



UNHCR OCM Afghanistan, P.O.Box 3232, Kabul, Afghanistan

Free of Charge

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RETURN

Information Update

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ADVICE FOR CIRCULATION: This update is intended for Afghans abroad, as well as those displaced inside their country, to help them make an informed choice about returning to their homes. It is a public document and should be circulated as widely as possible.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Afghan refugees in Pakistan are advised that assisted repatriation will restart on 2 March 2004.

Afghans who wish to return voluntarily from Pakistan should approach appropriate official centers to register for assistance.

At present, repatriation will be facilitated only through the main border crossings at Torkham (NWFP) and Chaman (Balochistan province). UNHCR will announce the reopening of additional facilities when information becomes available.

UNHCR will reopen encashment centres in Afghanistan in Mohmandara (Jalalabad), Daman (Kandahar), and Pul-i-Khumri (Baghlan). It is expected that the Kabul encashment centre in the industrial sites will reopen on 4 March 2004.

Beginning 2 March 2004 UNHCR will give each returning refugee cash assistance in place of food and material assistance. This amount replaces the items distributed until now, including the wheat ration from WFP. Each returning refugee – regardless of age and family size - will receive US\$8 in addition to transport assistance. The new cash grant will be given to returning refugees at the appropriate encashment centre inside Afghanistan. (See page 10)

1. PRESIDENT KARZAI SIGNS DECREE ON ELECTION

On 18 February 2004, President Karzai signed a decree on the arrangements for the elections. The decree sets out the functions of the Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB) and establishes an Electoral Secretariat, which is to implement the decisions of the JEMB.

The new framework for the elections will be to continue the current voter registration in the eight regional centres until 7 April 2004, at which time all sites will be permanently closed to the population in these areas. On 1 May 2004, for a period of three weeks, registration sites in 4,200 locations will open throughout the country, in every province and in as many rural locations as possible. This will allow eligible voters to register at a location convenient to them within a specific period of time. The Joint Electoral Management Body will announce the exact locations of these registration sites towards the end of March 2004.

So far more than 1,200,000 Afghans (74 percent men and 26 percent women) have registered to vote. Nearly 300 registration teams are currently registering over 30,000 voters a day in the eight regional centres of the country.

2. PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS

In order to help to establish a more secure Afghanistan and to expand reconstruction programmes beyond large cities, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have been established in various provinces throughout Afghanistan. PRTs are joint civil military units mainly from the US. The US PRTs include US Army Civil Affairs personnel, USAID, USDA and other agencies.

The existing PRTs are in Mazar, Kunar, Bamyan, Gardez, Parwan, Herat and Kandahar. Jalalabad, Qalat, Ghazni, Assadabad, Khost and Terin Kot are among the planned PRTs.

Bamyan PRT: In Bamyan province, USAID is working with the US military, the department of state, other US agencies, the United Nations and the appropriate Afghan Ministries to construct local municipal buildings in four districts. In the spring, plans are being developed to build 14 Bailey bridges throughout Bamyan, which are needed during the flood season.

Mazar PRT: USAID is working with PRT staff to develop micro financing programmes that would help to promote small industries such as poultry production. The PRT is also working to rehabilitate an existing water well that is currently broken, and construct a pipeline from a water reservoir to neighbourhood street outlets.

Kunar PRT: The PRT was inaugurated in Assadabad (Capital of Eastern Kunar province) on 19 Feb 2004 and the following projects will be implemented under this programme: to asphalt the road from Jalalabad to Kunar, to repair roads within the province, to construct a hydro power station, to construct an airport, to construct and rehabilitate some water canals and streams, and to provide medical services.

The possible additional future locations for PRTs are: Lashkargah, Farah, Sharana (Paktika), Badghis, Ghor, Faizabad, Maimana, Wardak and Laghman.

3. IDPs FROM NORTHERN PROVINCES TO RETURN HOME

Thousands of ethnic Pashtuns who were displaced from northwestern Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime should be able to return home soon because factional fighting in their province has eased.

