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The situation in Afghanistan

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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 [2543 \(2020\)](#), in which the Secretary-General 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 issuance of the previous report dated 18 August 2020 ([A/75/378-S/2020/809](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. Ministerial nominations by the President, Ashraf Ghani, and the Chairperson of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, were presented to the Wolesi Jirga (lower house of parliament) for a vote of confidence. The peace negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban were launched on 12 September in Doha. High levels of violence were sustained in Afghanistan, in particular in the south, resulting in continued significant numbers of civilian casualties despite the launch of the peace negotiations. The Government continued to promote regional consensus on intra-Afghan peace and reconciliation, economic cooperation and connectivity. Humanitarian needs climbed owing to violence, natural disasters, heightened levels of food insecurity and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, with a total of 18.4 million people estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021, up from 14 million in mid-2020. At the 2020 Afghanistan Conference, held in Geneva on 23 and 24 November, renewed international commitments were given in support of the country's peace, prosperity and self-reliance.



A. Political developments

4. Pursuant to the political agreement concluded between Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah on 17 May, which provides for an equal share of Cabinet posts, Mr. Ghani announced a total of 13 ministerial nominees and two State ministers, and Mr. Abdullah announced 10 ministerial appointments and one State minister. All assumed their functions as acting ministers. On 21 October, Mr. Ghani introduced the 23 acting ministers (including 4 women) and the other three government nominees requiring parliamentary approval to the Wolesi Jirga plenary for a vote of confidence. He also continued to appoint provincial governors. Since March, 22 of the 34 provincial governors have been replaced.

5. On 14 August, the President issued a decree establishing a High Council for Women, intended to support the empowerment of women and the implementation of the Government's commitments regarding women's rights. Membership, authority and the relationship between the Council and existing government structures are yet to be defined.

6. Further to the call for electoral reforms in the agreement of 17 May, the Ministry of Justice began a review of the election law and the political parties law and started work on legislation concerning political party and electoral campaign financing. Civil society organizations, including the Civil Society Election Coordination Group and the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan, submitted their electoral reform proposals to the electoral management bodies. The latter initiated planning for the delayed Wolesi Jirga election for Ghazni Province, contingent upon security, agreement on constituencies and budget, and commenced recruitment for 199 positions.

7. In Kabul, from 7 to 9 August, 3,000 community representatives from across Afghanistan, including 700 women, gathered for the consultative peace loya jirga for consultations on the release of an additional 400 prisoners, as sought by the Taliban. On 9 August, the representatives adopted a resolution in which they recommended the prisoner release and called for the immediate start of negotiations, a ceasefire and the preservation of democracy, the constitutional republic and the basic rights of all Afghans, including women and minorities. The resolution was broadly welcomed by Afghan political figures and civil society groups, although some commentators expressed concern about the prisoner release and consideration for the rights of victims of war. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission noted that the President did not have the authority to release individuals convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity. On 10 August, the President issued a decree authorizing the release of the 400 prisoners.

8. The Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban continued preparations for negotiations. From 23 to 26 August, a Taliban delegation, led by its deputy and head of the Political Commission, Mullah Baradar, met in Pakistan with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, and the Special Representative of Pakistan for Afghanistan, Mohammad Sadiq. On 26 August, the Taliban announced the formation of a 20-member negotiation team. On 5 September, the size of the team was increased to 21 members, all men, and the leadership was transferred to Mawlawi Abdul Hakim. In early September, the Taliban agreed to the transfer by the Government of Afghanistan of six prisoners to house arrest in Qatar, instead of their release, and to release or account for a further 22 Afghan government soldiers, which was completed in the week leading up to the opening of the talks.

