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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [68/11](#) and Security Council resolution [2344 \(2017\)](#), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.
2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the date of my previous report, 15 September 2017 ([A/72/392-S/2017/783](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. The National Unity Government continued to prioritize its reform agenda, with an emphasis on anti-corruption measures and security sector reform, in the face of ongoing security and governance challenges. Although electoral preparations by the Independent Election Commission faced setbacks, political groups continued to coalesce around the prospect of parliamentary and district council elections. The security situation remained highly volatile, as the Taliban and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) showed continued capacity for inflicting mass casualties amid increased Afghan and international air strikes. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group, comprising Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States of America, reconvened for the first time in over a year, while Afghanistan continued to expand its multilateral engagement in the region through such forums as the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan. There was no meaningful progress towards a peace settlement.



A. Political developments

4. As noted in my previous report, a fragile political equilibrium emerged after the announcement of July 2018 as the date for the parliamentary and district council elections. This configuration was maintained, as major political actors focused on building coalitions, strengthening their constituencies and closely following the Independent Election Commission's electoral preparations. Delays on key decisions placed the electoral timeline in jeopardy, however, and exacerbated concerns about the Commission's capacity and independence. Political figures began to question the feasibility of holding credible elections as scheduled, and public scepticism around elections increased. Some opposition figures called for elections to be superseded by extraconstitutional measures and the creation of an interim administration. That remained a minority position, however, as the largest parties and coalitions continued to devote significant effort to peaceful democratic processes.

5. The President, Ashraf Ghani, and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, maintained their cooperative relationship, as the National Unity Government sought to build credibility around its reform agenda. The President also increased his political outreach to youth opposition movements, including the largely Tajik Rasta Khez and the Hazara-dominated Junbish-i Roshnayi, whose demonstrations diminished during the reporting period as the Government entered into dialogue on their demands for greater political inclusion. The political landscape, however, was largely dominated by the mobilization of major opposition coalitions around the electoral process.

6. As noted in my previous report, the formation of the Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan brought together prominent politicians, such as the Governor of Balkh Province, Atta Noor, and the First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, as well as the Second Deputy Chief Executive, Mohammad Mohaqiq. Despite the historical rivalry between Mr. Noor and Mr. Dostum, their alliance has endured, and the former took steps to expand the coalition's geographical base, reaching out to such politicians as the Police Chief of Kandahar, Abdul Raziq, a parliamentarian from the eastern region, Zahir Qadir, and a former mujahidin leader from the western region, Ismail Khan. In late September, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a former mujahidin leader, convened meetings of a new umbrella group, the Harmony Council. This group, which encompassed a broad array of political factions, coalesced around an electoral agenda and proposed major changes to the electoral process, including the replacement of electoral commissioners and the redrafting of the 2016 Election Law.

7. Some opposition figures became increasingly vocal in their calls for a traditional loya jirga, a traditional form of national assembly largely constituted by elders, as a step towards the establishment of a new form of government. Those calls were led by the former President, Hamid Karzai, who on 12 October publicly called for a loya jirga to review security policy and the relationship of Afghanistan with the United States of America and possibly to select new leadership for the country. Mr. Karzai's calls initially gained little traction, with many politicians dismissing the idea. Nevertheless, the proposal appeared to be gaining broader acceptance as the lack of progress on elections became increasingly apparent. The Palace issued a press statement on 15 November instructing government personnel to avoid participation in such processes. Subsequently, two senior government officials were dismissed after they voiced public support for a loya jirga.

8. Opposition to the Government also manifested itself in tensions between the executive and legislative branches, as the Government and the parliament exchanged public allegations of corruption. Parliamentary confirmation votes for at least 10 acting ministers were scheduled to take place in the lower house of the National Assembly shortly after the opening of the session in September. The votes were

delayed following reports that some ministerial nominees had failed to attract sufficient support from parliamentarians. On 25 November, the Government introduced 12 ministerial nominees to the lower house for confirmation votes. Allegations of corruption also emerged within the parliament itself, leading to a verbal dispute between two prominent parliamentarians, the Speaker, Abdul Rauf Ibrahimi, and the Deputy Speaker, Humayun Humayun, which culminated in a physical confrontation between their supporters on the floor of the parliament on 25 October. On 4 November, a majority of the lower house voted in favour of disciplinary action against Mr. Ibrahimi, Mr. Humayun and two other parliamentarians.

9. Mr. Dostum remained outside of the country throughout the reporting period while under indictment for alleged sexual assault in Afghanistan. On 1 November, a primary court in Kabul sentenced seven of Mr. Dostum's bodyguards in absentia to three to five years in prison for assaulting a political rival in November 2016. Two other bodyguards and Mr. Dostum himself were also named in court documents in the same incident. In Mr. Dostum's absence, Mr. Ghani took steps to revive his ties with the Uzbek community, holding a meeting on 23 October with several former associates of the First Vice-President and members of the Junbish-i Nawin party, a new political group that seeks support among ethnic Uzbek voters. Following the meeting, several prominent Junbish-i Milli members accepted positions within the Government. However, the founder of Junbish-i Milli, Mr. Dostum, continued to command a loyal support base among provincial party representatives and Uzbek community members in the north.