Representatives of some 15,000 people from Faryab province, who fled to Pakistan or are sheltering in camps elsewhere in Afghanistan, returned to their places of origin in an organised visit by UNHCR in mid February 2004 and expressed willingness to go back.

Filippo Grandi, UNHCR Chief of Mission in Afghanistan, told reporters during a press conference on 19 February 2004 in the capital, Kabul, that “hopefully at least some of them can return before the elections” due in June. He added “the security situation is improved, and there is less factional fighting.”

Grandi appealed for international donors to help support the return of displaced people and their peaceful resettlement. He said that many had lost their land to mid and low level commanders of private militia groups, and had been subjected to illegal taxation on the crops they had produced.

The IDPs’ representatives visited Faryab and Mazar, and met with Junbesh representatives as well as local authorities, UNAMA, etc. After the visit they show willingness to go back, and while they were in Maimana they issued a statement, recognizing the improvements and stating that the environment is now conducive to negotiate to return.

About 180,000 Afghans are displaced inside the country because of fighting or economic hardship. They are currently staying in six camps in the south and west of the country, and include about 30,000-40,000 Pashtuns who have fled their homes in the north and northwest.

4. SECURITY

(15 – 29 February 2004)

Central Region

Kabul: Five Afghan aid workers, who were employed in a non governmental organisation, were killed and two wounded in an ambush on Wednesday, 25 February 2004 on a road northeast of Kabul.

Parwan: On 15 February 2004, a quantity of heavy and strategic artillery was transferred from Panjsher district of Parwan province to Kabul. The ammunition was handed over to the National Army.

Northern Region:

Kunduz and Baghlan: Afghan forces captured 30 armed men in northern Kunduz and Baghlan provinces as a result of military operations launched by the Kunduz Military Corps. The captured persons were causing disorder and undermining security.

Many of checkpoints, belonging to armed groups, have been removed from the northern Salang road and instead, the national police forces have been deployed to maintain security. A group of around 100 national police has been sent from the centre of Kunduz to different parts of the province to ensure public order.

Samangan: Abdul Khalil Bakhtyari has been appointed as the security commander of Samangan province. He promised the people to be honest, faithful and decisive to his country and Samangan people, and to carry out his duties well.

Southern Region:

Kandahar: One person was killed and three others were injured in a helicopter crash in Kandahar on 22 February 2004. The helicopter belonged to a US social services team, which intended to visit a school in Panjwai District of Kandahar. The same team had built the school. The helicopter was flying low when it came under fire from Kalashnikov rifles.

Helmand: 38 suspects who were arrested in Bad-i-Tond Mountains, were released after an investigation by the coalition forces. Two others are still in prison. This operation was carried out by the coalition forces started in early January 2004.

Eastern region:

Nangarhar: Two men accused of firing rockets on Jalalabad Airport were arrested on 22 February 2004 in Nangarhar province. The men were arrested in a village called Saracha in Nangarhar province while about to launch rockets on Nangarhar airport. These two men were arrested with heavy rockets and missiles, remote controls, batteries and cables.

5. ENVIRONMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

UNEP, United Nations Environment Programmes, says the drought have caused serious resource degradation such as lowered water tables, dried up wetlands, denuded forests, eroded land and depleted wildlife population. The Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan (TISA) with the help of the donors and aid agencies is working on rehabilitate and improvement of the environment in the country.

Central Region

Kabul Municipality: The Kabul Municipality has launched a programme of cleaning the city since early 2003. Since then, almost 80% of the rubbish has been taken 35 kilometres away from

the city. The Municipality officials say their main achievement in the past year was the fact that a large amount of garbage was carried out of the city.

Based on TISA's request, UNEP and the European Commission and the Ministry of Irrigation, Water Resources and Environment (MIWRE) started a project to promote and support environmental rehabilitation in the country on 28 October 2003, which costs 4.27 million Euros.

With an initial funding of 973,000 Euros, phase one of this project started in Kabul on 28 October 2003. The second phase with 3.3 million Euros budget is planned for 2004, which will further the capacity of the MIWRE, and also includes the environmental education at universities, schools and public sites.

