipalities and local communities but also with local units and departments in the Ministry of Women's Af-

fairs, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled alongside the MUDH and the MHAFF.

UDG's project planning and implementation are guided by the following principles:

- △ Employment generation
- △ Reintegration
- △ Infrastructure for economic growth
- △ Healthier environment
- △ Natural environment
- △ Participation, ownership and sustainability
- △ Development of standard models of urban infrastructure
- △ Universal accessibility
- △ Synergy with other aid agencies and existing initiatives

Project activities are designed mainly to create an environment conducive to sustainable economic development by addressing the fundamental livelihood issues in the regions.



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.

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Up coming ICT Conference

Afghanistan's first ever National ICT Conference takes place 25-26 April 2006.

The conference will be held in the Loya Jirga tent.

All those wishing to exhibit and participate should click online at: www.ictconference.org.af.



An image of Afghanistan

Photo by: Dominic Medley

