

The HAG quarterly report analyses access restrictions encountered by humanitarian workers during the third quarter of 2020 (Q3 2020). The report is based on the Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework, which records access impediments encountered by humanitarians in Afghanistan and logs them according to seven different categories of access constraints, which are then further divided into different types of access incidents.

Access Constraint	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Tendency
1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities	52	97	↑
2) Levy Request	9	16	↑
3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity	33	41	↑
4) Movement Restriction	76	48	↓
5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure	15	15	→
6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities	50	74	↑
7) Landmines/UXO	2	1	↓
Overall Number of Access Constraints	237	292	↑

Summary

- Humanitarian partners in Afghanistan continue to deliver much needed services to people in need despite a continuously challenging access environment;
- In Q3 2020, the HAG recorded 292 access impediments, compared to 237 in Q2;
- The number of interferences and violence against humanitarian personnel or assets increased most significantly;
- NSAG-TB continued to author most access constraints in Q3, followed by ACG and GoA initiated incidents;
- Q3 saw a renewed push by NSAG-TB to get humanitarian partners to register with them;
- The negotiation of levy exemptions remains challenging but possible;
- August and September logged most access impediments due to ongoing fighting on HAG record;
- Q3 logged another 16 abductions of humanitarian personnel, bringing the total number of abductions in 2020 to 41.

Overall Access Constraints

In the third quarter of 2020, the HAG recorded a total of 292 incidents impacting access of humanitarian, compared to 237 and 193 respectively in the first two quarters of 2020.

In June, access constraints dropped, which is likely due to COVID-19 related lockdown measures no longer being strictly implemented, while many partner organizations continued to limit their field missions to protect staff and beneficiaries from the virus. In July, the number of access constraints continued to raise again, reaching their highest number on HAG record in August 2020 (see figure 1). The high number of access impediments in Q3 was driven by a notable increase of interferences and violence against humanitarian personnel and assets, levy requests and access impediments resulting from military operations also increased.

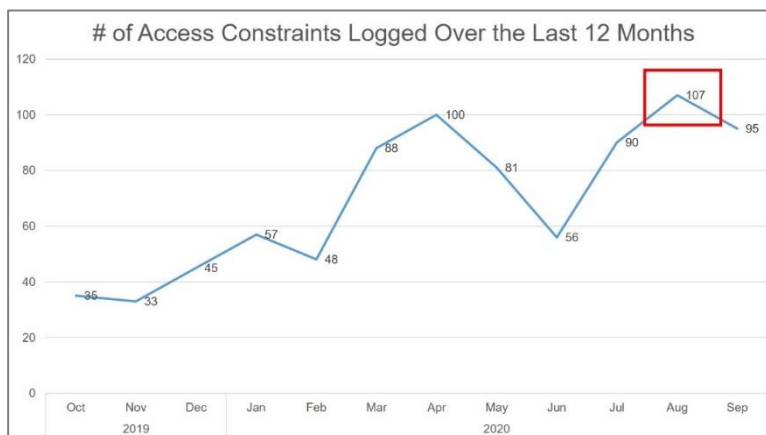


Figure 1: Access Impediments Peaked in August 2020

while

In Q3 2020, NSAG-TB continued to author most access incidents (189), with another 38 and 35 initiated by ACG and GoA respectively (see figure 2). Compared to Q2, NSAG-TB authored incidents increased by 50 per cent, while ACG and GoA initiated incidents increased by 30 and 40 per cent respectively.

