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**Press Conference (near verbatim transcript)**

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**Ramesh Penumaka, Country Representative, UNFPA Afghanistan**

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**UNAMA:** Salam Alaikum, Subh ba Khair and welcome to UNAMA's regular Monday press conference. My name is Aleem Siddique from UNAMA Spokesperson's office. We are joined this morning by guest speakers both from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and also by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Some of you may be aware that this coming Saturday, 8 March, the United Nations will be marking International Women's Day. This day has particular significance for Afghanistan. This year, the United Nations, the government, civil society and hundreds of ordinary Afghan women will be organizing a range of events over the coming week, from concerts and conferences, TV and radio broadcasts to the provision of free services to women across the country. On the side table you will find a schedule of these events taking place across the country, and you are all invited to attend these events and report about these events.

Here in Kabul, the United Nations will be holding an outdoor celebration in Baghe Zanana, the women's park, this coming Friday, 7 March.

We hope that you will all be able to join us for this event and I would just like to point out that this event is taking place on Friday, the day before International Women's Day, in order to avoid clashes with official government events taking place on the following day, on Saturday. The event starts at 13:00, one o'clock, and you are all invited to come and join us. Can I just make one request, that if you do join us, can you please make an effort to send female journalists to the women's park.

Before I hand over to my guest speakers, can I just share some news from UN agencies with you. In particular, as we speak now, representatives of the Governments of Afghanistan, Iran and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) began two days of discussions here in Kabul on the voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan from Iran.

Today's Tripartite Commission meeting is led on the Afghan side by the Afghan Deputy Minister for Refugees and Repatriation, Mr. Abdul Qadir Ahadi, and on the Iranian side, it is led by Mr. Seyyed Taghi Ghaemi, Advisor to the Minister of Interior and Director General of the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants.

They will be holding a press conference this afternoon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at 15:30 and there is a media advisory available for you on the side table regarding the details of that.

Moving on to our guest speakers, can I now introduce our speaker from UNIFEM, Ziad Sheikh, who will make a few comments before I hand over to our colleague from UNFPA, after which we will be happy to take questions from you. I would now like to thank Ziad Sheikh for joining us, and I will hand over to Ziad.

**ZIAD SHEIKH, Deputy Director for UNIFEM:**

Salam alaikum, good morning. UNIFEM works with its partners from across the government, the UN, civil society and the donor community towards a peaceful and progressive Afghanistan where women and men enjoy security, equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of life.

We are part of a growing community of international and national gender advocates and institutions that work with the Government in advancing gender equality within the overall development agenda.

Our programme is anchored in three mutually reinforcing areas: gender justice; community empowerment and economic development; and institutional capacity building for gender mainstreaming.

Our goal here in Afghanistan is to increase the opportunities for women so they can play their full role in the development of their country. We also support the long-term goal of Afghan women to fully realize their human rights as enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The extremely difficult situation of women in Afghanistan remains a central concern. Within this context, however, opportunities for promoting women's concerns are available.

Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction agenda has been framed with women's rights as a core concern. A robust gender policy framework has been established with the ratification of the Convention and the adoption of constitutional provisions that outlaw gender-based discrimination and guarantee equality between women and men.

Moreover, the Afghanistan Millennium Development Goals adopted a number of women-specific targets and under the Afghanistan Compact, the Government committed to a number of benchmarks, including the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, a ten-year development plan for women that was developed by the Government with technical support from UNIFEM.

While a strong policy framework for improving women's status is in place, greater efforts by all those involved are needed to ensure its implementation.

To engender governance and peacebuilding, UNIFEM continues to provide technical and resource support to female political leaders.

To increase women's access to justice, we provide legal counselling and legal aid to women, especially in rural areas, and paralegal training is also being provided to staff at referral centres.

And to pursue the elimination of violence against women (also known as ERAW), UNIFEM provides technical expertise to the ERAW Commission, established by presidential decree.

UNIFEM also works to improve women's economic security and their rights as entrepreneurs and home-based workers through the establishment of Women's Development Centres and the implementation of gender-focused livelihood projects.

