

Afghan human rights activist wins international peace award



8 January 2011 - The chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has been awarded the 2010 Tipperary International Peace Award for her contribution to freedom and democracy in Afghanistan.

The Tipperary Peace Convention based in Ireland hailed Sima Samar as a "principled and outspoken proponent of human rights and the need for a true reconciliatory process" who put her life in immense risk and overcame numerous obstacles for the welfare of oppressed women and children.

As a medical doctor - the first Hazara woman to obtain a degree in medicine from Kabul University - Samar has spoken out about the health hazards of the burqa worn by some women.

She served as Deputy President in the interim government in 2002 in Afghanistan, and then as Minister for Women's Affairs.

Between 1995 and 1999, Samar served as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Sudan.

Samar will receive the award later this year in Tipperary, Ireland. Previous recipients of the Tipperary International Peace Award include Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev and Bill Clinton.

By UNAMA

UNODC warns high opium prices may reverse the gains of recent years

20 January 2010 - Soaring opium prices may induce more farmers to grow opium, warned the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its full 2010 Afghanistan Opium Survey released today.

The high prices are based on speculation arising from an opium blight that halved production in 2010 and from ongoing military operations, which are creating uncertainty among opium farmers regarding future cultivation. "There is cause for concern. The market responded to the steep drop in opium production with an equally dramatic jump in the market price to more than double 2009 levels", said Yuri Fedotov, Executive Director of UNODC.

"We cannot continue business as usual", stressed the Executive Director noting that after a steady decline from 2005 to 2009, prices are rising again. "If this cash bonanza lasts, it could effectively reverse the hard-won gains of recent years". The cause of the decline in production was a naturally occurring plant disease that ravaged Afghanistan's major opium poppy-growing provinces of Helmand and Kandahar.



Impact on Afghan economy

Poppy-growing households saw a cash windfall. In 2010, the average farm-gate price of dry opium at harvest time was US\$ 169 per kg - a 164 per cent increase over 2009, when the price was US\$ 64 per kg. Despite the drop in production, the gross income per hectare of opium cultivated increased by 36 per cent to US\$ 4,900. The average annual income of opium-growing households in 2009 was 17 per cent higher than for households that had stopped opium cultivation.

However, the dramatic opium price increases at the local level did not translate into similar price increases in neighbouring countries. Afghan traffickers are heavily involved in shipping opiates (morphine/heroin) abroad, notably to Iran and Pakistan, and to a lesser extent, Central Asia. Cross-border prices remained relatively stable.

As a result of falling production and stable cross-border prices, funding from the opium economy to Afghan criminal groups halved in 2010. The total value of exported opium and heroin was US\$ 1.4 billion, compared with US\$ 2.9 billion in 2009 - a 50 per cent drop. The gross export value in 2010 amounted to 11 per cent of the GDP, compared to 26 per cent in 2009.

Rural development works

On the bright side, rural development has encouraged the cultivation of licit crops, and this year, a distinct correlation was seen between the provision of agricultural assistance and a drop in opium cultivation. Giving farmers access to markets also helped them shift away from opium poppy cultivation. In villages located close to agricultural markets, farmers planted less poppy crop than in those that had no access to markets.

"We encourage donors and the Afghan community to continue to invest in alternative livelihood programmes and increase market access for farmers. But security, stability and an environment free of corruption remain the key elements to making such initiatives effective and sustainable", said Mr. Fedotov.

For a full report, go to the UNODC website: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crop-monitoring/>

Road access supports peace and stability in northern Afghanistan

18 January 2011 - New roads built in northern Afghanistan are benefiting almost 700,000 people by increasing access to basic services, providing jobs and promoting peace and stability.

The Road Access Improvement Project in the provinces of Samangan and Sar-e-Pul is being funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

In cooperation with the Ministry of Public Works in Afghanistan, UNOPS (the United Nations Office for Project Services) helped build the roads and cleared snow off six critical passes.

Since its launch in 2007, the project has completed 52km of gravel roads and conducted emergency maintenance of 14km of roads in Samangan, while constructing 20km of bituminous asphalt roads, 13km of gravel roads and three steel bridges in Sar-e-Pul.

