



Dear readers,

First of all, I would like to express my very best wishes to all who are celebrating New Year and Nowroz around the world. Nawroz is the ancient traditional festival of our ancestors. I hope this year brings happiness and joy to the people all over the world.

Nawroz is the most ancient festival which goes back to more than a thousand years ago, and people from the borders of China till Western Asia as well as the entire area of the Iranian civilization celebrate it. Even though political boundaries have divided this civilization into different countries, but these people- from Khojand to Isfahan and Neshapoor, from Balkh and Heart to Samarkand, and from Caucasus to Mavronahr- share the same values and cultural heritage which bounds them together.

It is with happiness to announce that on February 22, 2010 UNESCO announced Nawroz as an Iranian- the historical, greater Iran- festival to be celebrated worldwide and known as a great, non-tangible world heritage. Nawroz is celebrated in different parts of Afghanistan with special lush. The people of Afghanistan, from Balkh to Badakhshan, from Parwan

to Kandahar, from Ghaznain to Heart and Bamyan, and from Urozgan to JalalAbad celebrate this majestic festival.

In Mazar-E-Sharif, people start Nawroz by upraising (Jahenda) to the sky in Ali Ibn Abi-Taleb's shrine. They then start the traditional Gul-E-Sorkh ceremony.



Foto: Aminwahidi

Nawroz is the celebration of the flowers. The red tulips which start appearing from the first days of the New Year show the beauty of Mother Nature. Besides, they give Nawroz a special glory with horse-riding races and (Buzkashi).

Similarly, the people in Kabul start the celebration of Nawroz by upraising Jahenda in front of Kart-E-Sakhi Mountain Range; they reflect their religious beliefs and celebrate the traditional festival of their ancestors. Furthermore, they have different ceremonies in Khawja Safa, Estalef, Shah Shaheed, Karez Meer, and Gul Ghundi.

On the other hand, people make traditional food to honor Nawroz. It would be hard to find any Afghan family, from the poor to the rich, who doesn't make Samanak, Haft Mewa, and Sabzee Chalaw in Nawroz. In addition to that, people think of Nawroz as a sign of happiness and luck; therefore, they embrace it with smiles and excitement. Happy New Year!

Manizha Bakhtari
Ambassador

Efforts to rebuild Afghanistan's food industry

The United States Department of Agriculture, and various organizations such as the American Soybean Association (ASA) who are involved in the promotion of soy will come together to implement a project worth \$26 million dollars in Afghanistan. The project aims to fight against malnutrition and help rebuild Afghanistan's food industry. ASA Board member Scott Fritz, a soybean producer from Winamac, Indiana says in a press release: "We are excited to help Afghan farmers rebuild their infrastructure while we make healthy food available to their fellow citizens and to build a market for soy. Diets will improve and soy consumption will increase as Afghan agriculture and the local economy develops. When this happens, everybody wins."



Photo: LIFE

Afghanistan will be provided with 240 metric tons of defatted soy flour over the next three years to meet the immediate nutritional needs of thousands of Afghans. There will also be shipments of 6,000 metric tons of soybeans over three years, so Afghan soybean processing facilities can use the soybeans to produce soy flour and soybean oil for consumption by the local market.

Afghanistan Exports Pomegranates to UK

According to Sky News, Pomegreat, a Gloucestershire-based company that sells pomegranate juice to UK supermarkets, has made a commitment to purchase 500 tons of concentrate and 500 tons of fresh fruit from Omaid Bahar Ltd, Afghanistan's first fruit processing facility.

It is a business deal that Adam Pritchard, chief executive of Pomegreat, says he has long been waiting to achieve. "The Afghan pomegranate is the best in the world and in ten years working with pomegranates from many countries, I have never previously encountered juice of the quality Omaid Bahar is offering," he said "My long-term aim is for pomegranates and other fruit juices from Afghanistan to become a valuable and valid commodity that can be exported around the world."



Photo: Sky News

Pomegreat says the fruit grown in Afghanistan is of the highest quality available.