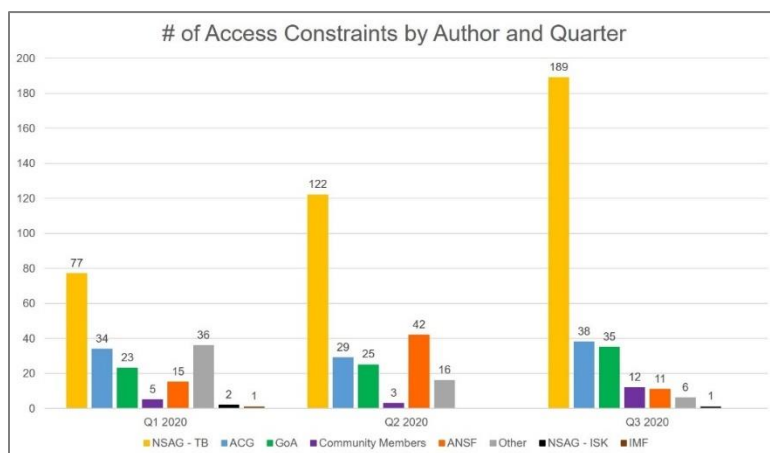


Figure 2: NSAG-TB Continue to Initiate Most Access Constraints

Although community authored access constraints remained rare, with 12 incidents on record in Q3, the increase is nonetheless of note and might be explained by economic hardship resulting from COVID-19, with financial pressure possibly leading to more criminally motivated action against humanitarians. Access constraints authored by ANSF decreased compared to Q3, with ANSF no longer implementing COVID-19 related lockdown measures.

Meanwhile, in the absence of major natural hazards impacting physical access, incidents logged under 'other' decreased, with this number expected to increase again in Q4 with the start of winter season.

Interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Tendency
1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities	Bureaucratic Impediment	7	21	↑
	Interference with beneficiary selection	3	9	↑
	Interference with programming	32	55	↑
	Interference with staff recruitment	10	12	↑
	Total	52	97	↑

In Q3 2020, the HAG recorded 97 interferences in the implementation of humanitarian activities, compared to 52 incidents recorded in Q2 2020. NSAG-TB and GoA continued to author most interference attempts, with most of the 51 NSAG-TB initiated incidents logged as interference in humanitarian programming (see figure 3). Meanwhile, GoA members authored 21 bureaucratic impediments and were behind half of all incidents logged as interference with staff recruitment and beneficiary selection.

Most incidents stemmed from interferences with programming, with 55 incidents recorded in Q3, compared to 32 and 28 in Q2 and Q1 respectively.

The past three months saw a renewed push by NSAG-TB to get humanitarian partners to register with them. In July, the NSAG-TB Commission for NGOs and Companies issued two letters addressed to the humanitarian community in Afghanistan, with the first requesting from organizations to obtain permission for the transportation of food and NFIs, and the second relating to general registration. In August 2020, the NSAG-TB Commission for NGOs and Companies followed up on the issue and through WhatsApp approached at least 10 partners, calling for registration in return for unimpeded access. While this message was unambiguous in nature, using the exact same language and content for different partners, at least four partners in Baghlan, Badakhshan and Badghis were also directly approached by NSAG-TB members with requests for registration, including an invitation to share budget details and copies of donor contracts.

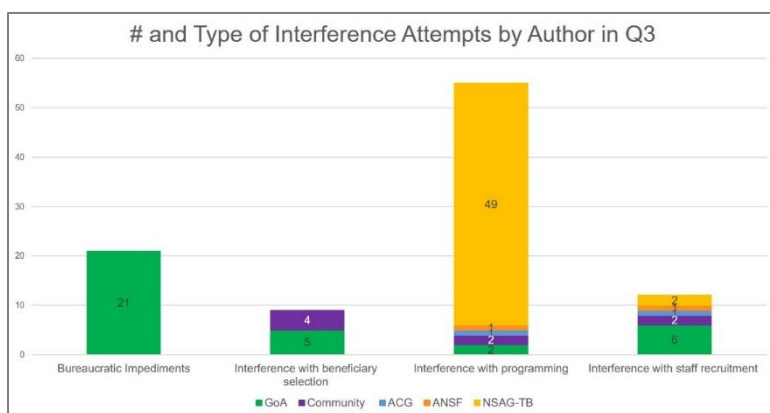


Figure 3: NSAG-TB Initiated Most Interferences with Programming

The concerned partners engaged with NSAG-TB and agreed to share certain non-sensitive information about their organization and ongoing projects but refused to formally register with NSAG-TB. Following extensive discussions within the HAG to define redlines of the humanitarian community when it comes to registration, the HAG started engaging NSAG-TB on a higher level on the issue.