Forests and grazing lands: The Ministry of Agriculture officials said that there are forests in all central provinces but most of them have either dried up during the years of drought or were illegally cut.

Assistance:

- World Bank through UN Habitat is providing Kabul Municipality with petrol and spare parts for the vehicles which carry garbage out of the city.
- ECHO has recently hired few vehicles, which help in carrying the garbage.
- The Indian government has promised 125 vehicles (25 trucks and 10 water tanks have already arrived, and 35 trucks are in Herat, which will soon arrive in Kabul).
- Japan has recently placed 20 big rubbish bins around the city, mainly next to markets and public sites. The municipality empties the bins twice a day.
- UN Habitat, UNDP, US embassy, governments of Korea and Iran as well as other agencies have provided wells, tools, vehicles and helped in cleaning the ditches on the sidewalks in various locations of Kabul during 2003.

Future plans:

- The sewage system in Kabul City has been damaged through the years of conflicts. The Kabul Municipality, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, is planning to rehabilitate the sewage system in the city, and is looking for donors support.
- FAO, UNDP, UNOPS, some other UN agencies, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and governments of France, Germany, Italy, Iran and Thailand have promised to provide assistance for forest restoration. They also promised to provide saplings to be planted around the Kabul City. The officials said these are long-term programmes, which need a very big budget and will take many years to be implemented.

- The government of Iran has provided the municipality with 500,000 saplings, which would be planted in various parts of the Kabul City in the coming months.
- The US Embassy has promised to provide almost one million saplings, which will be planted around the Kabul City, parks, schools, university and public sites during 2004. They say most of these saplings would be bought from Pakistan and Iran.

Sources of information: Ministry of Irrigation, Water Resources and Environment, Kabul Municipality and UNEP

Northern Region:

A major part of the city sanitation is running by the Mazar Municipality. 59 daily labourers are working on cleaning the city, moving the garbage out of the city and drilling canals and drains. This Municipality also rehabilitated some of the parks and gravelled some of the streets in the city.

The Agriculture Department has a reforestation plan and at present it is implementing some of the projects such as planting seedlings in and outside the city of Mazar. However, the implementing process is very slow due to lack of equipment and budget. The Forestry section of the Agriculture Department in Mazar also has several groups of foresters who protect the forests against illegal abuses.

UNOPS is currently supporting reforestation in the region.

Public Health Department had organised several health education trainings in schools and women communities in ten districts of Mazar city last year with the objectives of improving health situation in these areas by providing the trainees with the information on safe drinking water, vaccination and sanitation guidelines. IRC, SCUK and SCUS will continue this programme in the future.

The environmental sanitation section of the Public Health Department check the public baths, hotel and restaurants' foods as well as imported food items on regular basis.

Baghlan: The environment situation in Baghlan province has improved since 2003 and the Municipality in Baghlan has made efforts to clean the city with the help of few international NGOs. UN Habitat established a system of collecting garbage from the city to be carried outside the city. Habitat built community forums in each district, which work on public awareness, health education trainings and community based activities such as carrying garbage out of the city using pushcarts. Habitat also supported drains lining and road gravelling and built about 60 garbage bins for the public use.

Assistance: UN Habitat provided a large number of people in different parts of the city with seedlings last year.

Sources of information: Forestry Section of Agriculture Department, Municipality, UN Habitat, Department of Public Health, FAO.

South eastern Region:

Paktia Province: According to the CARE International's survey, more than 6,000 trees are cut in this province almost every day.

Paktika Province: There are forests around Urgon, Gomal, Barmal and some other parts of the province. Trees from these forests are cut illegally almost on daily basis for domestic uses and selling.

Assistance: CARE International, WSTA, ISRA, IRC and DACAAR have constructed a large number of latrines in different districts of Paktika, Paktia, Ghazni and Khost provinces during last three years, which were funded by UNHCR, EU and Australian governments.

Future Plans:

- Forestation Department is going to do forestation on two Hectares of land in 2004.
- The Gardez Municipality is going to plant a large number of fruit and non fruit trees in the coming spring in the city.
- The Municipality have plans for shifting the slaughter place to somewhere out of the city, keep drainages clean and carry garbage regularly out of the city.