Mr Pritchard acknowledges that the decision to source fruit from Afghanistan is not without its difficulties, and that it is a relationship that will need to be reviewed on an annual basis. Nevertheless, he says, it is very much a long-term relationship. "The country is landlocked, and

It's a longer distance from factory to port, so there are some logistical challenges," he told Sky News. "We've also had to make sure we get the documentation and paperwork correct, and identify which Afghan ministry does what.

"These are challenges we think we've overcome, though, and I have been over to Kabul to meet the factory owner and talk about his long-term ambitions." He went on: "Initially we'll use a percentage of Afghan pomegranates in our product, but we aim to make this 100% in future years." The state-of-the-art Omaid Bahar fruit processing facility, based in Kabul, opened in October 2009 with the support of the American government agency USAID. Its first batch of juice is expected to arrive in the UK during March 2010.

Afghanistan was once famous for its pomegranates, before years of war cut trade routes and forced the loss of traditional markets. Many of the nation's farmers are now engaged in opium poppy cultivation, a trade that has been growing since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. International efforts have been made to offer poor farmers incentives to grow other crops - including pomegranates, to control the production of opium, from which heroin is obtained.

Maternity hospital to be built in Gardez



Photo: UN

In an effort to reduce mother and child mortality rates, a new maternity hospital has been built in Gardez, which is in Afghanistan's eastern province of Paktia.

The maternity hospital in Gardez specializes in providing care for women during pregnancy and childbirth as well as care for newborn infants.

The project was funded by Bayat Foundation. "Bayat Foundation had constructed similar facilities in different parts of the country" Said Eng Ehsanullah Bayat.

Tree-planting Drive Implemented in Afghanistan



In order to combat soil erosion, desertification, and help improve air quality in Afghanistan's urban areas; a major tree-planting drive will be implemented this year. The goal is to plant up to 25 million seedlings (young trees) - mostly in and around urban areas. An official from Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture, Abdul Majid Qarar told the United Nations news service, IRIN that: "We must revitalize forests and expand green areas because they are essential for the future of our country."

Feature Story Of The Month:

**Afghanistan
Exports
Pomegranates to
UK**

Norwegian Foreign Minister Visits Afghanistan



Photo: Norwegian MFA

Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre's visit to Kabul was part of a tour that also included visits to New Delhi and Islamabad. He also managed a brief visit to the Mazar-e-Sharif, where he among others, met the Governor of Balkh Province Mohammed Atta and Norwegian military forces.

During his stay in Kabul, the Foreign Minister met President Karzai, Foreign Minister Rassoul and National security adviser Spanta. He also had a working dinner with Interior Minister Atmar and leader of IDLG, Popal.

In meetings with Afghan dignitaries one of the main messages from Foreign Minister Støre was that Norway had a long-term commitment to its civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan once again confirming that Norway stands by its obligations. The meetings also gave a useful opportunity to discuss regional circumstances and with a strong Norwegian determination that the neighboring countries should take an active part in order to stabilize Afghanistan. The Norwegian Foreign Minister also raised issues related to the upcoming parliamentary elections in September and the importance of having a national perspective on the challenges of Afghanistan when it comes to social and economic development.

Danish Foreign Minister's First Visit to Kabul

Foreign minister Lene Espersen has not been in her new post for too long, but nevertheless she hit the ground running with a lightening visit to Afghanistan soon after assuming office. Espersen landed in the Afghan capital Kabul on a military transporter and met with President Hamid Karzai and UN Special Representative Staffan de Mistura in what she has described as a '100 metre dash of Kabul'.



Photo: Danish MFA

The Foreign Minister also had a meeting with her Afghan counterpart Zalmay Rassoul. At the meeting with Rassoul, Espersen mainly focused on the issue of protecting the rights of Afghan women and the transition process which will see local forces being entrusted with the task of maintaining security in the war-ravaged country.

"We have to create a tighter bond with the civilian population and put focus on the integration of the fighting parties" Espersen said. In her trip to Afghanistan Foreign Minister Lene Espersen visited Helmand province. Denmark as a NATO member has about 750 troops in Afghanistan, mostly stationed in Helmand province as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Women's Day Celebration in Oslo

Ambassador Manizha Bakhtari was invited as one of the main speakers by the Norwegian Atlantic Committee on the occasion of the International Women's Day.