In Q3, the HAG further logged three incidents where partners faced challenges after NSAG-TB accused them of not having requested their permission or approval prior to travel to an area or start a project implementation. While registration refers to a more formal process, the request for prior approval or permission is rather linked to ad-hoc engagement on specific projects and/or missions.

Another recurrent issue is NSAG-TB opposing the collection of what they deem sensitive data from beneficiaries during assessment missions. In Q3, the HAG recorded five such incidents in Logar, Nuristan, Uruzgan, Hirat and Ghor provinces, with NSAG-TB being particularly sensitive to the registration of GPS data but also considering the registration of beneficiary's ID and phone numbers as too sensitive.

Door to door polio vaccination remains a challenge in Q3, although partners reported of a breakthrough in Paktya Province, where NSAG-TB agreed to allow door to door vaccination in all districts, except for Zurmat District.

In Q3, the HAG recorded 21 bureaucratic impediments, compared to seven in Q2. The increase in these GoA authored incidents can be explained by a specific outreach to partners to report on bureaucratic impediments, with many of the issues raised having been ongoing for several months. In reports from across the country, partners complained of GoA members requesting financial incentives to participate in monitoring missions. In one incident, GoA members declined joining a monitoring mission to a NSAG-TB controlled area due to security concerns but subsequently refused to sign off on the activity's report of the partner organization. Another issue of discontent occurred when a GoA Ministry started to request international NGOs to purchase a local health insurance arguing that it was a requirement for the renewal of work permits for their international staff, despite them being already covered by their own health insurance. This local health insurance had to be purchased from one specific health facility and was sold at USD 150. While a receipt was issued, there was no indication of actual coverage of services. This issue is currently followed up by ACBAR.

The HAG recorded 12 interference attempts with staff recruitment in Q3, with these numbers being nearly on par with the 10 incidents logged in Q2. Interference with recruitment is extremely widespread, with real numbers likely significantly higher. Most incidents were authored by GoA officials (6), while community and NSAG-TB authored two incidents each and one was initiated by a member of an ACG. In most incidents, actors were applying pressure on partner organizations, sometimes threatening violence, to get members of their constituencies hired. In three instances, actors were opposing already hired candidates and impeding their access, sometimes due to previous grievances with the organization.

In Q3, the HAG recorded nine instances of interference with the beneficiary selection of partner organizations, compared to three incidents each in Q2 and Q1. GoA officials authored five and community members four of the incidents, with interferences either aiming at shifting assistance to different locations or adding additional beneficiaries to the lists. In one incident that occurred in the southern region, a female staff member was physically assaulted by a group of women after she refused to include specific individuals in an IDP assessment.

Levy Requests

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Tendency
2) Levy Request	In cash	8	16	↑
	In kind	1	0	↓
	Total	9	16	↑

In Q3, the HAG recorded 16 levy requests, compared to nine requests each in Q2 and Q1 (see figure 4). With levy requests seriously underreported, this increase does not necessarily point towards increased levy pressure from NSAG-TB, rather it is indicative of partners feeling more comfortable to report such incidents to the HAG.

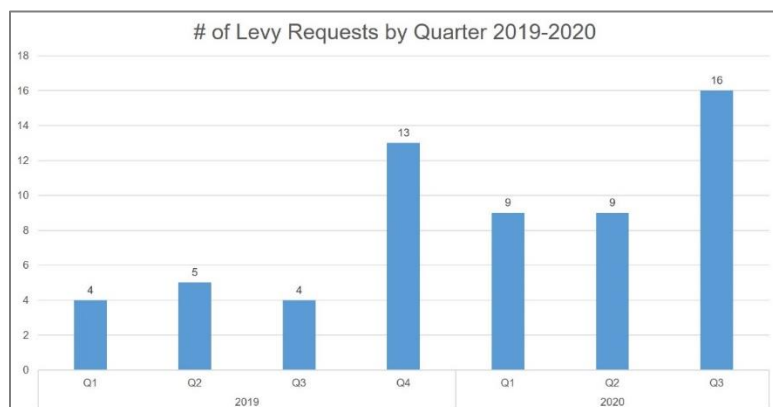


Figure 4: Q3 Logged a Further Increase of Levy Requests

All 16 levy demands were made by NSAG-TB members, with requests being logged in all six regions of Afghanistan.