Sources of information: UNHCR, CARE International, Provincial Forestation Departments and Municipalities.

Eastern Region:

Natural forests in the Eastern Region cover more than 300,000 Hectares of land, which have been severely affected. According to a survey done by FAO, 70% of the forests have been illegally cut, which has caused 80% decrease in the wildlife.

There are Forestry Sections in the Agricultural Departments in each of the eastern provinces, which are mainly responsible for the monitoring and preservation of forests.

According to the Jalalabad Agricultural Departments (JAD), the process of illegal cutting of forests speeded up from 1992 until the Taliban time. JAD added that the Taliban prevented cutting of the forest trees in all provinces except Kunar in the Eastern Region, but no rehabilitation or reforestation had taken place during their time. The JAD officials said that after the collapse of the Taliban, the warlords restarted cutting of the forest trees.

The natural forests in Nangarhar province cover 134,800 Hectares, in Laghman 57,689 Hectares, in Kunar 66,500 Hectares and in Nuristan 50 Hectares of land.

Assistance: UNHCR funded environmental projects implemented by AREA in the region are:

- About 30,000 different kinds of trees were planted and 105 check dams (for protection of forest areas from soil erosion) were constructed on five Hectares of land in Dih Bala forest.
- 60 orchards were established in Ghanikhel and Batikot districts.
- About 30,000 fruit and non fruit saplings from Behsood Nursery (for trees) were distributed to the farmers, municipality and schools.
- Two hydro power stations were installed, one in Moriz village in Dih Bala district of Nangarhar and another Lokar village in Alingar district of Laghman province.
- 70 Bio Gas plants, which produce gas from animal's dung, were constructed in Nangarhar and Laghman provinces.
- During the last three years, the Environmental Protection Awareness Programme was conducted for 30,000 students in 20 girls and boys schools.

UNDP, HABITAT, and UNICEF supported the following projects:

- 33.5 Km of drain was concreted and eight latrines were constructed in Jalalabad. 416 latrines were constructed in Kunar province and 678 teachers were trained in teaching environmental issue in the schools of the eastern provinces.

Future Plans:

- HABITAT is planning to remove all the garbage and wastes from Jalalabad City, to concrete drains, and to construct two parks in this city.
- UNDP is planning to construct a public bathroom in each district of the Jalalabad City.
- UNHCR is planning to continue reforestation in Dih Bala district and Environmental Protection Awareness in schools.

Sources of information: Nangarhar and Laghman provincial Departments of Agriculture, Municipalities, AREA (Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy-conservation in Afghanistan), UNICEF, UNDP and HABITAT

Western Region:

Herat officials have established a City Solidarity Committee. This committee monitors different activities, but mainly the rehabilitation affairs and city sanitation works. This committee is combined of the National Security, Municipality, Traffic, and Transport Departments.

The authorities of Herat assisted Agriculture Department to conduct tree plantation campaign in Herat province. The first round was in 2002 just after the fall of the Taliban and the second

round is happening now. So far around 400,000 different kinds of saplings have been planted in and around the city.

In the districts of Herat the local population carries out the tree plantation programme initiated by Shura and village elders. In each plantation season, people start planting in their farms and public places.

The Agriculture Department in Badghis conducted tree plantation campaign last year in which 20,000 saplings were planted. In 2004, 13,000 saplings will be planted.

Parks: In Herat after the fall of the Taliban one new park (Milat) was established and two parks (Shaidayee and Takht-e-Safar) were rehabilitated. In Farah, UN-Habitat helped the government to establish a Park (Solh), which is still unfinished.

Forestation, Pastures and Greenery: The Department of Agriculture has been working on the improvement and rehabilitation of forests, pastures and green areas particularly in the past two years. There are 12 artificial forests, several other natural mountain based forests and around 12,629,640 Jereeb of pastures in all 15 districts of Herat.

Sanitation: City Municipality has placed garbage bins in different parts of the city. The municipality in 2003, constructed the city canals with the help of Irrigation Department. The construction of canals flow the baths and latrine spoiled water and drain all outside the city.