9. The Afghanistan peace negotiations were launched on 12 September in Doha. Delegations of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban and representatives of the international community attended a ceremony opened by the

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani, Mr. Abdullah, Mr. Baradar and the Secretary of State of the United States of America, Michael R. Pompeo. Remarks were then given virtually by the ministers for foreign affairs of 13 countries, the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, the Secretary-General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Yousef Al-Othaimen, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The two negotiating teams then established contact groups to discuss a potential code of conduct and other practical matters. In meetings held throughout September and October, the parties discussed issues relating to the school of Islamic jurisprudence to be referenced as part of a dispute resolution mechanism, as well as the putative basis for the negotiations, which the Taliban insisted should be the agreement concluded on 29 February with the United States. The agenda for the negotiation is still to be agreed.

10. During his visit to Doha on 5 and 6 October, Mr. Ghani discussed ongoing peace efforts with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, and the Prime Minister of Qatar, Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al-Thani. Mr. Abdullah continued to seek regional support for the Afghan peace process, with trips to Islamabad from 28 to 30 September to meet with the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, Mr. Qureshi and Mr. Sadiq; to Delhi from 6 to 10 October to meet with the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, and the Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar; to Tehran from 18 to 20 October to meet with the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif; and to Uzbekistan from 10 to 11 November to meet with the President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Abdulaziz Kamilov, and other officials, as well as the Grand Mufti and Chair of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, Usman Khan Alimov. Meanwhile, the political opposition engaged with regional actors: the leader of the Hizb-i Islami party, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, visited Pakistan, and Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum travelled to Turkey and India.

11. International and regional partners accelerated their engagement in support of the peace negotiations. Representatives of the host country support group from Germany, Indonesia, Norway and Uzbekistan gathered in Doha, along with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). International special representatives and regional partners continued their engagement in support of the negotiations. The United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, met with the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and Mr. Sadiq in Islamabad on 14 September; with Mr. Jaishankar and the National Security Adviser of India, Ajit Doval, in Delhi on 15 September; and with the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, in Dushanbe on 2 October. On 16 September, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway, Ine Eriksen Søreide, met virtually with Mr. Baradar to discuss the negotiations and called for an inclusive peace process with war victims, women, ethnic minorities and rural communities. The Special Envoy of China for Afghanistan, Liu Jian, met with Mr. Baradar in Doha on 19 September; this was followed by a meeting in Islamabad with Mr. Sadiq on 24 September, in which Mr. Liu expressed the support of China for the Afghan peace process. On 3 November, the special envoys for Afghanistan of India, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation held a trilateral meeting in Moscow to voice their support for peace and stability in Afghanistan. On 7 November, the Special Envoy of Finland for the 2020 Afghanistan Conference, Janne Taalas, met separately with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Taliban negotiation teams in Doha to give them briefings on the upcoming conference.

12. With violence on the rise, efforts continued in order to push for a reduction of violence. Mr. Khalilzad met with Mr. Baradar, Mr. Hakim and other Taliban officials in Doha on various occasions in October and November to discuss adherence to the agreement between the United States and the Taliban, and announced on 15 October that a “reset” had been agreed to, aimed at decreasing military activity and violence and strengthening compliance with the agreement. Mr. Khalilzad also held meetings with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan negotiation team while in Doha.

13. Women’s organizations continued public advocacy, with the Afghan Women’s Network and the women’s coalition for peace “Our Voice, Our Future” publishing an open letter to the Taliban on 13 August, expressing concern at the ambiguity of the movement’s position on women’s rights. On 15 August, women’s networks in 15 provinces held simultaneous rallies and issued a statement conveying the concerns and expectations of rural and urban women and a call for an immediate ceasefire. On 8 September, several Afghan women’s organizations sent letters to Germany, Indonesia, Norway, Qatar, the United States and Uzbekistan, asking for their support in drawing attention to human rights, women’s rights, political participation and demilitarization in the context of the peace talks. On 13 October, several Afghan women’s networks sent an open letter to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressing concern regarding the intra-Afghan peace process and seeking support for a just, durable and inclusive peace process.

