

Senior Indian diplomat participates in 'Mr. Kabul' contest

Sandeep Kumar, Minister at the Indian Embassy in Kabul, participated at the 'Mr. Kabul, 2007' body-building competition held at the crammed-to-the-nook Park Cinema in downtown Shahar-e-Nau in Kabul on July 05, 2007, as the sole foreigner.

The competition was organised by the National Olympic Committee, with participation of about 100 athletes in nine categories of 50-100 kgs, representing various Kabul body-building gyms.

Body-building, together with wrestling and karate, is one of the top sports in Afghanistan. Most city gyms are packed at all times of the day with ardent fans of the sport pumping iron vigorously. The infrastructure is basic, but this does not in any way impinge on the determination and commitment of the gym users.

Some of the weights are carved out from discarded military vehicle tyres or canister cans. Sometimes there is no electricity, and the gyming sessions are conducted by candle light. But the show must go on.

At this year's competition, Wahid-ul-lah, 28, a huge hunk with rippled torso, was declared Mr. Kabul 2007. He said that it was a great honour for him to be awarded the top award. But at the same time, he also expressed some criticism that the government was not paying enough attention to the sports sector in the country and that the body-building department within the National Olympic Committee was starved of funds.

Another contestant, Khwaja Farid Sidiqui, was crowned as the sports master of the year and was awarded one thousand dollars and some sports equipment in prize.

Kumar from the Indian Embassy, who himself came third in his category, attributed his



Sandeep Kumar in preparation for the competition.

participation in the competition to the desire of expressing his solidarity with the Afghan body-builders. He maintained that events such as these had the great potential of sending out very positive and encouraging signals to the people both within and outside Afghanistan that despite the security paradigm, there are a lot of positive developments in this country like body-building competitions, art exhibitions and music festivals. These constitute the other layer of reality in Afghanistan, that portray that Afghanistan has taken off, that it is business as usual in many sectors, and that there is cause for optimism and confidence in the tremendous work being undertaken in the country. Such events need to be applauded but sadly go unexposed in the national and

international media. In his view, the quality of competition was top-class, at par with any such event in the developed world like the U.S., Europe, Canada and Australia. He expressed his highest respect for the professionalism, fitness regime, diet control as well as the grit and determination of the participants to be able to come up with such exalted standards.

When asked what has been the most memorable part of his stay in Afghanistan, he said: "I will cherish the personal memories of participation in competitions like these with friends who allowed me to share their lives with them, who opened up their hearts and homes to me. It is this love and friendship of the Afghan people that has been my vital sustaining force." ■

Preview of painting exhibition at Indian Culture Centre in Kabul

The newly opened Indian Culture Centre at the Indian Embassy in Kabul buzzed with activity on July 17. The occasion was the preview of the painting exhibition of a well-known Indian painter and art critic, Sumati Gangopadhyay.

Gangopadhyay's collective work entitled 'Songs of a Mountain Country' predominantly touches upon the Afghan landscapes, sensuously approached, and dexterously intertwined with the themes of climate change, inundation of forested areas and pollution.

The paintings are abstract, drawing upon natural objects like mountains, rivers, trees and oceans, and often spaced out with tiny birds and animals.

The vibrancy of the work is embodied in the profuse use of reds, oranges and blacks that float on acrylics in perfect harmony and yet bode a sense of disquiet, reflective of the concern for the environment.

The main exhibition opened at the Park Residency Gallery on July 18 and ran successfully for 10 days.

Moved by the plight of orphans and street children of Kabul during an earlier visit, Gangopadhyay donated 25 percent of the sale of her paintings to Aschiana, a NGO working for children.

She also conducted art workshops for children, sponsored by the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the product of which will be entered in an international children's art competition, 'Smiling Faces', to be held in South Korea later this month. **Continued on page 5**