Natural Water Sources: In the last years, efforts were made in recovering the natural water resources. Community residents through public gathering and elders of the districts were informed not to spoil the underground water sources by digging latrines nearby water points and to avoid putting garbage into the natural water canals.

Assistance

- Drifting Sand: DACAAR (Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees) in Pashtun Zarghon district implemented drifting sand clearance. The farming lands and water canals were affected by shifting sand. Under this project DACAAR provided the villagers 14,000 cuttings and 16,000 saplings.
- UNHCR implemented Hygiene Education and Sanitation projects through implementing partners in three districts in Herat, two districts in Badghis, two districts in Ghor and three districts in Farah.
- In 2002-3, UNHCR constructed 1,224 latrines and 338 baths in western provinces.
- In 2002-3, UN Habitat implemented Developing Community Based Sanitation Services Management Systems in all city districts of Herat under which Health Educators were trained too. Same project was implemented in Farah.

- FAO organised agriculture training in Herat, Badghis, Ghor, and Farah provinces for the staff members of Agriculture and Irrigation Departments.
- UN Habitat implemented a tree plantation project in Farah City.
- Ockenden International is implementing rehabilitation of irrigation sources in Nimroz.
- COOPI implemented hygiene education programmes in Nimroz.
- In Lash-o-Jawain and Shib Koh districts of Farah, sandstorms have badly affected the area. UNHCR distributed wheelbarrows, shovels and pickaxe to help villages clean their area. As of now, WFP is implementing sand clearance under Food for Work (FFW) project through WVI and HELP organisations.

Future Plans: UNOPS together with Irrigation Department will implement the Forest Rehabilitation Project. Pistachio and Juniper forests will be rehabilitated. UNOPS will establish protected areas for the forests.

UNOPS will start the implementation of Forest Rehabilitation in near future. FAO is planning to organise forest protection training for the farmers in the coming weeks.

Sources of Information: Agriculture Department, Irrigation & Environment Department, FAO, UNOPS, DACAAR, Municipality, DRRD, UNHCR, UNICEF and UN-Habitat.

ALL REGIONS

Problems: According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL) 60% of the forests in the country have been illegally cut or damaged during the two decades of war. The ministry officials believe that the forests are illegally cut by some of the commanders and transported to neighbouring countries. The MAL has proposed to the Ministry of Interior to help in ensuring security through their police check posts in forest areas.

Population density in small areas, open drainage, usage of local latrines, deforestation and demolishing of gardens because of drought and war, poor economy of the people, storage of garbage in the open areas have also contributed in damaging the environment.

6. ANNOUNCEMENT TO RETURNEES

Afghan refugees are advised to take note of the following:

- Returnees have the free choice of either returning to their village (location of origin) or to any other place in Afghanistan – but not to the IDP camps.

- Returnees are advised to have their VRFs with them while travelling in the host country and Afghanistan. Anyone who is discovered to have received assistance before will not receive assistance. The entire family will be checked against the VRFs at the encashment centre. Returnees should not approach just any Distribution Centre (DC), but only the one marked on their VRFs; otherwise they will not receive assistance.
- Returnees are advised to ensure that their VRFs are correctly filled out in the country of asylum, as VRFs will not be issued or changed in Afghanistan.
- Returnees are also advised to have their vaccination and health records and those of their children with them for medical uses in clinics on the way to return and in Afghanistan. Children under age five will be vaccinated.
- The returnees' personal belongings are exempt from all customs duties. But please note that returnees can take neither commercial amounts of any item nor can they export government-proscribed items. Returnees should also advise their truck drivers not to carry business goods on returnee trucks in order to avoid delay at the border and undesired consequences at the customs. Returnees are advised to ensure the truck is empty when they began loading their belongings.
- The Salang tunnel was reopened in January 2004 during the day and night-time according to the new traffic control schedule and security rules.
- The distribution centres in Mazar and Kunduz are assisting only returnees from the Central Asian republics.