14. Civil society engagement in the peace process also increased. On 30 September, a collective of Hazara diaspora groups issued a statement welcoming the intra-Afghan peace talks while calling for an inclusive peace process that guarantees the full participation of Hazara and other ethnic groups in a future political system. The State Ministry for Peace organized 20 outreach initiatives for various stakeholder groups, including virtual consultations on 13 and 28 October between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan negotiation team and victims of war and a women’s group. On 25 October, the Ulama Council of Afghanistan held a gathering of around 2,000 ulama representing the country’s Sunni and Shia populations to express support for the Afghan peace process.

15. UNAMA continued to support local-level conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts with subnational authorities and civil society. Within the context of COVID-19-related limitations, the Mission began eight new local peace initiatives while continuing its collaboration with national partners in implementing the national strategy on Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) on women and peace and security. In the central region, it provided a platform for women and youth representatives of six provinces to engage with representatives of the Afghan peace structures to discuss the negotiations. On 1 and 2 October, the Mission supported a gathering of nearly 100 women religious scholars, community representatives and activists from across Afghanistan to discuss women’s rights and political participation within Islam. In October, participants in a series of radio conversations supported by UNAMA in eight provinces discussed the importance of the inclusion and participation of women in areas of peace and security, stressing that women were skilled peace brokers, experienced negotiators and key to the success of any future political settlement. The Mission promoted support by international donors for these and other relevant programmes and activities.

16. To mark the twentieth anniversary of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and UNAMA organized a high-level dialogue on 26 October on 20 years of hard-fought progress on women’s rights in Afghanistan. The First Lady, Rula Ghani, delivered keynote remarks, emphasizing the role of women in areas of peace and security at the provincial and central levels. Afghan women members of civil society organizations reiterated that sustainable peace could not be achieved without

the active participation of women. On 29 October, the Executive Director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, Zarqa Yaftali, also representing an Afghan non-governmental organization working group, gave a briefing to the Security Council, calling for political accountability from the international community and the United Nations to ensure that gains in terms of women's rights and participation are not compromised in the peace talks. On 31 October, the Friends of Afghan Women Ambassadors' Group in Kabul issued a statement to celebrate the achievements of Afghan women peacebuilders and reaffirm support for their future.

17. Dialogues supported by UNAMA to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations provided an opportunity to galvanize ideas on ways to shape a better future collectively. In discussions in several municipal districts of Kabul in September, young people, including women and persons with disabilities, shared their vision of a future free of violence and discrimination in which all people can meet their full potential.

B. Security

18. The security situation in Afghanistan remained highly volatile. From 13 July to 12 November, the United Nations recorded 10,439 security-related incidents, representing an 18 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2019. Armed clashes accounted for 63 per cent of all security incidents. There were 6,599 armed clashes, representing a 38 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2019. Anti-government elements conducted 92 per cent of all security-related incidents and 95 per cent of armed clashes. The total number of air strikes decreased from 689 to 416. A total of 389 assassinations were reported, a 21 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2019. The targets of the assassinations included members of the security forces, government officials and civilians, and religious leaders known for being critical of the Taliban. On 24 October, the acting Minister of the Interior, Massoud Andarabi, announced that the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces had killed Abu Muhsin Al-Misri (also known as Husam Abd-al-Ra'uf), a senior commander of Al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent.

19. The highest number of security incidents was recorded in the southern region, followed by the northern and eastern regions. Collectively, incidents in those regions accounted for 62 per cent of all security incidents in the country, with Kandahar, Helmand, Nangarhar and Balkh Provinces recording most security incidents. The Taliban conducted attacks on several district administrative centres across the country and increased pressure on provincial capitals such as Kunduz, Lashkar Gah and Tirin Kot. Levels of reported armed clashes increased steadily from mid-July to the end of October. October was the month with the highest level of armed clashes since the United Nations started to keep records in 2007.

20. Throughout the country, high-profile attacks by anti-government elements continued, with 42 suicide attacks recorded, including 30 attacks with suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices targeting the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and 1 targeting the convoy of the Governor of Laghman Province.