In most instances, NSAG-TB requested a 10% levy on the project budget, with the request amounting to 20% in one case. The negotiation of a levy exemption continued to be extremely challenging, especially in the four cases where commercial contractors working for humanitarian partners were concerned.

In at least seven instances, levy demands resulted in a temporary halt of program, with an additional five incidents resulting in the relocation of the project activities to another province in the absence of a successful outcome. However, in at least two instances partner organization were successful in negotiating a levy exemption by highlighting the humanitarian nature of their activities and getting the local community to advocate on their behalf.

Negotiations on humanitarian exemptions, including on levies are more likely to succeed when carried by a collective of humanitarian partners. This is highlighted by an example from the northeastern region, where a group consisting of UN and NGO partners jointly negotiated a levy exemption and was subsequently able to access NSAG-TB controlled areas and conduct assessments without being levied.

Military Operations and Kinetic Activity

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Tendency
3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity	Airstrike	4	1	↓
	Attack with heavy weaponry	6	4	↓
	Crossfire	7	3	↓
	IED	8	9	↑
	Ongoing Fighting	7	24	↑
	Search Operation	1	0	↓
	Total		33	41

In Q3 2020, the HAG recorded 41 access constraints resulting from military operations and kinetic activity, injuring eight humanitarian staff members and creating damages to nine humanitarian facilities, out of which six were health facilities.

The number of incidents stemming from airstrikes, attacks with heavy weaponry, crossfire and search operations decreased compared to the previous quarter. This is a positive development and while it is too early to speak about a reverse trend, it raises hope that OCHA's civil military coordination with both international and Afghan forces, advocating for the respect of international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians bears fruit.

The number of constraints resulting from IEDs remained high but stable, with nine incidents recorded this quarter, compared to eight in Q2. All nine IED related incidents were authored by NSAG-TB, with humanitarian entities largely collaterally impacted due to their proximity to ANSF targets, including in July when a truck rigged as an SVBIED detonated near the ANP HQ in Shawalikot and an NGO-supported health facility sustained structural damage from the blast. In August, humanitarian movement along the Kandahar-Uruzgan Road was impeded after NSAG-TB through a letter warned the population to avoid this road due to IED prevalence, advising to employ alternative roads.

Meanwhile, ongoing fighting resulted in 24 instances of impeded humanitarian access, a threefold increase compared to the seven incidents recorded in Q2. August and September logged 10 access constraints each (*see figure 5*), pointing towards two particularly kinetic months. In most instances, humanitarian actors received advance warning from the community or a conflict party and were able to delay their activities, thereby avoiding putting their staff at risk. This once again highlights the importance of having good community engagement as well as direct or indirect engagement with conflict actors. In at least two instances, humanitarian partners were surprised by an outbreak in fighting and had to relocate their staff members from the area.

Ongoing fighting led to the temporary closure of at least seven health facilities, including in Kandahar, Zabul, Nangarhar, Laghman, Paktika and Daykundi provinces. Some of the health facilities remain closed at the time of reporting, with a health facility permanently relocated from Khoshmand to Yahyakhel District in Paktika due a continuously challenging security situation limiting access of beneficiaries.