10. Other political parties also struggled to maintain internal cohesion in the face of ongoing leadership tensions. The Hizb-i Islami political movement remained split between the Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) and Hizb-i Islami Afghanistan factions, despite the ongoing attempts of the leader of the former group, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, to unite the movement. In October, Mr. Hikmatyar launched a process of restructuring the party leadership and provincial representation, holding internal elections in several provinces. On 8 November, Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) organized a large gathering in Kabul, attended by party representatives from across the country. The event confirmed Mr. Hikmatyar as the temporary leader of the party, but failed to reconcile the division between Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) and the registered political party Hizb-i Islami Afghanistan, whose leader, Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, continued to distance himself from Mr. Hikmatyar. On 13 November, the Ministry of Justice issued a statement confirming Mr. Arghandiwal as the head of the registered Hizb-i Islami party. Jamiyat-i Islami also faced internal rivalries, as loyalists of Chief Executive Abdullah and those of Balkh Province Governor Noor disputed ministerial appointments. A suicide attack on a gathering of Governor Noor's supporters on 16 November in Kabul exacerbated tensions between him and the National Unity Government, as Mr. Noor accused figures within the Government of conspiring against Jamiyat-i Islami.

11. The Independent Election Commission made some progress on electoral preparations against a background of internal turmoil. For the first time, the Commission completed a review of the location of polling centres throughout the country to ascertain voter accessibility, as envisaged in the 2016 Election Law. It also embarked on the implementation of a biometric voter registration process. Ultimately, however, the effort to introduce such technology was aborted when the tendering process yielded a single bid, which was disqualified on procedural grounds. As a result, the Commission, on 25 October, announced that it had reverted to considering paper-based ballot options. On 15 November, the Commission discussed the options in a public session with external stakeholders. Irrespective of the modalities, the aim

is to link, for the first time in Afghanistan, every voter on the register to one specific polling centre.

12. The Commission also held several consultation forums and public meetings that brought together representatives of political parties, coalitions and civil society organizations. The Commission faced increasing criticism from political stakeholders and civil society, however, over its perceived lack of progress, poor leadership and internal divisions. Following a determination by five Commissioners, the Chair of the Commission was removed from office, and on 15 November the President gave instructions to identify candidates to replace the vacant position. Despite this upheaval, the Commission continued to move forward with its work. On 20 November, the Commission concluded an agreement with the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission to accelerate the recruitment of electoral positions and reduce the high vacancy rate. On 4 October, the United Nations, the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission signed the electoral support project document, establishing the framework for international donor assistance for elections.

13. Women's participation in the electoral process was the theme of dialogues organized across Afghanistan by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women from 17 October to 22 November in celebration of the 2017 Global Open Day for Women and Peace. At the events, male and female activists, former candidates, election officials and religious leaders discussed ways of encouraging women's participation in elections by addressing issues of security, access to funds for potential women candidates and targeted awareness-raising that addresses gender biases with respect to leadership and the holding of public office. A report with key findings and recommendations was distributed to relevant stakeholders. A total of 364 individuals (303 women and 61 men) participated in the events from 44 districts across 20 provinces.

14. Since my previous report there have been no significant steps towards establishing a peace process with the Taliban. Institutional reforms continued within the existing peace architecture, as the High Peace Council finalized a strategic plan for its work from 2017 to 2020. It was stipulated in the plan that the Government would not negotiate from a position of weakness, and the fundamental standing of the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan was reiterated. Furthermore, the plan included a call for peace talks to be hosted in Kabul, with no international intermediaries, and the need to achieve a regional consensus on stability in Afghanistan was emphasized. The Taliban, meanwhile, communicated their readiness to militarily confront the Government and its international partners following the renewal of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troop commitments in Afghanistan. At the subnational level, the High Peace Council appointed new members for all 34 provincial peace committees, with the membership of the Council and its provincial affiliates now totalling 480 members, including 65 women.

15. UNAMA continued to promote inclusivity in Afghan peace initiatives. Since mid-September, the Mission has supported the implementation of seven local peace initiatives, including events in Balkh, Bamyan, Daykundi, Helmand, Herat, Jowzjan and Kabul Provinces. On 29 October, with technical support from UNAMA, the Asia Foundation in Kabul organized a national conference to present four provincial road maps for the Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace to provincial invitees and relevant stakeholders. Participants voiced concern about the security situation and suggested leveraging the role of religious leaders to support the establishment of conflict resolution councils in rural areas in order to increase the participation of women in peace processes.

B. Security

16. The security situation remained highly volatile, as conflict between government and anti-government forces continued throughout most of the country. The United Nations recorded 3,995 security-related incidents from 15 September to 15 November, representing a 4 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2016. By 15 November, the United Nations had recorded more than 21,105 security-related incidents for the first 11 months of 2017, an increase of 1 per cent since 2016. The continuing high number of incidents is attributed mainly to armed clashes. In line with established trends, armed clashes accounted for the majority of security incidents, at 62 per cent, followed by improvised explosive devices, at 17 per cent. Targeted killings and abductions increased by 16 per cent compared with the same period in 2016. The eastern region experienced the highest number of incidents, followed by the southern region, with the two regions accounting for 56 per cent of all incidents.