21. The city of Kabul witnessed three high-profile attacks during the reporting period and 65 incidents of improvised explosive device detonations. The targets of these complex attacks were civilians, while 82 per cent of all improvised explosive device attacks targeted Afghan National Defence and Security Forces or government entities.

22. The number of incidents claimed by or attributed to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) was lower in 2020 than in the same period in 2019 (11 compared with 343). On 18 August, in Kabul, ISIL-K claimed a rocket attack that

targeted the Presidential Palace during the Independence Day speech delivered by Mr. Ghani. A total of 14 rockets were reportedly launched from two locations in Kabul, with three people killed in the attack. On 28 August, ISIL-K claimed one attack in the city of Herat, with a magnetic improvised explosive device attack targeting an ice cream shop. On 24 October, ISIL-K claimed an attack at an education centre in Kabul, with at least 25 people killed and 52 injured. On 2 November, ISIL-K claimed responsibility for an attack on Kabul University, resulting in 22 people killed and 24 injured.

23. Overall, progress relating to security sector reform was limited, focusing on reshaping local protection forces and strengthening security management in urban areas. International funding for the Afghan Local Police ended in September 2020; it is expected that by the end of 2020 two thirds of the forces will be integrated into the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, while the remainder are to retire. The security charter plan, launched in July 2020 by the Government and local communities, was met with concerns voiced in parliament that communities were being mobilized to enhance the national security forces, with no tangible improvements in security. At the subnational level, 100 new district chiefs of police, all men, were appointed.

24. There were 34 incidents involving United Nations personnel during the reporting period, including 11 incidents of intimidation and 19 criminal-related incidents. A United Nations staff member who was abducted by anti-government elements on 13 September was released on 17 September.

C. Regional cooperation

25. On 20 August, the acting Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Mohammad Haneef Atmar, held virtual consultations with the State Councillor and Minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Wang Yi, Mr. Jaishankar and Mr. Zarif to discuss regional and international support for peace, connectivity and bilateral relations. China, India and the Islamic Republic of Iran expressed support for the consultative peace loya jirga, the Afghanistan peace negotiations and preserving the achievements of the past 19 years.

26. On 25 August, the first senior officials' meeting in 2020 of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan was held, co-chaired by Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Participants reiterated support for an inclusive peace process. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, many of the planned activities under the seven confidence-building measures were deferred.

27. On 31 August, the second review meeting of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity was held in Kabul, chaired by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Mirwais Nab, and the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Sohail Mahmood. Following the meeting, the Government of Pakistan announced the liberalization of its visa policy with Afghanistan to allow the issuance of long-term multiple-entry visas to Afghan nationals visiting Pakistan for medical treatment, family matters, business and education, among other things.

28. Efforts aimed at enhancing regional economic and infrastructure connectivity also continued. On 28 and 29 August, Mr. Atmar travelled to Tashkent, where he met with the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulla Aripov, the National Security Adviser, Viktor Makhmudov, and Mr. Kamilov. Mr. Kamilov emphasized his country's support for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. The two delegations highlighted the importance of expanding cooperation in trade and transport. The Afghan electricity company Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat and the

Ministry of Energy of Uzbekistan signed a 10-year power transmission agreement on 28 August. During a visit to Kabul from 20 to 22 October, an Uzbek delegation and Afghan counterparts signed several cooperation agreements to further strengthen economic and trade ties.

29. Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran continued to intensify efforts to improve economic and energy cooperation. At a meeting held in Tehran on 6 September, the Afghanistan-Iran joint committee on transport discussed ways to improve transport and transit efficiencies. From 22 to 25 September, the Islamic Republic of Iran held a three-day technical exhibition in Kabul, showcasing advanced technologies in the fields of electricity, energy, telecommunications and engineering. On the margins of the event, Afghan and Iranian officials discussed the development of electricity infrastructure to boost the two countries' energy cooperation.