"The new roads have really changed our lives. Now we can access schools, hospitals and markets easily," said Mohammadullah, a farmer who participated in the project as a labourer in Khuram, Samangan.

Before the roads were built, he only allowed his sons to attend school because of his family's remote location, but with increased access his daughter has also started going to school.

The project provided temporary employment for approximately 8,000 people, particularly the vulnerable, and benefited an estimated 680,000 people. Both travel times and costs have been significantly reduced.

Mohammadullah added: "We have no problem going to work in Aybak (the provincial capital of Samangan) now and people are earning a lot. This also brings peace and stability in our district as people are busy and have no time to fight. Fighting comes when people have nothing to do."

Local authorities and Sida have expressed appreciation for successful results to date.

UNOPS is now focusing on continuing to support year round access to services and markets, through periodic maintenance of roads and bridge construction. These activities are scheduled to be completed in 2012.



Kandahar cricket team keeps provincial top spot

19 January 2011 - Kandahar's rise in cricket continues as the team beat out players from 21 other provinces to win the national championships in Nangarhar for a second year in a row.

Each team played two-day matches against three opposing teams. Representing the Bost zone, Kandahar secured two wins and drew the third to secure the tournament's first place position.

The captain of the Bost team, Qayamudin, and batsman Hafizullah were declared the stars of the tournament. Qayamudin picked up 18 wickets. Hafizullah passed a century, scoring 130 runs.

Hundreds of Kandaharis beat traditional drums and danced the Attan at Kandahar airport on 9 January to warmly welcome the victorious players. "We are stunned by the achievement of our cricket team. It is really a great performance by the Kandahar cricket team which earned success in three major tournaments countrywide," said Wali Amin, the head of Kandahar Cricket Federation.

The national championships are held in part to choose the best players for the National Cricket Team which represents Afghanistan in international competitions. Despite Kandahar's success, Amin said the players have been overlooked by the Afghanistan Cricket Board, and could perform even better if local authorities provide better resources. A request echoed by Qayamudin, who said that the team could bring "more success to Kandahar if the local authorities provide us with cricket stadium and other facilities."

Cricket increased in popularity in the country after the Afghanistan National team qualified for the 2010 International Cricket Council (ICC) World Twenty20, the team's first major tournament, and secured One Day International (ODI) standing until 2013. "The popularity of cricket makes it an ideal driving force for the United Nations in their work of improving the lives of people around the world," said Wilfried Lemke, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace.

"In Afghanistan and elsewhere, many partnerships have been forged between UN agencies and cricket clubs and federations, resulting in successful outreach campaigns and assistance programmes" he added.

The recent victory by Kandahar cricket team is a message of peace and tranquillity and creates a glimpse of hope for the inhabitants of war-torn province. "Sport has the power to bring people together and to unite them. It often transcends nationality, ethnicity, gender, class and ideology, and can therefore be a channel for peace and a bearer of hope in war-torn countries and communities," Lemke said.

Read more about cricket in the latest Afghan Update (Sports Edition January 2011 in English, Dari and Pashto): http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/Publication/Afghan%20Update/AU_Sports.pdf

Follow the Kandahar team from its provincial win in 2010 via this UNAMA photo story: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/unama/sets/72157623224539055/>

By Mubeeb Rahman, UNAMA

Women's role in society on display in Herat

3 January 2011 - A three-day photo exhibit depicting women's role in politics, society and sport opened Thursday in the western province of Herat.

"The exhibition depicts the ways of women's lives in Afghanistan, which is peerless," said Wali Shah Bahra, Director of Information and Culture in Herat, calling all visitors to attend.

"Women in Society" - which includes 54 photographs by national and international journalists - was organized at the Allama Saljoqi Public Hall by the Herat Youth Journalism Center with support from UNAMA's Western Region office.

The opening attracted residents and representatives from women's rights organizations. The Director of Women Voice Organization, Suraya Pakzad, said it was the first time she had witnessed such an exhibition.

By Fraidoon Poya, UNAMA



Street children in Herat - a working life

1 January 2011 - Abdul Karim (not his real name) is a nine-year-old Afghan child. He waits under the street traffic light in downtown Herat for the cars to come and cleans their windscreens in the hope of gleaning some money.