And finally, UNIFEM continues to support the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the implementation and monitoring of the aforementioned NAPWA, the Government's primary vehicle for women's rights and participation in the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

International Women's Day presents us all with an opportunity to bring these issues and others to the fore. And we call on all our partners, including our partners in the media to ensure that these issues remain alive throughout the year. Thank you.

**RAMESH PENUMAKA, Country Representative for UNFPA:**

Friends, salam alaikum and a very good morning to all of you. On the occasion of International Women's Day, I would like to convey very warm greetings and a very strong commitment of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to all Afghan mothers, sisters, daughters and all the men. An occasion like this is a very useful occasion to look back and look at the advances we have made, the challenges we are facing, what we are doing and how, how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

UNFPA takes this opportunity to affirm its commitment to investing in women and girls. As all of you know, investing in women is investing in the society, in the village, in nation building. The biggest challenge that Afghan women face is maternal health and high maternal mortality. Just to give you some statistics, 1,600 of every 100,000 women that give birth die in childbirth. That is a staggering 24,000 a year, about 25 times the number of people dying of security-related violent incidents. As we are talking now, two women somewhere in Afghanistan are dying because of pregnancy-related, childbirth-related problems.

Why is this happening? Why are so many Afghan mothers dying, 87 per cent of these deaths are preventable. It is because girls are married very young, more than half the girls are married before they are 18 years old, some as young as eight years old. There are no health facilities. Lack of education also prevents people, women, and particularly their husbands, from taking women to the hospital. There are not enough skilled birth attendants, community midwives. There are not enough obstetric care centres, blood facilities. These are all challenges, but they are challenges that can be met. And this is exactly what the Government with the support of the United Nations and the international community has been doing.

I must emphasize that a lot of progress has been made in the past 5 years. Afghanistan's National Development Strategy very clearly recognizes the importance of maternal health; it plays centre stage to improving the health of mothers and reducing maternal mortality. The Ministry of Public Health has a very comprehensive reproductive health strategy. At the field level there are 16,000 community health workers, substantial increases in the number of institutions training community midwives. Today 90 per cent of the health facilities in this country have at least one woman functionary, a doctor, nurse or midwife.

For example, only 4 per cent of pregnant mothers received any attention during pregnancy in 2001, whereas last year 30 per cent of pregnant mothers had some kind of attention from a health professional.

Only 6 per cent of deliveries were conducted by a skilled attendant in 2001, last years they were 80 per cent.

The progress made is significant but nowhere near sufficient. The very fact that 40 per cent of mothers do not have access to an emergency obstetric care service where a Cesarean section can be done, that only 80 per cent of the women receive skilled birth attendance shows that there is a very big gap.

It is in this context that UNFPA is committed to supporting the Government of Afghanistan, working with other partners, working through non-governmental

organizations, to see that no mother in Afghanistan ever dies in childbirth. That is the vision that is driving us.

At the national level we are working closely with other UN agencies, the Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Women's Affairs and Ministry of Religious Affairs, to advance the agenda. Advance the agenda that would result in the reduction of maternal morbidity, mortality and improve their health.

UNFPA is working with WHO and UNICEF for a joint UN programme for maternal mortality reduction and helping the Ministry of Public Health in developing an action plan for reproductive health, as well as an action plan for emergency obstetric care, and an action plan for increasing the number of skilled birth attendants, training the doctors and the midwives. We have also helped the Government set up a major centre for fistula and prolapse treatment which is a major health problem among women, in Kabul and we intend to expand that to Mazar-i -Sharif and Badakhshan in this year.

Simultaneously, we are working in five provinces, Bamyan, Badakhshan, Faryab, Logar, and Dai Kundi, and we are taking 26 districts in these five provinces to create a model in community participation, to generate the demand, the awareness, the consciousness at community level, and to link up with services through mobile units and to strengthen the emergency obstetric care units. That will be in close collaboration with the government at the provincial level, with the non-governmental organizations and with the communities, especially the community and the religious leaders, whose participation is vital if we are to address this serious problem.

UNFPA is also working very closely with young people and also with men, and especially their awareness, because the problems, particularly relating to maternal health, cannot be addressed by women alone. It is the husbands, it is the fathers, it is the brothers and the sons, everybody, who have to make a determined effort to see that no mother dies in childbirth, and that every mother leads a happy life and leads a productive life.