30. On 17 and 18 September, Mr. Atmar visited Dushanbe, where he met with Mr. Rahmon, the Prime Minister, Qohir Rasulzoda, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sirojiddin Muhridin, and other senior officials. Discussions were focused on strengthening cooperation in trade, the economy and cultural and humanitarian spheres; the joint implementation of regional infrastructure projects; and the development of a bilateral strategic cooperation agreement. The two sides also discussed the need to strengthen security and intelligence cooperation, aimed at securing borders and combating terrorism and organized crime.

31. On 30 September, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan signed three memorandums of understanding and an economic cooperation agreement in Kabul. The documents cover the development of a downstream plan of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project to the city of Herat, the construction of a 500 MW electricity transmission line from Turkmenistan to Herat and the expansion of telecommunications ties and fibre-optic networks.

32. On 8 October, Mr. Atmar, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, and the United States Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, David Hale, co-chaired an inaugural Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-United States trilateral meeting, held virtually. In a joint statement, the participants pledged to improve regional security cooperation to address terrorism, drug trafficking, smuggling and irregular migration; to increase people-to-people ties and promote the equality and inclusion of women; and to expand trade, regional connectivity and humanitarian engagement.

33. On 26 and 27 October, the Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan, Asad Qaiser, organized a seminar entitled "Pakistan-Afghanistan Trade and Investment Forum", attended by Mr. Khan, the Chairperson of the Wolesi Jirga of Afghanistan, Rahman Rahmani, and a 17-member Afghan delegation including the acting Minister of Commerce, Nisar Ghoriyani. The lawmakers of the two countries decided to create a task force to oversee the renegotiation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, which will expire in 2021.

34. UNAMA initiated a working group of diplomatic representatives of the six countries neighbouring Afghanistan to discuss trade and transit, infrastructure connectivity, counter-narcotics, people movements and knowledge transfer. The Mission works closely with United Nations partners in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries to contribute to existing regional formats, such as the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan. In addition, my Special Representative for Afghanistan visited the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan to support the region's engagement on peace and regional cooperation.

III. Human rights

35. UNAMA continued to document high levels of civilian harm from the conflict in Afghanistan. On 27 October, the Mission released its third quarterly report, documenting 5,939 civilian casualties (2,117 killed, including 251 women and 553 children; and 3,822 injured, including 495 women and 1,295 children) from 1 January to 30 September. The 30 per cent drop in civilian casualties compared with the same period in 2019 is mainly due to decreases in civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks carried out by anti-government elements and air strikes by international military forces. Civilian casualties from ground engagements remained at similar levels, and those from Taliban pressure-plate improvised explosive devices and Afghan Air Force air strikes increased compared with 2019. The Afghanistan peace negotiations have so far failed to slow the civilian casualty toll; from the start of the negotiations on 12 September to the end of October, UNAMA did not document a reduction in the number of civilian casualties.

36. Anti-government elements continued to cause the majority of civilian casualties (58 per cent), mostly attributed to the Taliban (45 per cent), followed by ISIL-K (7 per cent) and the remainder by undetermined anti-government elements. Pro-government forces were responsible for more than a quarter of all civilian casualties (28 per cent), with Afghan national security forces causing 23 per cent of civilian casualties, international military forces 2 per cent, and pro-government armed groups and undetermined or multiple pro-government forces each responsible for 1 per cent. Ground engagements (38 per cent) were the leading cause of civilian casualties, followed by suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices (29 per cent), targeted killings (16 per cent) and air strikes (8 per cent).

37. The armed conflict continued to inflict serious harm on children. During the third quarter of 2020, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 954 grave violations against 908 children (630 boys, 277 girls, 1 sex unknown).

38. The country task force verified 773 child casualties (210 killed (64 girls and 146 boys) and 563 maimed (206 girls, 356 boys, 1 sex unknown)). Anti-government elements were responsible for the same number of child casualties as pro-government forces (320 each). Ground engagements remained the leading cause of child casualties, with 448 child casualties (102 killed and 346 maimed), accounting for approximately 58 per cent of the overall total. The task force verified 119 children (all boys) recruited and used by the Taliban (108), a pro-government militia (7) and the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (4) for combat and service roles, in particular in the north-eastern and northern regions, compared with 19 children verified during the previous quarter. The country task force also verified the abduction of 15 children (14 boys, 1 girl), all attributed to the Taliban. Seven children were released, two were killed, and the remaining six are either still in custody or their whereabouts are unknown. As at 30 September, 151 boys aged from 13 to 17 years were being held in juvenile rehabilitation centres for periods ranging from six months to three and a half years.