Abdul is the only breadwinner for his three-member family. He lost his drug-addicted father two years ago, and now supports his family by doing this hard work every day, sometimes begging. Abdul says he has to return home with money, food and other family needs.

According to the Herat office of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, thousands of Afghan children in the western provinces work and many are abused.

Basireh Mohammadi, the director of the Department of Labor and Social Affairs in Herat said "finding practical and urgent ways to solve the problems of street children and encouraging them to return to school is one of the major challenges and priorities of this office for 2011."

Mohammadi lists programmes in the pipeline by agencies in Herat, particularly UNICEF, to provide vocational training capacities for families who send their children to work, so that they can attend school.

She adds that they will launch campaigns in the coming year to give vocational training to street children so that they grow in confidence and self-esteem. "We will encourage street children to stop begging and other work and join schools" she says.

Meanwhile, the Herat Department of Labour and Social affairs is working on a survey in 2011 to gather statistics and data on the number and status of street children. UNICEF supports this study so that donor agencies can use the data to extend their programmes to improve the living conditions of these children.

By Fraidoon Poya, UNAMA



First picture guide to country's flora and vegetation distributed to Afghan students

7 January 2011 - The first pictorial guide to the flora of Afghanistan co-authored in English and Dari by a Kabul born scientist has been made available for free to thousands of Afghan students as the United Nations wrapped up its International Year of Biodiversity.

The publication of the 870-page Field Guide Afghanistan – Flora and Vegetation includes an introduction by UN Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Ahmed Djoghlaif.

With more than 1,200 illustrations and descriptions of plants, the atlas is "a milestone in Afghan Botanical Studies is aimed at research scientists and students as well as the educated general reader," according to publisher Scientia Bonnensis.

Some 4,500 copies of the atlas – written by Siegmund W. Breckle of the University of Bielefeld and the Kabul born scientist Daud Rafiqpoor at the University of Bonn – were distributed for free to universities and educational institutes throughout Afghanistan between the Christmas and New Year's holidays.

"The potentially far-reaching impacts of biodiversity loss and natural resource degradation for the Afghan people led the Government of Afghanistan to sign and ratify the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) in 1992," has said Asif Zaidi, Programme Manager at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The UN General Assembly, of which Afghanistan is a member, agreed last month to allow UNEP to set up the Intergovernmental Science Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), a new international body aimed at reversing the unprecedented loss of species and ecosystems vital to life on Earth due to human activity.

UNEP has actively supported sustainable environmental management programmes in Afghanistan since 2002.

Read about UNEP's Trekking for Peace event in Bamyan:
<http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1783&ctl=Details&mid=1882&ItemID=9923>

By UNAMA-SCSU

UNAMA NEWS

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
Website: <http://unama.unmissions.org>

Compiled by:
Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit
Kabul, Afghanistan

1 - 20 January 2011



Photo courtesy of Bakhtar News Agency

OIC opens office in Kabul

4 January 2011 - The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) opened its office in the capital Kabul on 2 January.

The OIC is the second largest worldwide inter-governmental organization after the United Nations, with 57 member states spread over four continents: 55 OIC members are also member states of the United Nations. Afghanistan joined the OIC in 1969.

Ambassador Al Mohammad Moniruzzaman is the first Special Envoy of the Secretary General of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) for Afghanistan, and on 2 January, with Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs Minister, Dr Zalmay Rassoul, he inaugurated the office.

At the inauguration, the Ambassador stressed the OIC's support to the Afghan Government's peace programmes. Minister Rassoul said that the OIC planned to hold an extraordinary summit on Afghanistan in March this year to focus on efforts to bring peace.

By Nilab Mobarez, UNAMA



Revamped healthcare centre ready for public services in Helmand

10 January 2011 - A fully-equipped public health centre that once operated out of a rented house is operational in southern Afghanistan.

The 18 room facility will have enough doctors, nurses and paramedics to provide first aid and emergency treatment to residents in Lashkargah, the capital of Helmand province, and the surrounding regions.

Helmand Governor Mohammad Gulab Mangal cut the ribbon on Sunday at a ceremony inaugurating the building which had taken six months to build. The US\$ 270,000 price tag was funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID).