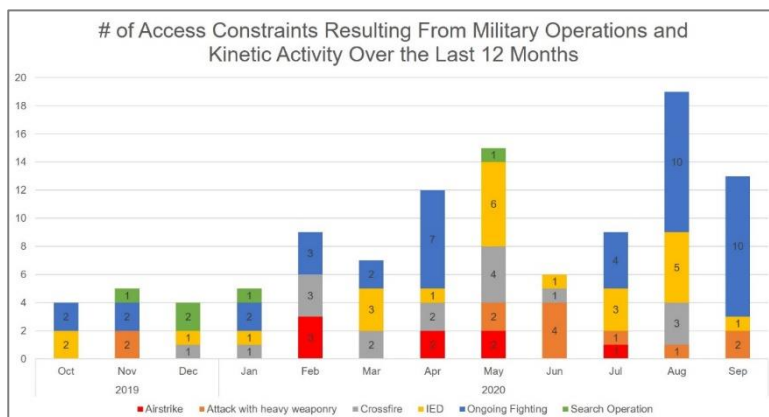


Figure 5: Aug and Sep Logged Most Incidents Stemming from Ongoing Fighting on HAG Record

While most clashes occurred between ANSF and NSAG-TB members, the HAG also recorded four incidents of fighting between rivalry tribal or political groups impeding humanitarian access.

Movement Restriction

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Tendency
4) Movement Restriction	Checkpoint	54	45	↓
	Demonstration	1	0	↓
	Other	15	0	↓
	Road Closure (not linked to weather hazard)	6	3	↓
	Total	76	48	↓

In Q3, the HAG recorded 48 instances of restrictions to humanitarian movement, a decrease compared to the 76 incidents recorded in Q2. After a peak in movement restrictions in March and April, numbers decreased in May and have been relatively stable since (see figure 6). The peak was largely due to government-imposed movement restrictions to limit the spread of Covid-19 translating into a high number of reports about ANSF checkpoints as well as about government guidelines (recorded under 'other') restricting humanitarian movement.

43 out of 45 checkpoints impeding humanitarian movement were manned by NSAG-TB, highlighting a continuous trend of NSAG-TB members controlling or at least influencing most of the main supply routes across the country.

Most checkpoints (35) did not directly impact humanitarian actors, with NSAG-TB searching for GoA or ANSF members or collecting taxes from commercial transporters.

Two partners reported that their teams decided to turn around when spotting an NSAG-TB checkpoint further along the road. While these two incidents ended well, avoidance of NSAG-TB checkpoints is not without risk, with several incidents on HAG record where NSAG-TB opened fire towards humanitarian partners attempting to avoid a checkpoint.

While threats and intimidation can't be excluded, not all humanitarian partners facing NSAG-TB checkpoints experienced problems. In August, a health partner was stopped at a NSAG-TB checkpoint in Shakardara District, Kabul Province. After the seven staff members responded to a few questions and explained their programming, they were allowed to continue without further interferences. In Shindand District, Hirat Province, a partner organization was returning from an awareness session when they were stopped by local NSAG-TB members who asked to see their mobile phones and then continued to delete some photos they deemed too sensitive. While the team was allowed to continue, NSAG-TB reiterated that such movement should not occur without their knowledge.

The HAG recorded two incidents of ANSF checkpoints impeding humanitarian access, with both incidents occurring in Kandahar City. In August, trucks transporting NFI kits for a humanitarian partner were stopped at an ANSF checkpoint and prevented from reaching their warehouse. In a second incident in September, ANP members stopped and searched four IO vehicles, claiming that the Chief of Police had tasked them to search all vehicles that were either armored or had tinted windows. The issue was subsequently addressed at higher level to ensure free movement for humanitarian partners.