39. Between 1 July and 30 September, the country task force verified 25 attacks against schools, more than four times the number in the previous quarter. Attacks were attributed to the Taliban (11), the Afghan National Army (6), joint operations by multiple pro-government forces (2), undetermined armed opposition groups (2), crossfire during operations between armed opposition groups and pro-government forces not able to be attributed to either side (2), ISIL-K (1) and undetermined pro-government forces (1).

40. Attacks on hospitals decreased during the reporting period, with 13 verified attacks against hospitals and protected health personnel, compared with 18 attacks verified in the previous reporting period. Of the 13 incidents, 8 were attributed to the Taliban, 1 to the Afghan National Army, 1 to a pro-government militia, 1 to an incident involving ISIL-K and Afghan National Defence and Security Forces in which it could not be determined which side was responsible, 1 jointly attributed to the Afghan National Army and international forces and 1 to an undetermined perpetrator.

41. UNAMA documented 77 crimes of violence against women and girls from August to October, including 20 cases of beating, 16 cases of murder, 15 cases of harassment or annoyance, 7 cases of rape, 3 cases of causing injury or disability, 3 cases of forcing into self-immolation or suicide, 2 cases of forced marriage and 1 case of child marriage. The Mission also documented 10 cases of conflict-related sexual violence (rape), 6 of which were reportedly perpetrated by members of the Taliban and 4 reportedly perpetrated by pro-government forces. Crimes of violence against women and girls are still significantly underreported because cultural barriers, security threats and widespread impunity continue to impede access to justice for women who experience violent crimes. During the reporting period, UNAMA organized awareness-raising and capacity-building events on the protection and promotion of women's rights, including a radio event in Kandahar on the law on the elimination of violence against women, an awareness-raising workshop in Sari Pul on the anti-harassment law and a radio programme in Paktika on women's rights.

42. On 3 September, the Cabinet Legislative Committee proposed an amendment to the provision in the Penal Code concerning so-called virginity testing by requiring both a court order and a woman's consent for such a test to be conducted. The proposal entered into force pursuant to a presidential decree gazetted on 29 September. The amendment falls far short of prohibiting the practice entirely, long called for by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, women's rights organizations and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. UNAMA continues to support civil society engagement regarding calls for a prohibition of the practice without exception. On 17 September, it was stipulated in a presidential decree that national identification cards would include an individual's mother's name, a change long sought by civil society groups, though the inclusion of the name remains optional.

43. Between mid-July and late September, no prison reported any new cases of COVID-19 among prisoners or staff, though limited testing may have resulted in underreporting. In early October, Herat prison reported several positive cases. The release of prisoners for the purpose of preventing COVID-19 transmission has almost ended; the prison population started to increase during the second week of August. As at the end of October, approximately two thirds of prisons operated beyond their full capacity. Many prisons appear to be unprepared for a possible second wave of the disease. In both prisons and juvenile rehabilitation centres, the frequency of disinfection of the facilities decreased compared with July, mainly owing to a lack of disinfection materials.

44. In the Pul-e-Charkhi women's prison in Kabul, women continue to be held in overcrowded conditions, and close to 300 children are held with their mothers. There are over 100 women with alleged links to ISIL-K who have been in pretrial detention for almost one year.

45. Attacks on judicial officials and those working for independent institutions continued. On 18 September, two judges were abducted in Ghazni Province. In separate incidents, on 9 September and 4 October, three prosecutors were killed in Kabul. On 4 October, a commissioner with the Access to Information Commission

survived an attempted assassination when a magnetic bomb attached to his vehicle detonated, killing his driver. All incidents are awaiting investigation.