By Mujeeb Rahman, UNAMA

Business high school established in Helmand

13 January 2011 - A co-ed high school focused on management and the economy officially opened this week in the capital of the southern province Helmand.

"Education is the best tool to achieve sustainable peace and development, desperately needed for Helmand province and the whole country," said Shigeru Aoyagi, Representative to Afghanistan of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Governor Mohammad Gulab Mangal presided over the 9 January inauguration ceremony of the high school in Lashkargah.

"We had, previously, two agriculture high schools and now five more schools will be established in Helmand under the technical structure of the Ministry of Education," Governor Mangal told journalists, adding that construction plans are underway in Marjah, Nadali, Garamser and Grishk.

Officials plan to upgrade two of the new schools to institute-level facilities "in the near future."

Once completed, Helmand may become the only province in the country to have seven high schools, enabling access to education for hundreds of male and female students.

"Similarly, the local authorities are trying to build the capacity of the government officials in order to prepare for the transition," Governor Mangal told the local media.

A three-month management training for 58 government officials kicked off on Monday.

The training, which includes English language skills, computer skills, policy and strategy development and financial management, is conducted by Afghanistan Civil Service Institute (ACSI).

By Mujeeb Rahman, UNAMA



Afghan media training fosters freedom of expression

12 January 2011 - An Afghan non-governmental organization has provided multimedia training to nearly 50 staff of state-owned media and provincial government, as part of an effort to strengthen journalism in the country and support freedom of expression.

"The overall objective of the training was to improve the capacity of our reporters working in Jalalabad and the districts of Nangarhar," said Engr Zalmay, Director for Radio and Television (RTA) in the province.

"I hope that our reporters keep in mind and use in their daily work all the materials taught," added Zalmay.

The five-day workshop, which started on 2 January, included video camera recording and editing, photo journalism and television reporting.

"UNAMA strongly supports freedom of expression, and realizes that such training improves access to information and promotes the status of journalists in Afghanistan," said Naqib-u-Rahman Qazizada, Human Rights Officer at the UN Assistance Mission office in Jalalabad.

Radio, television and other media have grown rapidly in the last decade throughout the country. There are four TV stations and around 20 FM radio stations in the eastern provinces, including two television and 10 radio stations in Jalalabad.

Due to the rapid growth of national media "we are working hard to train many young journalists and make them capable to meet the needs of media sources," said Muhamad Asif Amin, manager of Nai's sub-office in Jalalabad.

Nai or Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, a local NGO working in partnership with the non-profit Internews, organized the training and held 54 similar ones in the past year.

"I headed lots of trainings but this was the most impressive because of the keenness of the participants and their ability to understand the lessons," said Nai trainer Sajjad Mahmood.

RTA cameraman Shafiqullah Khiwawal, 30, one of the participants of the workshop, called the training "very useful".

His colleague, Shukrullah Pason, 22, a producer, said he was very satisfied with its contents.

Staff of the Department of Culture and Information in Nangarhar also participated.

By Shafiqullah Waak, UNAMA



Afghan civil society notes youth's role in democracy at UNAMA workshop

17 January 2011 - The challenges and opportunities for young leaders in Afghanistan was among the main discussion topics at a political outreach workshop attended this week by 40 civil society representatives in the central region of Bamyan.

"Participants noted the atmosphere of democracy slowly evolving in Afghan society," said Heran Song, head of the UNAMA Central Highlands Regions (CHR), which organized the 12 January event entitled "Youth Empowering Democracy."

Song added that the participants had specified "increased access to information, growing freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and better access to education" during discussions that also focused on the Concept of Democracy and Pluralism in Afghanistan.

Also in the region, the local chapter of the Afghan Victims Association commemorated the 10th anniversary of the Yakawlang massacre, where approximately 350 residents of Bamyan's Yakawlang district were killed on 11 January 2001.

More than 700 community members participated in the memorial ceremony, including victims' families, government district authorities, men and women Shura or political representatives, civil society representatives and members of the UNAMA-CHR Human Rights Unit.

Local participants to the event highlighted their desire for the government to implement the transitional justice action plan initiated in 2006, Song said.