The topic for the seminar was "Women, Peace and Security in International operations". Ambassador Manizha Bakhtari was among the panelists in addition to Minister of Health and former Minister of Defense Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen and Mie Eek Larsen a former prison advisor with the Norwegian led Provincial Reconstruction Team. Ambassador Manizha Bakhtari shared her reflections about women in Afghanistan, concentrating on the actual achievements of Afghan women after the fall of Taliban, followed by speeches delivered by the Minister of Health regarding the implementation of UN-resolution 1325 and Mie Eek Larsen who spoke about the rights of female prisoners based on her experience from the provincial prison in Faryab province. Ambassador Bakhtari stressed the need of continued commitment from the Nordic countries in sectors that would be of advantage to Afghan women.

The Ambassador also discussed the much debated issue regarding the participation of Afghan women in the political process of reconciliation, and added that women should and must be included in important processes concerning the future of Afghanistan. The presentation was followed by a Q&A session where all the panelists discussed the various challenges and achievements of the women in Afghanistan.

Business Center for Women built in Herat



Photo: USAID

Construction work on a building to initiate a project for the promotion of women-made handicrafts has been launched in the western province of Herat.

The project were financed by the Herat-based Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), the building would cost 700,000 Euros and would be completed in a five-month timescale, according to women's affairs director, Manija Sadiq told Pajhwok News agency the project would play an important role in enhancing the skills of women in making handicrafts in the province. "It would provide the women the opportunity to have access to the international market for their products," she added.

The first two floors of the four-storey building would be dedicated to shops while the third to a restaurant and exhibition centre and the fourth to a sports complex and conference hall.

Commander of the Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), Col. Claudio Dei, told Pajhwok news the project was aimed at enabling Afghan women to have a permanent source of income through their handicraft making profession.

He reassured Italy's commitment to assist Afghanistan in other fields of life.

Italy has recently pledged to spend another 45 million Euros on development schemes during 2010 in Herat, where most of its 2,350 soldiers under NATO command are deployed. The PRT commander also hinted at the deployment of another 1,000 Italian soldiers in the war-torn country this year.

Afghan Colonel receives the Women of Courage Award

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and first lady Michelle Obama present the 2010 International Women of Courage Award to Afghan women's rights activist, Colonel Shafiqa Quraishi, during a ceremony at the State Department in Washington, March 10, 2010.

Ten women received the award on Wednesday at the State Department in Washington and Colonel Shafiqa Quraishi, from Afghanistan was among the 2010 International Women of Courage Award Winners.



Photo: State Department

Colonel Shafiqa Quraishi is the Director of Gender, Human, and Child Rights within the Ministry of the Interior.

She began her career in the Afghan National Police, as Director of Gender, Human, and Child Rights. Colonel Shafiqa created and led a working group on Afghan National Gender Recruitment Strategy, with the goal of increasing the number of women working in the Ministry of the Interior to 5,000 and improving the quality of the Ministry's service to the women of Afghanistan.

Beyond recruiting women, she's worked toward securing benefits and incentives to increase the number of women in the workforce, including childcare, healthcare, maternity care, security, and skills training.

Colonel Shafiqa has succeeded in securing promotions for women working in the Afghan National Police who had been unfairly passed over for advancement for years.

She works in close partnership with those responsible for training the police force, and works to raise public awareness of gender rights and the important role that women can hold as police officers.

Successful Anti-opium strategy



Photo: The Telegraph

The Afghan government with help from the United Nations, and other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom is trying to greatly lessen or completely remove Afghanistan's dependence on opium farming. To achieve this goal, the players involved are shifting the anti-opium strategy.

Before the focus was heavily dependent on eradication, now the strategy will also involve interdiction and alternative agriculture. There will be much more effort in assisting Afghan farmers with planting alternative crops, including cereals. According to a report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), opium production in Afghanistan has fallen from 8,200 tons in 2007 to 6,900 tons in 2009.

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