46. Human rights defenders and media workers continued to face security threats. During the reporting period, three civil society activists were killed by unknown perpetrators in Logar, Paktya and Kabul Provinces. Two others were injured in Kabul and Paktya Provinces; there was no claim of responsibility. UNAMA received additional reports of 14 human rights defenders threatened by unknown perpetrators, 1 targeted (with no consequences) with an improvised explosive device and 1 summoned by prosecutors for criticizing local authorities. With regard to the media, UNAMA recorded two journalists killed and one injured in two separate attacks with magnetic improvised explosive devices in Kabul and Helmand; one journalist summoned by prosecutors for broadcasting a report about alleged sexual abuse of women inmates in prison; the detonation of an improvised explosive device near a private radio station in Baghlan Province, causing damage to it; one journalist allegedly detained by the National Directorate for Security in Khost Province for spreading propaganda against the Government on social media; and two journalists (one man and one woman) allegedly threatened by the Taliban. Journalists reported to UNAMA a growing sense of insecurity, in particular owing to the killings in November of colleagues and remarks made in October by the First Vice-President that those reporting on civilian casualties could possibly face legal action.

47. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission engaged on various issues related to peace, human rights and victim-centred justice, including victims' rights, supported by UNAMA with technical assistance from the Mediation Support Unit of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. On 12 September, the Commission welcomed the opening of the Afghanistan peace negotiations, encouraging the parties to agree on a set of principles to guide the talks, such as inclusivity and victims' rights. The Commission continued to advocate a ceasefire, women's rights and victim-centred justice.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

48. The 2020 Afghanistan Conference convened on 23 and 24 November by Afghanistan, Finland and the United Nations brought together representatives of over 60 countries, some 30 international organizations, and civil society groups, all attending virtually. In the communiqué that was adopted, the participants called for an immediate, permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and a meaningful peace process, with the participation of women and young people, as well as ethnic, religious and other minorities. They affirmed a renewed partnership to strengthen a sovereign, unified, democratic and peaceful Afghanistan on its path towards self-reliance, and welcomed a new Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework and the Afghanistan Partnership Framework. Donors pledged at least \$3.3 billion for the first year of the upcoming quadrennial period 2021–2024, with annual commitments expected to stay at the same level year on year.

49. At three side events on 23 November, key challenges and accomplishments for Afghanistan in the areas of sustainable peacebuilding were discussed, with a focus on human rights, the participation of women, reintegrating refugees and returnees, anti-corruption, economic priorities and aid effectiveness. The Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II provides a vision, strategy and plans for development for the 2021–2025 period and towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, organized around three pillars: peacebuilding, State-building and market-building. The conference also included high-level thematic meetings. On 19 November, the United Nations and Nordic countries organized a side

meeting on the theme “From peacemakers to negotiators: Afghan women envision peace”. Speakers stressed the importance of sustaining and strengthening the participation of women and addressing security and protection concerns.

50. While pressure on the Government intensified to enhance anti-corruption efforts ahead of the conference, few tangible results were produced. On 19 September, the Special Anti-Corruption Secretariat in the Office of the President requested UNAMA and international partners to provide feedback on the Government’s updated draft of 9 September of a strategic anti-corruption reform document, which is to succeed the 2017 reform strategy. While welcoming the effort, international partners stressed that, in line with the recommendations of the UNAMA anti-corruption report of 2020, a genuinely new long-term reform document resulting from far-reaching consultations and built upon an impact assessment of previous reform steps, was needed.

51. On 16 September, the heads of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre primary trial and appeals courts, as well as the chief of investigation in the prosecution office, were transferred in a standard rotation. During the reporting period, the primary court adjudicated seven cases, three more than in the previous reporting period. The appeals court affirmed the conviction of the former Police Commander, Zmarai Paikan, who had been at large since 2017, and sentenced him to three years’ imprisonment. Since its inception in 2016, the Centre has adjudicated 83 cases involving 317 defendants at the primary trial level and 73 cases (including 6 during the reporting period) involving a total of 229 defendants at the appeals level.