17. Afghan and international forces significantly increased their air operations following the announcement of a new United States strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, which provided for changes in the rules of the engagement of the United States military forces. During the reporting period there were 215 air strikes, a 73 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2016, and in October the Mission recorded the highest number of air strikes in the country to date. Air strikes were reported in 22 provinces, with the majority conducted in Helmand Province in the south and Nangarhar Province in the east. The increase in air strikes had a notable effect on the ground, reportedly inflicting heavy casualties on anti-government elements and civilians.

18. The Taliban launched multiple large-scale operations to capture district administration centres, temporarily overrunning Maruf in Kandahar Province, Andar in Ghazni Province, Shib Koh in Farah Province and Shahid-i Hasas in Uruzgan Province. In all cases, Afghan security forces pushed the Taliban back, in some instances with international military air support. On 14 October, Afghan forces recaptured the Ghorak district centre in Kandahar Province, which had been under Taliban control since November 2016.

19. The reporting period witnessed one of the most violent weeks in recent times, as anti-government elements staged a seemingly coordinated series of attacks in several locations. From 17 to 19 October, the Taliban launched four complex attacks around the country using Humvees rigged as suicide bombs, killing more than 100 people, including both Afghan National Defence and Security Forces personnel and civilians. The incidents were indicative of a growing Taliban focus on attacking the bases of Afghan security forces rather than district centres, inflicting heavy casualties, weakening morale and stealing military equipment.

20. ISIL-KP remained resilient, claiming responsibility for several attacks against both the civilian population and military targets throughout the reporting period. These included three suicide attacks in Kabul, two of which were against worshippers at mosques, inflicting numerous civilian casualties. In the third attack, on 31 October, a device was detonated on the boundary of Kabul's diplomatic "Green Zone", killing 10 civilians in what appeared to be a symbolic attack against the international community, the first attack in the diplomatic quarter since the 31 May suicide attack. The group also claimed responsibility for an attack on a television station in Kabul on 7 November and for a suicide attack against a gathering of supporters of Governor Noor in Kabul on 16 November. ISIL-KP and Taliban militants also fought against each other in Nangarhar and Jowzjan Provinces.

21. The Government continued to prioritize the implementation of its four-year plan on security sector reform as a key component of its overall security strategy. As part of the plan, on 5 November, the Interior and Defence Ministries signed a memorandum of understanding to officially transfer the Afghan Border Police and the Afghan National Civil Order Police from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Defence. Efforts towards the civilianization of the police force also continued with further civilian appointments, leaving a vacancy rate of only 16 identified mid-level civilian positions out of a total of 191. Attrition within the Afghan National Police remained a major concern, and police continued to suffer from high casualty rates. On 17 October, 54 police personnel died in a single attack on the provincial police headquarters in Paktiya Province.

22. On 27 September, the United States Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, and the Secretary-General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, visited Afghanistan and met with the President. At a joint press conference, Mr. Ghani and Mr. Mattis urged all countries in the region to cooperate on counter-terrorism efforts. On 9 November, NATO allies reaffirmed their commitment to Afghanistan during the NATO meeting of defence ministers in Brussels, where Mr. Stoltenberg announced that NATO troop levels would be increased from 13,000 to 16,000, following more commitments by allies within existing troop authorization levels.

23. There were seven incidents involving United Nations personnel, including one incident of intimidation, five criminal incidents, no armed clashes and no incidents of abduction.

C. Regional cooperation

24. Bilateral ties between Afghanistan and its neighbours intensified. On 1 October, the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, met Mr. Ghani in Kabul to discuss regional security among other matters of common interest. The bilateral efforts of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran to finalize a comprehensive partnership agreement also progressed, with a second round of meetings of working committees held in Kabul on 8 October. Water, security and refugee and migrant issues were discussed at the deputy minister level. Afghanistan also continued to expand its bilateral ties with India with the launch of the “new development partnership” of the two countries on 12 September and the signing of a memorandum of understanding of technical cooperation on police training and development on 28 September. On 24 October, Mr. Ghani visited New Delhi, where he met with the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi. During the visit, Mr. Modi expressed support for “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, Afghan-controlled” reconciliation, while the two leaders also discussed development and connectivity. On 24 October, the Secretary of State of the United States, Rex Tillerson, visited Afghanistan, India and Pakistan to discuss the new United States strategy for South Asia. At Bagram airfield in Afghanistan, Mr. Tillerson reaffirmed the commitment of the United States to securing a process of peace and reconciliation.

25. A meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Afghanistan Contact Group was held on 11 October in Moscow, attended at the deputy foreign ministerial level. During the meeting, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Hekmat Karzai, highlighted five main issues: the proposal for Afghanistan to co-chair future Afghanistan Contact Group meetings; the interest of Afghanistan in full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; the common security threat of Islamic State fighters moving from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic to Afghanistan; the importance of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process; and economic integration with Shanghai Cooperation Organization countries through trade and investment. China offered to host the next meeting of the Afghanistan Contact Group

in early 2018. Following over a year of dormancy, the sixth meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group was held in Muscat on 16 October, bringing together Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States. There was no outcome statement after the event.