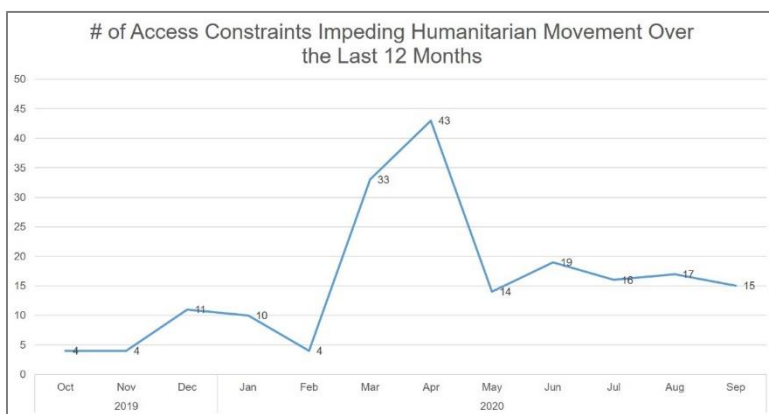






Figure 6: After a Peak in Mar and April, the Number of Movement Restrictions Stabilized

Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Tendency
5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure	Lack of Phone Coverage	3	7	
	Natural Disaster	12	6	
	Lack of Road Infrastructure	0	2	
	Total	15	15	

In addition to restrictions caused by people, humanitarian movement in Afghanistan continued to be impeded by the physical environment and the lack of infrastructure, leading to 15 access impediments this quarter, a number on par with the 15 incidents recorded in Q2.

Availability of phone coverage is essential for humanitarian operations and NSAG-TB interference and pressure on providers of mobile phone coverage collaterally impact humanitarian activities, making it more challenging to maintain communication with colleagues on the field or to engage with beneficiaries. In Q3, the HAG recorded five incidents of NSAG-TB destroying network towers, often after the companies refused to pay taxation or to adhere to requests of going offline during the night, including in Maywand where NSAG-TB destroyed two AWCC cell towers after they ignored a request to go offline from 7pm to 7am.

In Q3, the HAG recorded six instances where natural disasters impacted humanitarian access, all linked to heavy rainfall and subsequent flooding. With the arrival of winter, the number of incidents is expected to increase in Q4, with heavy snowfall and avalanches often leading to road closures.

Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Tendency
6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities	Abduction	16	16	→
	Arrest/Detention	1	3	↑
	Arson	1	2	↑
	Assassination/Shooting	5	4	↓
	Attack on facility/asset	3	2	↓
	Intimidation/Threat	3	20	↑
	Robbery	21	26	↑
	Total		50	74

In Q3, violence or the threat of violence against humanitarian personnel, assets, or facilities accounted for 74 access impediments, compared to 50 such incidents recorded in the previous quarter, resulting in the killing of four humanitarians and injuring another nine.

While most sub-categories logged similar numbers as in Q2, there was a significant increase in intimidation/threats, with 20 such incidents recorded this quarter, compared to three in Q2 (see figure 7).

Most intimidation attempts were authored by NSAG-TB (14), with ACG members authoring three, ANSF two and community members another incident. However, in some cases the authorship was difficult to establish, with financially and criminally motivated incidents not only conducted by ACG members but also by NSAG-TB and GoA members. IO staff members in Nangarhar, Kabul and Balkh received at least three threatening phone calls requesting for financial assistance and while the callers identified themselves as NSAG-TB members, it cannot be excluded that criminal actors misused the NSAG-TB label to foster fear.

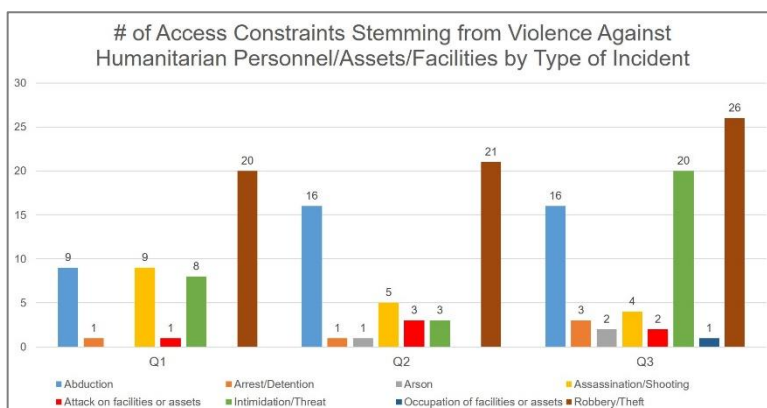


Figure 7: The Number of Intimidations/Threats Increased Significantly in Q3

The HAG logged three instances where female staff members were threatened or intimidated, including one incident where a female staff member was harassed by ANSF personnel. Another six threats were in relation to NSAG-TB being dissatisfied with operations of partners, with partners often being accused of being immoral or conducting immoral activities.

