

[Afghanistan: Violence at voter registration sites 'assault on democracy,' UN envoy warns](#)

Afghanistan has suffered “a disturbing pattern” of attacks on voter registration facilities since the process began last month, which add up to an “assault on democracy”, the United Nations mission there said Thursday.

According to a [new report](#) from the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 23 election-related security incidents have already been recorded since voter registration began on 14 April, ahead of parliamentary elections due to take place in October, resulting in 271 civilian deaths and injuries.

UNAMA said these incidents include the 22 April suicide attack on a crowd gathered outside a national identity card distribution centre, in the capital Kabul, which killed and injured a total of 198 civilians.

“These attacks at election facilities are nothing less than [an assault on democracy](#),” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan.

He stressed that Afghans who were turning up to register were “exercising their constitutional right and putting hope for Afghanistan’s future above concerns about their personal safety.”

The report details how some 75 per cent of the security incidents have taken place at schools or mosques, which are doubling-up as election-related facilities, and describes allegations of intimidation of staff there and those seeking to take part in the vote.

“Elections-related violence should remind everyone that efforts toward peace in Afghanistan cannot be set aside,” said Mr. Yamamoto, urging the Taliban to take up President Ashraf Ghani’s peace offer, participate in the elections, and start direct talks with the government to put an end to the suffering of the Afghan people.

The report also urged anti-government and terrorist groups to stop violence at election-related sites and called on the government to do more to protect voters.

UNICEF urges wealthy countries to encourage more breastfeeding

Babies in wealthy countries are five times more likely to miss out on breastfeeding than those in the least-developed, the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) said on Thursday, explaining that this gap could be addressed by better support for working mothers, and regulating sales of infant formula.

Some [7.6 million babies](#) across the world are not breastfed each year despite clear evidence that it can save lives, and protect babies and mothers against deadly diseases.

Evidence suggests breastfeeding also boosts brain development and improves educational outcomes, UNICEF said in a new study, published on Thursday.

In high-income countries, 21 per cent of babies are not breastfed at all, while in low- and-middle-income countries, the figure on average is only four per cent.

Mothers in wealthier countries often lack support for breastfeeding at home or workplace.

"Breastfeeding is the best gift a mother, rich or poor, can give her child, as well as herself," said Shahida Azfar, UNICEF's acting Deputy Executive Director. "As we celebrate Mother's Day, we must give the world's mothers the support they need to breastfeed."

According to the study, [99 per cent](#) of babies in Bhutan, Madagascar and Peru are breastfed at least once. But this rate is only 55 per cent in Ireland, 74 per cent in the United States and 77 per cent in Spain.

The US alone accounts for more than one-third of the 2.6 million babies in high-income countries who were never breastfed.

Even within low-and-middle-income countries, babies from the poorest families are more likely to be breastfed for a longer period of time, than those from wealthier families.

Factors leading to higher breastfeeding rates vary around the world, say UNICEF. India and Vietnam have put in place strong policies to protect and promote breastfeeding. Turkmenistan has high rates of mothers giving birth in hospitals where maternal services are prioritized – officially designated by UNICEF as [baby-friendly hospitals](#). Almost all mothers in New Zealand and Sri Lanka give birth at a baby-friendly facility.

Additionally, cultural and social norms play a decisive role, including varying levels of support from fathers, families, employers and communities at large.

Through its [Every Child ALIVE](#) campaign, UNICEF urges governments, the private sector and civil society to increase funding and awareness to raise breastfeeding rates from birth, through the age of two.

The agency also outlines other factors which can effect breastfeeding rates, such as introducing strong legal measures to regulate the marketing of infant formula and other breastmilk substitutes; enacting paid family leave and putting in place workplace breastfeeding policies, including paid breaks for new mothers.

[New UN agency guidelines aim to sustain forest benefits for future generations](#)

New guidelines designed to give poor and isolated communities more of a say in how tropical forests are used and preserved around the world were published on Thursday, by the Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)).

The FAO is the lead United Nations agency on the sustainable use of forests, and the voluntary guidelines refer to so-called forest concessions; laws and policies that allow local communities and private individuals or businesses to use forested land in return for payment or services.

The aim is to make these concessions “[more transparent, accountable and beneficial](#) to some of the poorest communities in the world”, said the agency.

It is hoped that by adopting the guidelines, countries in tropical regions will be able to curb abuse of forest land due to poor management; corruption and bribery; tenure disputes, and the harassment of local communities.

“If well managed, forest concessions can have multiple socio-economic and environmental benefits and increase the value of standing forests for present and future generations,” said Eva Muller, the head of Forestry Policy and Resources Division at FAO.

“All in all, they can improve the lives of rural communities in some of the poorest and most isolated parts of the world.”

If well managed, forest concessions can have multiple socio-economic and environmental benefits and increase the value of standing forests for present and future generations – *Eva Muller, senior FAO official*

Forest concessions at work

When well managed, forest concessions can curb deforestation and reduce forest degradation. They can also reduce carbon footprint and combat climate change, while increasing employment opportunities and services in local communities.

Proper concessions also add to local and national revenues, which can in turn be invested in development, health and services.

A good example is the Borneo Initiative, a foundation established in 2008, which has provided financial and technical assistance to concession-holders linking them to a professional network of experts to guide them through the process. It has already led to an increase of more than 2 million hectares of natural forest across Indonesia.

Another example is in Guatemala, where concessions are providing direct financial benefits to local communities and have generated more than 16,000 jobs, which in turn brings additional economic benefits.

Verification

The guidelines – formally entitled: “[Making forest concessions in the tropics work to achieve the 2030 Agenda](#)” – build on best practices from around the world, and are based on consultations with more than 300 technical experts from the public and private sectors, together with civil society representatives from Africa, the Asia-Pacific region and Latin America.

A self-assessment tool is one key recommendation, whereby concession-holders and local communities can verify if their agreements will encourage the sustainable use of forest land.

The guidelines were launched on the margins of the 13th session of the UN [Forum on Forests](#), which has been taking place this week at UN Headquarters in New York.

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