26. The Government continued its multilateral engagement through other regional forums. On 14 November, the seventh Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan convened in Ashgabat. Such issues as partnerships in the field of regional interchange, water use, counter-narcotics, transport, trade facilitation and the business climate were discussed. On the margins of the conference, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Turkmenistan signed an agreement on the creation of the Lapis Lazuli transport corridor following three years of technical talks. Following the conference, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime organized a two-day conference on the theme “Promoting Afghanistan’s alternative development initiatives among regional partners” in Ashgabat on 16 and 17 November. The event was attended by delegations from Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, as well as representatives from a number of regional and other countries and several agencies of the United Nations system. Participants discussed a range of measures to promote alternative development and reduce opium poppy cultivation. The seventh Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process was convened on 1 December in Baku. In the Baku Declaration, States underlined the priorities of countering violent extremism and terrorism and enhancing economic connectivity to advance regional economic growth.

III. Human rights

27. On 12 October, UNAMA released civilian casualty trends for the first nine months of 2017. Between 1 January and 30 September, the Mission documented 8,019 civilian casualties (2,640 deaths and 5,379 injured), a decrease of 6 per cent compared with the same period in 2016. Civilian deaths increased by 1 per cent, while the number of injured civilians decreased by 9 per cent. Conflict-related violence also destroyed livelihoods, homes and property, displaced thousands of families and limited access to education, health and other services. UNAMA attributed 64 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-government elements, 20 per cent to pro-government forces, 11 per cent to unattributed crossfire during ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces and 5 per cent to other sources, including explosive remnants of war and cross-border shelling.

28. Ground engagements accounted for 2,807 civilian casualties (684 deaths and 2,123 injured), or 35 per cent of all such casualties. The indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices in suicide attacks by anti-government elements in civilian-populated areas caused 382 deaths and 1,202 injuries, amounting to 20 per cent of all civilian casualties, while other improvised explosive device tactics, including the use of pressure-plate devices, accounted for a further 18 per cent. The Mission documented 466 civilian casualties from aerial attacks (205 deaths and 261 injured), marking an increase of 52 per cent compared with the same period in 2016, with women and children comprising 68 per cent of those casualties. Overall, the Mission documented 2,480 child casualties (689 deaths and 1,791 injured), a 5 per cent increase in child deaths compared with the same period in 2016. Ground engagements caused 46 per cent of all child casualties. Female casualties increased by 13 per cent.

29. On 17 October, UNAMA held its second annual civil-military dialogue on the protection of civilians in Kabul. High-level government and military representatives, together with the international protection community, discussed plans to meet

obligations under Protocol V to the 1980 Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, ratified in August, and the implementation of the recently approved national policy on the prevention and mitigation of civilian casualties.

30. Following a series of violent attacks against sectarian targets, UNAMA released a special report on 7 November documenting attacks against places of worship and religious leaders and worshippers, and particularly attacks targeting Shia Muslim congregations. Between 1 January 2016 and 7 November 2017, UNAMA documented 51 incidents of this nature, resulting in 850 civilian casualties (273 deaths and 577 injured), nearly double the number of civilian casualties recorded in such attacks during the entire seven-year period from 2009 to 2015. UNAMA attributed nearly all of the attacks to anti-government elements. Two Shia mosques were attacked during the reporting period. On 29 September, a suicide attacker detonated an explosive device at a gathering to commemorate the Shia holiday of Ashura, killing six civilians. On 20 October, an attacker detonated an explosive device inside the Imam-i Zaman mosque in Kabul, killing 57 civilians. ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for both attacks.

31. In an effort to prevent attacks against sectarian targets, the Government introduced new measures in mid-September to protect places of worship identified as being at risk. These consisted of recruiting and arming about 2,500 men from local communities countrywide to protect approximately 600 mosques and shrines from attacks. Interlocutors generally expressed satisfaction with the measures but insisted that the Government retains primary responsibility to protect all citizens, a stance endorsed by UNAMA.

32. Between 1 July and 30 September, UNAMA verified 18 conflict-related incidents targeting health facilities and health-care personnel (10 by the Taliban, 5 by undetermined armed groups, 2 by ISIL-KP and 1 by government forces) compared with 33 incidents over the same period in 2016, including 3 involving polio vaccination workers. Five of the incidents resulted in the closure of health clinics. UNAMA verified 13 incidents having an impact on education facilities and education-related personnel, several of which consisted of threats, intimidation and harassment. UNAMA attributed 10 incidents to armed groups (6 to the Taliban, 2 to ISIL-KP and 2 to undetermined armed groups), 2 incidents to cross-border shelling and 1 incident to international military forces. UNAMA documented 24 incidents of this nature over the same period in 2016.

33. UNAMA received 30 reports of the recruitment and use of children involving 247 boys; it verified the recruitment and use of 19 boys (12 by ISIL-KP, 6 by the Taliban and 1 by the Afghan local police). In addition, UNAMA received three reports of abductions by the Taliban involving at least four boys and two unverified incidents of sexual violence against children that remain under investigation.