Read more about transitional justice in Afghanistan and UNAMA's human rights activities at <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1816>

By Aurora V Alambra, UNAMA



Record donation enables UN agency to provide food aid in 20 countries

11 January 2011 - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) today welcomed a donation of \$196.6 million from Japan, the largest-ever single contribution to the agency, which will use it to provide essential food and nutritional assistance to millions of needy people in 20 countries in Africa and Asia.

The funds will also support logistics operations in eight countries where WFP has projects.

"We are extremely grateful for this substantial supplementary aid package and Japan's continued commitment to promoting human security and peacebuilding," said Mohamed Saleheen, Director of WFP's Japan Relations Office.

"This is proof of Japan's strong leadership in global food and nutrition security."

The donation will benefit people in need in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Niger and Uganda.

The channelling of funds to support food assistance programmes in Afghanistan and Pakistan reflect Japan's desire to promote peace and stability in the region, according to WFP.

The funds will be used to provide food to conflict and disaster-affected people, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other vulnerable groups, including malnourished children and pregnant and lactating women.

In Pakistan, the donation will be used to provide immediate food assistance, as well as recovery support to the survivors of last year's devastating floods.

In Africa, the contribution will support WFP's programmes in 17 African countries where people are in need food aid because of conflicts and weather-related shocks such as droughts and floods.

WFP's logistics operations will also benefit from the donation, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the agency runs the UN Humanitarian Air Service, which provides critical air transport and cargo services for the humanitarian community.

By UN News Centre

WFP and Government of Afghanistan strengthen coordination on food assistance

19 January 2011 - High-level officials from the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) met Tuesday to map out a common strategy for the provision of WFP food assistance to millions of vulnerable Afghans over the next three years.

The meeting, hosted by Vice President Abdul Karim Khalili, aimed to strengthen coordination between WFP and the government ministries with which it works in Afghanistan.

"This groundbreaking meeting is a sign of how serious all parties are about the need to improve Afghanistan's food security," said Louis Imbleau, WFP's representative in Afghanistan. "We look forward to working closely together to support Afghan efforts."

"It is a privilege that the Government of Afghanistan and WFP are working jointly to further cooperate and coordinate the provision of food assistance, using the available resources and opportunities to improve the lives of the most vulnerable and food-insecure Afghans across the country," said Afghan Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development Jarullah Mansoori, who co-chaired the meeting.

WFP began its current three-year Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation in April 2010, under which WFP plans to provide food assistance to an average of 7.3 million vulnerable Afghans every year, mainly in rural areas.

WFP's operation in Afghanistan has a twin focus. It provides lifesaving relief and emergency assistance to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of the Afghan people, including those affected by conflict and natural disaster.

At the same time WFP, in partnership with the government, is working toward rehabilitation and recovery, to help Afghanistan improve its overall food security.

The high-level steering committee will guide implementation of the WFP operations in terms of planning and policy, and will also serve as a vehicle for WFP to help support the government's food assistance strategy.

At the Kabul meeting, the steering committee established a number of technical working groups to coordinate common approaches to key issues, including agricultural development, education, health, nutrition and economic development including vocational skills training.

In addition to Vice President Khalili, Minister Mansoori and Mr. Imbleau, the meeting was attended by Husn Bano Ghazanfar, Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and the Disabled (MoLSAMD), and Amina Afzali, Minister of Women's Affairs, as well as deputy ministers or high-level representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Health and the Afghan National Disaster Management Authority.

WFP's activities in Afghanistan include food-for-work and food-for-training programmes, which emphasize improving agricultural production, livelihoods and overall food security for rural communities. WFP provides lifesaving support for people displaced by conflict or natural disaster, tuberculosis patients and schoolchildren. WFP also plans to expand assistance to malnourished children under five, new mothers and pregnant women.

WFP has been working in Afghanistan since 1963 and currently supports vulnerable Afghans with food assistance in all 34 provinces of the country. The 2007/2008 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment found that about 7.3 million people, or 31 percent of the Afghan population, are food-insecure, meaning they cannot get enough nutritious food to live active, healthy lives.