We are also working closely with our sister UN agency UNIFEM and other agencies to eliminate violence against women. Eighty per cent of women, directly or indirectly, at some time in their lives are subjected to violence. And this is a major challenge that all of us need to confront, and especially those of us who are men.

And I want to take this opportunity to call upon every citizen, every donor agency and every single member of the UN agencies to re-dedicate themselves, commit themselves, to this goal of eliminating maternal mortality, reducing maternal morbidity and improving the status of women in this country.

And lastly I would like to appeal to all of you, the journalist community, to commit yourself to advancing the agenda of women on this day and every day, and every part of your career. Thank you.

**UNAMA:** Thank you to our speakers. We will now take questions, and to underline Ramesh's point on the role that men have to play in achieving gender equality, I would like the first question to come from one of our male colleagues please. Gentlemen, don't be shy.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Noor TV [translated from Dari]:** What is your budget for the current year? On violence against women, what modalities will you use to tackle this problem and finally, one of the reasons that we have high maternal mortality in Afghanistan is lack of family planning; so what are you doing in this regard?

**UNIFEM:** In terms of our budget, UNIFEM is one of the smaller players within the UN family. Our budget for this year is approximately 5 million US dollars, but we are seeing an increasing interest from the donor community based on the issues that face women in Afghanistan today and the issues that we work on, and also based on the work that we have been able to begin since our office started here in 2002. So we are looking forward to a significantly increased budget in the coming years for the work that we are undertaking.

I should add that, as my colleague has already mentioned, there are a number of joint programmes within the UN where different agencies pool their resources towards a common goal, and my colleague has already referred to the maternal health joint programme.

On your second question regarding the elimination of violence against women, there are two things I'd like to mention here. Firstly, efforts to understand as well as possible the nature and extent of the problem we are facing. We had facilitated some research in 2006, secondary data research, which we have now combined with primary data research, to culminate in a primary-secondary database, which helps us to give us as full a picture as possible across the country of both the extent of violence against women and the particular forms that it takes. We are also working with our colleagues in UNAMA and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission to add to those statistics case studies so that we can further contextualize the problem. With this data we are better placed to advise on what policies actions are required in order to tackle this very serious, very deep-rooted problem. I am sure you will understand that obtaining such information in the first place is not an easy task.

The second thing I would like to mention is the recent establishment of a special fund for the elimination of violence against women. Again an initiative undertaken in partnership with our sister agencies within the UN, with members of the donor community and the Ministry of Women's Affairs. This special fund will be formally launched on the 8th of March at UNIFEM's resource centre for women in politics, and I look forward to seeing many of you there for the launch.

**UNFPA:** May I just briefly add on birth spacing and the maternal mortality rate: It is true that the families tend to be large; the average family size in Afghanistan is 6.6. Women get married fast and there is very little birth spacing. But nevertheless, we are working with the Government to improve the contraceptive prevalence rate. Today, about 15 per cent of couples in the country are using some form of contraceptives. We are developing with the Ministry a national reproductive health commodity security action plan which will make available the pill, condoms and injectables, in better quality, across the country. We are also training medical personnel in skills in tubectomy and vasectomy. In Rabia Balkhi and Malalai hospitals in Kabul there is a large number of trained staff who in turn are training people from the regional and provincial hospitals. There is a very conscious effort being made to increase the couple's protection. There is importance in terms of spacing births; at

least 2-3 years between one child and another. There are measures available now all over the country for this purpose.

One thing about violence against women: we are focusing our attention on men and religious leaders to sensitize them about this serious problem. We had a national workshop for religious leaders, and we intend to have a similar dialogue with the religious and community leaders at the provincial level because the need for awareness and the importance of recognizing that violence against women is a violation of fundamental human rights and everybody's participation is important. Secondly we also have a counselling centre in Kabul, and we intend to extend that to other provinces like Herat and Badakhshan where women who are victims of violence can receive healthcare, psycho-social and other kind of support. These are some of the efforts that have been made, and with the participation of our partners we intend to extend them.