34. Following advocacy by UNAMA, on 7 November, the Government of Afghanistan transferred 50 juveniles, detained on national security-related charges, from the maximum-security adult detention facility in Parwan to the juvenile rehabilitation centre of Kabul Province. The United Nations, while monitoring the situation of children in juvenile rehabilitation centres, continued to advocate for the granting of family visits, educational, health, legal and social services, and psychosocial support and reintegration programmes.

35. Access to justice remained a challenge for female survivors of violence. Progress in the implementation of the national action plan on women, peace and security has been slow owing to the delay in the finalization of the revised \$52 million implementation budget, which occurred in October. Discussions are ongoing with

donors on funding mechanisms. From 25 November to 10 December, UNAMA and the United Nations country team supported the campaign of Afghanistan entitled “16 days of activism on violence against women”, with 14 activities implemented nationwide, including seminars, workshops, dialogues and radio programmes. The theme for 2017 was “Leave no one behind: ending violence against women and girls”.

36. The Government took steps to implement the recommendations of the Committee against Torture, following its review of Afghanistan in May. In September, the President endorsed an additional annex to the presidential decree on the prohibition of torture providing that victims of torture can bring legal claims for redress from the Government in both the criminal and civil courts. On 25 October, at a conference organized by the Ministry of Justice, the Government presented its national action plan to follow up on the recommendations from the Committee against Torture. The Government also established a committee, chaired by the Office of the National Security Council, with specific responsibility to monitor the implementation of the action plan.

37. Civil society actors and media workers continued to face attacks, intimidation and threats by anti-government elements. UNAMA documented five incidents of this nature, one each in the central, central highlands, north-eastern, southern and south-eastern regions. On 7 November, an attack claimed by ISIL-KP against the Shamshad television station in Kabul killed 1 person and injured 20 employees of the station. As part of its efforts to promote the opening of civic space, on 8 October UNAMA hosted a meeting with the representatives of journalists in Kandahar Province. Participants shared concerns about their safety and challenges faced while carrying out their professional responsibilities.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul Process and coordination of development assistance

38. The Government continued to prioritize the implementation of its reform agenda, in consultation with civil society, representatives of the private sector and international donors. Governance reforms remained a key component of the reform agenda, with an emphasis on anti-corruption efforts, merit-based civil service recruitment and Interior Ministry reform. On 5 October, the Government convened its biannual meeting of senior officials on development in Kabul, comprising representatives of 43 countries and international agencies along with Afghan government ministers and senior officials. Discussions focused on core elements of the economic development and reform agenda, including the economy, infrastructure, women’s empowerment, the private sector and governance. Participants highlighted the need for fiscal and policy reforms, while priorities for development investment include human capital development to promote equity and productivity; energy and the extractive industry to enhance government revenues; and regional connectivity to boost economic opportunity. On women’s economic empowerment, challenges discussed included harassment faced by women in obtaining and certifying educational credentials and in the workforce, as well as their limited access to assets. Government officials also highlighted the need for targeted infrastructure development, which they acknowledged must be carefully prioritized to address key construction and maintenance needs. On private sector development, participants expressed their appreciation for the Government’s inclusion of private sector representatives in policy discussions, but stressed that the impact of recent reforms had not yet been fully felt by local businesses.

39. Economic growth projections continued to indicate a slight increase compared with 2016, although the International Monetary Fund (IMF) noted that it would lower

its projections from 3 per cent to 2.5 per cent. An IMF team held discussions in Baku from 27 September to 7 October for the Fund's second review of Afghanistan's extended credit facility. The Fund reported that performance under the facility had been satisfactory, as all end-June performance criteria and most of the structural benchmarks had been met. Revenue collection continues to increase owing to government anti-corruption efforts, particularly at border crossings, and the overall 2017 revenue collection target of \$2.2 billion is likely to be achieved. IMF indicated, however, that growth rates approaching 6 per cent were needed to generate sufficient employment for the estimated 400,000 people entering the labour market every year. The Fund also pointed to the potential for instability arising from upcoming elections, which could lead to delays of necessary reforms.

40. On 28 September, the High Council for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption adopted the anti-corruption strategy, delivering on a commitment made at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, held in October 2016. The launch of the strategy followed consultations with national and international stakeholders and the provision of expert assistance by UNAMA, including the delivery of comments of donors and experts on 18 September. The priorities of the strategy include the security and justice sector and merit-based recruitment in the public sector. Civil society groups and international community observers, however, called for the strategy to be amended to be more explicit about the compliance of the proposed framework of anti-corruption institutions with the United Nations Convention against Corruption. While the strategy included a plan to dismantle the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption, which did not fully meet expectations, alternatives for better-functioning asset declaration and verification mechanisms remained undefined.