WFP now provides RSS feeds to help journalists keep up with the latest press releases, videos and photos as they are published on WFP.org. For more details see: <http://www.wfp.org/rss>



Deminers in the firing line

18 January 2011 - Taliban insurgents and other armed groups as well as criminal gangs in Afghanistan have been deliberately targeting demining NGOs, particularly in the volatile southern provinces, says the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO).

At least 10 deminers were killed, 23 injured and 12 abducted in 2010, said ANSO. ANSO's figures differed from those supplied to IRIN by the UN-affiliated Mine Action Coordination Centre for Afghanistan (MACCA), which said 17 deminers were killed, 35 injured and 73 abducted in 2010.

"Most commonly it [insurgent opposition to demining activities] is simply to do with them clearing areas that the IEA [Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan] wants to leave untouched perhaps because they laid the field, or benefit from it not being usable by other forces," ANSO director Nic Lee told IRIN. In some instances, attacks on deminers were preceded by warnings, and sometimes "high-profile demining support vehicles" were mistaken for security targets and attacked, he said.

ANSO advises NGOs to seek security through transparent dialogue with all combatants and avoid involvement in counterinsurgency activities. "We have not made any additional recommendations to them [deminers] specifically, other than to highlight that attacks against them account for a high percentage of NGO events," said Lee, adding that demining organizations were professional and understood the risks they were taking.

Targeted

Attacks on NGOs in 2010 were down by 27 percent on 2009 but fatalities rose by 42 percent, and a high percentage of deaths were among deminers. Of the 28 NGO members killed, eight were foreigners and half of the remainder were Afghan deminers, according to ANSO. "Without doubt the purpose of some attacks is precisely what it seems to be, to kill or injure NGO staff. Of the 51 cases under review here, we assess that eight (14 percent) fall into this worst of categories, but more alarmingly seven of these [attacks] targeted demining organizations. This reflects a clear and direct opposition to the work of deminers," said an ANSO report covering the fourth quarter of 2010 seen by IRIN and due to be published on the ANSO website soon.

ANSO's third quarter report spelt out the risks facing deminers: "The data suggests that the highest risk of kinetic attack remains towards demining NGOs who can be attacked for their perceived role in battlefield clearance as well as the superficial similarity of their vehicle convoys to those of security forces, while others are at risk of (1) accidental targeting especially with an IED [improvised explosive device], (2) circumstantial encounter with AOG [armed opposition group] at a check-post and (3) murder by AOG in a lawless area. The data shows that the only NGO staff deliberately targeted [ANSO italics] by the IEA this year have been deminers."

Armed violence hit unprecedented levels across the country in 2010, with an average of 800 security incidents per month, and there are no signs of it abating in 2011, ANSO said. Demining agencies have detected and destroyed millions of landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERWs) in Afghanistan over the past three decades but in some parts of the country landmines and ERWs still kill and maim dozens of people every month.

Over 14,000 people are working for demining organizations in Afghanistan, MACCA's director Haider Reza told IRIN, adding that the general environment of insecurity and criminality was largely to blame for casualties among deminers.

"Respected... as neutral"

"Deminers are widely respected in Afghanistan as neutral humanitarian workers," said Reza, adding that Taliban "supreme leader" Mullah Omar issued a decree in support of demining activities in 1996.

Farid Hodayoun, director of the demining NGO Halo Trust International, told IRIN his organization was sensitive to local demands and focused on pre-2001 mines: "We closely work with local communities and only clear the areas which the local people want us to clear... We are only clearing landmines left from the Russians [1979-1989] and the internal [1992-2001] wars."

"We don't believe we are deliberately attacked... We're not a target," said Hodayoun, adding that one Halo Trust deminer was killed last year and several others kidnapped but later released.

No Taliban spokesman was immediately available to comment about the group's position on demining organizations, though demining activities were allowed under the Taliban in 1995-2001. The insurgents are known to have used IEDs and landmines in their fight against pro-government forces, disproportionately harming civilians, according to the UN and other human rights groups.

Afghanistan is a signatory to the Ottawa Convention on Landmines and the government says it has already destroyed all its landmine stockpiles and has stopped importing and using them.

Demining agencies have set 2013 as a deadline to rid Afghanistan of all landmines. However, given the growing violence, it remains to be seen whether this target is achievable, say experts.

By IRIN