**UNAMA:** If I may just add: We have this habit of looking at how much money is being spent, and what the government and the international community are doing to ensure gender equality. What we perhaps fail to recognize is that the biggest impact can be made by ourselves in our own families, in our own communities and in wider society. When we leave this press conference room today, we all have a role to play in ensuring gender equality for our sisters, for our mothers and for our daughters and that is where the greatest impact can be made. It is a joint responsibility, not just for the government and the international community, but for all of us as individuals.

**Radio Azadi:** My question refers to you, Mr. Aleem. There are reports that Pakistan's Interior Minister Hamid Nawaz Khan has accused the United States, Afghanistan and India of supporting terrorists in Pakistan's tribal areas. What do you think, does the Afghan Government support the terrorists in Pakistan's tribal areas?

**UNAMA:** We have always made clear that the problem of extremism and terrorism is a joint problem, faced by the brother countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan. We need to see joint action by the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to tackle this threat that is facing both countries. Pointing fingers leads nowhere; what we need to see is joint action by both countries. We have seen action to tackle these extremists that are threatening the lives of people on both sides of the border, but we need to see more action on the part of both countries, with the support of the international community. And as the United Nations has always made clear, together with this military action, we need to see development action to deliver a peace dividend to people on both sides of the border. And this needs to be accompanied by increased political outreach efforts to persuade those people that can be persuaded to put down their arms to join the peace process that is taking place in this country.

**Rahe Nejat [translated from Dari]:** In spite of huge efforts by the international community to eliminate violence against women, why do the statistics show that violence is increasing? The Ministry of Women's Affairs has reported 1016 cases of violence in the previous year, but now it is 2330 cases, and some reports indicate that since the Taliban's time the violence has increased?

**UNFPA:** The reports indicate that there has been increased reporting. We need to differentiate between what is happening and what is being reported. Actually in a way the increased reporting also shows the empowerment of women, that incidents are being reported. There is also an increased awareness among the law enforcement authorities, so it is not an increasing trend of violence -- that has always been there, perhaps it is declining -- but what is happening is the increase in people coming

forward to report, nobody talked about this when it happened in the four walls of a house. Today women are not willing to stay and say, OK, I will take it. So I think we need to understand this distinction between whether the increase is real or is an increase in reporting of what is happening. There is no evidence to say that the violence as a whole is increasing. It has always been high, nobody is saying that is low, but the tendency to reporting in itself is an indicator of greater awareness and greater empowerment. We need to see that in a positive way.

**Freelance journalist:** A question for the UNIFEM representative: I'd like to know if you'd like to comment on two areas, one is the political representation in the cabinet as well as the justice sector which sometimes is treating women victims like criminal perpetrators, for example the women in prisons are evidence of that. Why has there been such a lack of progress in these essential sectors, one in the political area and the other in justice. Do you expect to see any changes?

**UNIFEM:** I think, as colleagues have already highlighted, we have made big steps over the past few years; the quota for women's representation in parliament, in decision-making positions is a huge step forward, but there is still a long way to go.

The issues you refer are both issues specific to women's issues, but also specific to all areas of life in Afghanistan. I think that the key thing that we need to do, as the UN and as the international community, in partnership with the Government, is to strengthen our rule of law system, our understanding of the human rights conventions, and while we have frameworks in place, our efforts need to be hugely increased on implementing them and seeing them in action.

**UNAMA:** Achieving gender equality is about progression, it is not about revolution. The important thing here is that what took us decades to achieve and what we are still working to achieve in Europe and North America with gender equality has taken many years. Let us not uphold Afghanistan to unfair standards. We are here in a post-conflict situation for the last five or six years and if we are to see gender equality in this country, we need to see a steady progression. We do not need to see a revolution here because revolutions are unsustainable. We need a cultural change; we need a change in people's way of thinking. This is a slow and steady process, not something that can be achieved overnight.

But already over the last five or six years you have seen tremendous efforts on the part of the Government of Afghanistan, on the part of the international community to help engender that change through human rights training for key personnel in the rule of law and the judiciary, in the police system and in the prison system. But we all recognize that there is much more for us to do. Progress is being made, but unfortunately, this progress takes time. Steady progress is being made but it is our joint responsibility, within our own families, our own communities and for each of us to act as ambassadors for gender equality so that all of Afghanistan benefits and prospers from the skills and abilities of all its people – both men and women.

Thank you very much.

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