41. The Anti-Corruption Justice Centre completed trials in 25 cases against 95 accused and 21 cases on appeal. Fifteen cases were reviewed by the Supreme Court. The Centre continued to focus on high-level cases against officials of the Interior and Defence Ministries. The security of its personnel remained a serious concern. On 15 October, a special investigator for the Centre was shot and died a few days later, the third official of the Centre killed in 2017. Also in October, the Executive Director was attacked and narrowly escaped abduction. Each of those incidents has yet to be fully investigated. Reports on security incidents highlighted serious lapses of the Centre's application of security protocols, and the presidential decree on security measures for Anti-Corruption Justice Centre personnel issued in June remains to be fully implemented.

42. On 14 October, the Ministry of Justice finished the translation from Dari into Pashto and the printing of the new penal code, which was decreed in March 2017 and is scheduled to enter into force in February 2018. The chapter on the elimination of violence against women was removed during the translation of the code. Its deletion, which was criticized by many within Afghan civil society and the international community, will require judges and prosecutors to continue to apply the weaker protection standards provided for in the separate 2008 Law on Elimination of Violence against Women.

43. The Government continued its efforts on merit-based appointments, with a particular focus on implementing competitive appointment processes for senior-level subnational officials. On 2 October, the President appointed two new provincial governors for Kabul and Daykundi Provinces. In addition, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance appointed the first female Deputy Provincial Governor in Herat Province.

V. Humanitarian assistance and refugees

44. Within the reporting period, some 33,000 people were newly displaced by conflict, bringing the overall total to more than 318,000 in 2017. Of all displaced people, 23 per cent relocated to hard-to-reach areas that were either very remote or controlled or contested by anti-government elements. Internal displacement has affected 31 out of 34 provinces across the country in 2017. As the fighting has become more protracted in some places and the frontlines have shifted, many displaced families have been forced to move multiple times. Many have no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin in safety and dignity.

45. Under the voluntary repatriation programme of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 14,000 registered Afghan refugees who returned to Afghanistan during the reporting period received assistance. Over 98 per cent of these were returning from Pakistan. Returning individuals received an average of \$200 each to pay for transport to their place of origin or destination and to meet their immediate needs for food and shelter. Overall, the number of refugees returning from Pakistan to Afghanistan was 84 per cent lower in 2017 than during the same period the previous year. This is attributed mainly to an improvement in the protection situation in Pakistan, the four-month winter pause in the UNHCR repatriation programme and the corresponding reduction in the cash grant awarded to each individual (from \$400 to \$200). The registration of undocumented Afghans in Pakistan commenced on 16 August, and over 411,000 applications had been received as at 20 November.

46. The deportation and spontaneous return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan continued, with 8,109 arrivals (7,640 spontaneous arrivals and 469 deportees) between 16 September and 18 November, accounting for 9 per cent of the total arrivals from Pakistan in 2017. Since the beginning of the year, the total number of undocumented returnees arriving from Pakistan was 94,957, down from 236,724 over the same period in 2016. During the reporting period 143,745 Afghans arrived from the Islamic Republic of Iran (55,323 spontaneous arrivals and 88,422 deportees) out of 393,824 since 1 January 2017. Out of the total undocumented returnee population, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) assisted 7,388 people (89.5 per cent) from Pakistan and 5,750 people (6 per cent) from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Between 15 September and 17 November, IOM also assisted 659 returnees from Europe, compared with 527 for the same period in 2016.

47. United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners continued to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to crisis-affected populations, delivering a combination of in-kind and cash assistance to 1.2 million people across all sectors in the third quarter of the year. Constraints on humanitarian access continued, with a total of 79 incidents affecting the United Nations and its humanitarian partners in September and October. Since January, a total of 305 such incidents were registered, up from 169 for the same period in 2016. The higher number was due mainly to improved reporting, rather than reflecting a drastic change in the environment. Nevertheless, access to communities in need of assistance in contested areas and areas under the control of anti-government elements remained a persistent challenge for humanitarian partners.

48. On 9 September, a deminer working for a non-governmental organization was shot and killed in Nangarhar Province, and on 11 September, a staff member of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was shot and killed in Balkh Province. ICRC subsequently announced a reduction in its geographical footprint in the northern region of Afghanistan. Since the start of 2017, 17 aid workers have been killed, 15 injured and 43 abducted. In the same period of 2016, 13 aid workers were killed, 22 wounded and 110 abducted. The trend of armed groups forcing health facilities to close down temporarily, often in an attempt to monopolize trauma care for their combatants, continued throughout the reporting period. In Uruzgan Province,

40 clinics were affected, depriving an estimated 420,000 people of access to health care, while 25 clinics were closed in Badghis Province, serving around 175,000 people. By 23 November, only five of the health facilities in Uruzgan had reopened.

49. More than 9 million children were reached in the national polio vaccination campaign in September and over 5.5 million in November. Two new cases of polio were reported, in Nangarhar and Kandahar Provinces, bringing the total to 9 cases for 2017, compared with 12 during the same period in 2016. The new transmissions detected in 2017 were the result of cross-border movements between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

50. The Mine Action Service of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations expressed its concern about the continual increase in the average monthly rate of casualties from mines, explosive remnants of war and pressure-plate improvised explosive devices, which stands at 169 for the period from January to October 2017. This is consistent with the trend in 2016, in which a monthly average of 168 victims was recorded from January to October. The vast majority of casualties (96.3 per cent) are due to explosive remnants of war and pressure-plate improvised explosive devices. The consequences of those incidents were exacerbated by the scarcity of resources available to assist victims and by the drawdown of international health organizations. In October, the Service conducted an initial assessment to support the national Directorate of Mine Action Coordination in developing a strategy to eliminate those devices.