In Q3, the HAG recorded another 16 abductions of humanitarian personnel, bringing the total number of abductions recorded this year to 41, compared to 18 during the same period in 2019. All except two abductions were attributed to NSAG-TB and while abductions were recorded across the country, most abductions occurred in the central and northeastern region. In 24 instances, the abductees were released within five days, with another seven released within 10 days. Cases where abductees remained in detention for several months are rare but do occur. While every abduction incident is unique, most abductions can be assigned to one of the following four categories:

1) Lack of Prior Engagement. These abductions are the result of NSAG-TB accusing humanitarian partners of not having gained permission or approval from them prior to entering areas controlled by them. In Q3, the HAG recorded four such abductions, with most of them relatively easily resolved through active engagement.

2) Opportunistic abductions. These abductions often occur at NSAG-TB checkpoints, with humanitarian personnel traveling in low profile vehicles. In Q3, the HAG recorded six such abductions, with most of them relatively easily resolved after the identity of the abductees is established.

3) Mistaken Identity. NSAG-TB abduct humanitarian partners suspected of being part of or supporting the GoA or ANSF. In Q3, the HAG recorded seven such incidents. While some of these cases are quickly resolved through engagement of local elders confirming the identity of the abductees, cases where the abductee is accused of spying might be more complicated to be resolved.

4) Dissatisfaction with Service Provision. NSAG-TB abduct humanitarian partners due to dissatisfaction with their service provisions. Health partners are particularly at risk, with NSAG-TB often taking a vested interest in their service provision, using abductions as a means to force partners into upscaling their services. In Q3, the HAG recorded seven such abductions, with the case often only resolved after partners agreed to some of the demands, including establishing more health facilities in NSAG-TB controlled areas or hiring additional personnel.

In Q3, the HAG recorded 26 robberies affecting humanitarian personnel. Crime is widespread in all major cities of Afghanistan and the real number is likely significantly higher, with these incidents being clearly underreported. 12 instances can be described as opportunistic petty crime, with ACG members robbing humanitarians of their mobile phones or cash when they were walking outside. These incidents occur more and more also during day time and the presence of bystanders is no longer a protection. In another five instances each, ACG members broke into the private residences of humanitarian personnel or stole their vehicles. In Q3, three humanitarian sustained physical injuries during a robbery. With most ACG members carrying a weapon, it is advised to comply with the demands and hand over the valuables without resisting.

HAG Recommendations :

- Partners operating in NSAG-TB controlled, or influenced areas require a coherent, well-developed access strategy, including on strong engagement with local NSAG-TB members;
- While local implementing partners and community elders can play an important role in facilitating engagement with NSAG-TB, the HAG cautions against attempts to fully outsource outreach to external partners and advises to consider direct engagement at a local level;
- The HAG advocates to find local solutions for local issues and only elevating issues to the TPC in Doha as a last resort when district and provincial-level engagement proved unsuccessful;
- Humanitarian negotiations, including on levy exemptions, are more likely to succeed when carried by a collective of humanitarian partners, as we are stronger when we speak in a joint and unified voice rather than trying to resolve issues on our own;
- Humanitarian partners directly approached by NSAG-TB for registration are encouraged to engage them locally, without agreeing to submit any formal documentation;
- Humanitarian partners are encouraged to report access incidents to the HAG to help understand broader access dynamics.

The HAG remains available to support partners on any access related issue.

Abbreviations

ACG	Armed Criminal Group
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Force
HAG	Humanitarian Access Group
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
IO	International Organization
NSAG-TB	Non-State Armed Group – Taliban
SVBIED	Suicide Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device
TPC	NSAG-TB Political Commission

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