Note on Land: UNHCR has learned about the existence of fraudulent schemes which extract money from refugees in return for a promise to get them government land for housing. As far as UNHCR is aware there is at present no legitimate government programme to distribute land. The general freeze on land distribution ordered by the President's decree is still enforced. UNHCR would like to advise refugees not to pay any money for fraudulent land schemes and to check the authenticity of any land scheme with the Representatives of the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation in Pakistan and Iran or with UNHCR offices.

7. RADIO PROGRAMMES

UNHCR/BBC Radio Programme:

There is a joint BBC/UNHCR radio programme specifically aimed at Afghan refugees, IDPs and returnees. The programme deals with the situation in Afghanistan, including security, development activities of the Afghan government, United Nations and other aid agencies, and the challenges that the Afghans, especially returnees, are facing. The BBC radio programme is part of UNHCR's efforts to provide an accurate account of the situation in Afghanistan to those

wishing to return home, and to offer a forum for a wider debate on all aspects of repatriation and reintegration. The programme is broadcast from Saturday to Thursday (6 days a week) on short wave frequencies of 13,605 kHz, and 9,795 kHz and on FM frequency of 89 MHz in Kabul.

Language	Days	GMT	Afghanistan Time
Pashto 1 st edition	Saturday to Monday	0916	1346
Pashto 2 nd edition	Tuesday to Thursday	1603	2033
Dari 1 st edition	Saturday to Monday	1616	2046
Dari 2 nd edition	Tuesday to Thursday	0846	1316

It has a section for listeners' letters. If you have any comments or questions please write to the following addresses. The BBC will include them in the programme as time permits.

Afghanistan: BBC, Post Box No. 1, Central Post Office, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Pakistan: BBC, Post Box 255, University Town, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Iran: UNHCR (BBC) – P.O.Box No. 91775 – 1876, Mashhad, Iran.

BBC FM transmitters in different provinces of Afghanistan are as follows:

City	Kabul	Mazar	Jalalabad	Bamyan	Kunduz	Faizabad	Pul-i-Khumri	Herat
FM Trans. MHz	89.0	89.0	89.0	89.0	88.1	88.4	99.6	89.2

City	Gardez	Kandahar	Jabulsaraj	Shibirghan	Maimana	Khost	Taloqan
FM Trans. (MHz)	87.9	88.0	89.1	91.0	92.1	90.1	88.3

UNHCR/ERTV Radio Programme:

UNHCR has also a joint radio programme with Afghanistan Radio and TV, "Coming Home", as part of its efforts to provide information for refugees. The programme is broadcast on Sundays and Fridays (two days a week) at 2100 hrs for 30 minutes in Dari and Pashto languages.

Prices of Essential Commodities in the Marketplace (WFP 3rd Week of February 2004)

Cities	Wheat (Kg)		W/Flour (Kg)		Bread (Kg)		Diesel/Litre	
	AFS	US\$	AFS	US\$	AFS	US\$	AFS	US\$
Kabul	6.5	0.13	11.8	0.24	15.0	0.30	15.0	0.30
Kandahar	10.5	0.21	13.5	0.27	12.0	0.24	14.5	0.29
Jalalabad	8.3	0.17	12.3	0.25	19.6	0.40	16.8	0.34
Herat	6.7	0.14	12.0	0.24	15.0	0.30	15.0	0.30
Mazar	6.0	0.12	7.0	0.14	15.0	0.30	14.0	0.28
Faizabad	7.1	0.14	8.5	0.17	17.6	0.35	17.0	0.34

Cities	One year old Live Sheep		Casual Labour/day		Exchange Rate		Wheat / Labour Day
	AFS	US\$	AFS	US\$	AFS	US\$	Kg
Kabul	4,150	83.67	130.0	2.62	49.6	1	20.0
Kandahar	3,800	77.00	120.0	2.43	49.4	1	11.5
Jalalabad	4,166	84.00	100.0	2.02	49.5	1	12.0
Herat	3,700	74.75	110.0	2.22	49.5	1	16.4
Mazar	4,000	80.00	150.0	3.00	50.0	1	25.0
Faizabad	3,500	70.56	150.0	3.02	49.6	1	21.1

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