51. The Mine Action Service and partners continued to provide risk education at encashment and transit centres to alert returnees to the danger posed by landmines, explosive remnants of war and abandoned pressure-plate improvised explosive devices. From 1 August to 31 October, 10,932 returnees received such education. During the same time period, mine action partners, coordinated by the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination and the Mine Action Service, declared 15 communities to be free of mines, which enabled approximately 234,885 individuals across 20.95 km² to move freely within their communities and facilitated improved agricultural activities and market access. It is estimated, however, that 3,321 minefields, 296 battlefields and 37 contaminated firing ranges remain, affecting 1,446 communities. Communities in areas of regular conflict continue to report contamination from explosive remnants of war, which often blocks access to public infrastructure, as was the case in Surkhrod district, Nangarhar Province, in October, where an artillery shell had to be cleared from a school.

52. As at 15 November, humanitarian activities in Afghanistan had received \$348 million in funding, of which \$287 million was for activities included in the humanitarian response plan. The number of people targeted for assistance was reduced at the mid-year review stage from 5.7 million to 3.6 million, owing to lower than anticipated returns and reduced capacity to deliver.

VI. Counter-narcotics

53. In an executive summary of the Afghanistan Opium Survey 2017 released by the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on 13 November, it was noted that the total area under opium poppy cultivation had increased by 63 per cent in 2017, to an estimated 328,000 ha. The increase was attributed to a variety of factors, including political instability, lack of government control and security, corruption and weaker engagement of the international aid community, which hampered eradication efforts, as well as the increasing availability of inexpensive labour and higher crop yields, which incentivized poppy cultivation. The majority (60 per cent) of opium poppy cultivation took place in the southern region. The western region accounted for 17 per cent of total cultivation, the northern

region for 13 per cent and the eastern region for 7 per cent. The remaining regions (north-eastern and central) together accounted for 3 per cent. The report also highlighted an increase of 87 per cent in opium production to 9,000 tons, from 4,800 tons in 2016.

54. From 27 August to 31 October, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 438 counter-narcotics operations, which resulted in the seizure of 230 kg of heroin, 700 kg of morphine, 2,736 kg of opium, 44 kg of methamphetamine, 5,699 kg of hashish, 510 kg of solid precursor chemicals, 18,182 litres of liquid precursor chemicals and 225 K-tablets (synthetic drugs). In addition, a heroin-processing laboratory was dismantled and 76 vehicles, 20 weapons and 111 mobile telephones were seized. Meanwhile, around 500 suspects were arrested during counter-narcotics operations, with 2 members of Afghan security forces being killed and 3 wounded in the course of operations.

55. There was some progress in licit crop production during the reporting period. According to the Central Statistics Organization, there was a 133 per cent increase in the cultivation of saffron compared with the previous harvest season, amounting to a total of 2,587.7 ha. There was also a 63 per cent increase in vegetable production, a 57 per cent increase in apple production, a 40 per cent increase in pomegranate production and a 35 per cent increase in almond production in comparison with 2015/16.

VII. Mission support

56. Further to the recommendations of the recent strategic review of UNAMA (A/72/312-S/2017/696), the Mission is well advanced in its plans to close the field office in Farah and to nationalize the Faizabad field office before the end of 2017. In addition, the Mission has put in place a number of measures to ensure adequate oversight of the nationalized Faizabad office by the Head of Office in Kunduz and to arrange ongoing access to Farah from the Herat field office to facilitate regular engagement by UNAMA staff with relevant local interlocutors in Farah Province. Between 16 August and 16 November, UNAMA conducted 21 air and 218 road missions, as well as 742 reverse outreach missions during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

57. As noted in my previous report, Afghanistan weathered a tumultuous month following the truck bomb attack in Kabul on 31 May, marked by protests, a vocal political opposition and a resilient Taliban insurgency. This volatility gradually gave way to a period of relative political calm, as major political actors shifted their focus towards upcoming elections and channelled their discontent into constructive political activity. Those developments, however, should not be regarded with complacency. Afghanistan continues to face manifold political, electoral, security and economic challenges, which require a unified vision and, above all, intensified efforts to reach a political settlement to the conflict.

58. Only a negotiated settlement can bring lasting peace and stability to Afghanistan and the region. With the recognition of this reality inside Afghanistan and within the international community comes the challenge of taking a realistic approach to a peace settlement. I encourage all parties to engage constructively in diplomatic efforts towards peace, with a view to promoting the interests and well-being of all Afghans. There is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

59. The possibilities for peaceful dialogue are being explored by a variety of actors across Afghanistan, as communities engage on issues of local concern such as land use, water management and security. UNAMA supports those initiatives at the local level, where Afghans have derived concrete benefits from the peaceful resolution of disputes. I am hopeful that the sum of those efforts will contribute positive momentum to a peace process at the national level. Noting the adoption of the new peace strategy, I encourage the High Peace Council to reach out to all sectors and levels of society to help build a national consensus on peace.

60. In a complex regional environment, strong cooperation among neighbours is critical in promoting stability and prosperity, including an environment conducive to intra-Afghan dialogue. The region has demonstrated its readiness to provide support under a variety of formats, each of which offers important capabilities that could reinforce an Afghan-owned peace process between the Government and the Taliban. I am encouraged by the statements in this past period from meetings held in Ashgabat, Baku, Brussels, Moscow, Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and others, all of which emphasized the importance of cooperation, regional integration and the need for a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. I encourage efforts to ensure the alignment and complementarity of those initiatives, and I call upon any Member State with influence on the Taliban to exercise such leverage in the service of a lasting peace.

61. The slow pace of electoral preparations has put pressure on the timetable for holding parliamentary and district council elections in 2018. While concrete steps have been taken towards the development of an improved voter registry and the compilation of polling centre-based voter lists, delays in key decisions have raised concerns among the public about the capacity of the electoral commissions to ensure timely elections. In an increasingly charged political atmosphere, the effects of a potential delay in the electoral calendar are amplified. I encourage the electoral management bodies to work closely with political stakeholders, civil society and international partners to ensure that credible elections are held in 2018. Holding elections in an increasingly insecure environment will require the firm commitment of all stakeholders to the peaceful conduct of and non-interference with the electoral process, and I encourage all parties within and outside the Government to take a responsible approach to their electoral preparations.

62. The persistently high levels of armed clashes and their corresponding impact on civilians remain a source of concern. I am deeply concerned about the increase in civilian casualties due to air strikes by Government and international military forces. Equally troubling are the continuing civilian casualties caused by the indiscriminate use by anti-government elements of improvised explosive devices. While the decrease in the number of security incidents affecting educational facilities and personnel is encouraging, it is unacceptable that schools continue to be used by armed forces and groups. I remind all parties to the conflict of their responsibilities to protect civilians during military operations and call for additional steps to reduce the number of civilian casualties.

63. The Government's endorsement of a national policy on civilian casualty prevention and mitigation and its ratification in August of Protocol V to the 1980 Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects are welcome steps. The United Nations stands ready to provide technical support for the implementation by the Government of action plans in those areas.

64. I congratulate Afghanistan on its election in October 2017 to the Human Rights Council. This is an opportunity for all national institutions to enact effective implementation measures in compliance with the Constitution of Afghanistan and international legal obligations. With this in mind, I encourage the Government to follow through on its public commitments to ratify the Optional Protocol to the

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and to withdraw its reservations to the Convention.

65. I welcome the Government's commitment to advancing the rights of women, and particularly its allocation of resources for the implementation of the national action plan on women, peace and security. The implementation of the plan should contribute to lowering the unacceptable level of violence directed at women, improving women's access to justice and providing for women's participation in political, professional and public life. The Government is to be commended for increasing the representation of women in the High Peace Council, although the dismissal of the country's only female provincial governor during the reporting period is a source of disappointment. In moving to complete its report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, being prepared in consultation with women from all walks of life, the Government would send a reassuring signal of its commitment to protecting women's rights by reinserting in the penal code the chapter on the elimination of violence against women. I encourage renewed attention to increasing the meaningful participation of women in the political life of the country.

66. The personal security of investigators, judges and prosecutors, in particular those working on sensitive or corruption-related cases, remains a source of serious concern. So, too, are the ongoing reports of threats against some of the commissioners, staff and leadership of the secretariat of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, as well as human rights defenders. It is vital that enhanced measures be provided to protect those individuals at their workplaces and their residences to ensure that they are able to continue their work for a more just and inclusive society.

67. I am profoundly troubled by the stark increase in the area under opium poppy cultivation across Afghanistan, which expanded by 63 per cent between 2016 and 2017, and its implications for the region and beyond. Equally, the rise in heroin production to a record level of 9,000 tons is a matter of grave concern. Apart from posing a significant threat to the health of Afghans, the rising prevalence of poppy cultivation fuels insecurity, reduces the space for licit economic development and widens the gap between the Government and the people it is responsible for serving. I call upon the Government and the international community to redouble their efforts to counter opium poppy cultivation, including the expansion of alternative development opportunities for local communities across Afghanistan, and to further enhance law enforcement efforts against illicit drug trafficking and associated money-laundering.

68. The Government's commitment to achieving progress on its reform agenda, despite the many challenges, deserves support. The Senior Officials Meeting, held on 5 October, reaffirmed donors' commitment to the development of Afghanistan and its path towards self-reliance. I am encouraged by the Government's stated commitment to drive the anti-corruption agenda forward, and the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre's continued success in prosecuting high-level corruption cases. The adoption of the national anti-corruption strategy on 28 September provides a blueprint for a more systematic and coordinated approach to curbing corruption. The effective implementation of the strategy across the civil service, security sector, Parliament and judiciary will be essential in ensuring the sustainability of the Government's anti-corruption efforts.

69. I thank all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication to fulfilling our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan under very challenging circumstances.