52. On 12 November, Mr. Ghani announced the appointment of the five commissioners (including two women) of the Anti-Corruption Commission, thus finalizing the establishment of anti-corruption institutions. The framework for anti-corruption legislation, however, remained incomplete. The Office of the Ombudsperson continued to operate without a confirmed legal basis. On 26 August, following a presidentially mandated investigation, the Ombudsperson publicly announced her findings, confirming widespread misuse of COVID-19 funds. She found that there were possible instances of embezzlement and misuse of authority and referred several suspects to the Office of the Attorney General for criminal investigations. On 27 August, the High Council for Rule of Law and Governance downgraded the legal basis for the Office of the Ombudsperson from a law to a regulation and directed the Office of the Ombudsperson and the Office of the Attorney General to agree on an appropriate jurisdiction for the former. On 6 October, the Wolesi Jirga rejected the anti-corruption law, which had been enacted on 5 September 2018 by presidential legislative decree, arguing that the process through which it was enacted was irregular. On 1 November, the Meshrano Jirga (upper house of parliament) approved the law, with amendments. The law remains in force pending a decision of a joint committee of both houses.

53. The Government continued to implement subnational governance and civil service reforms. On 17 August, the Cabinet established a subnational governance consultative board, comprising former provincial governors, to inform subnational governance reforms. On 9 October, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance published its five-year strategic plan to operationalize the subnational governance policy. The plan is focused on improving local planning and budgeting processes and organizational capacity to support provincial, district and municipal administrations in delivering services and leading local peace efforts effectively.

54. Following a return on 5 August from essential staff only in government offices owing to the COVID-19 pandemic to a normal staff presence, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission launched the annual competitive mass recruitment process on 28 August for 16,111 entry-level civil service positions, including 11,496 teaching positions. For the first time, 220

positions in the Ministry of Finance, including its Customs Department, were part of the process. Furthermore, 495 senior civil service positions previously encumbered by acting directors were under recruitment.

55. The Government continued to implement the 2016–2026 Citizen’s Charter national priority programme as part of the national strategy to reduce poverty and improve the socioeconomic conditions of communities. By 20 October, the programme had been rolled out in all provinces, providing critical services, including short-term employment and increased access to electricity, irrigation, water supply, sanitation services, roads and bridges, for 13.5 million beneficiaries, 50 per cent of whom were women, in 13,000 rural and urban communities. Furthermore, the programme supported the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic by raising awareness at the community level and serving as a platform for relief efforts. Operational challenges have hampered implementation, including delayed operationalization in insecure districts, inadequate monitoring of project activities, the lack of full participation of women in project selection and implementation, and occasional delays in the disbursement of project funds.

56. As the pandemic continues to affect the lives of Afghans, the national and international response has shifted to longer-term planning for recovery and resilience. On 4 August, the World Bank approved a \$380 million grant to help Afghanistan to cushion the economic impact of the pandemic on Afghan households and farmers. In addition, the United Nations facilitated the engagement of the World Bank and United Nations experts in the country for a regional risk and resilience assessment, bringing together Afghanistan and countries in Central Asia to identify common risks and resilience-building opportunities. On 6 November, the International Monetary Fund approved a \$370 million Extended Credit Facility arrangement to support Afghanistan in its recovery from the pandemic, to anchor economic reforms and to catalyse donor financing.

57. The United Nations accelerated advocacy with government entities to ensure commitment to legislative reform and protection to address harmful practices such as early forced marriage, virginity testing and convictions for moral crimes. Between 1 August and 31 October, risk communication reached a total of 53,400 women, girls, boys and men, providing sexual and reproductive health information. The United Nations continued to support the prevention of gender-based violence, while also providing survivors with multisectoral life-saving services during the pandemic, primarily through mobile outreach and women-friendly health spaces, reaching a total of 9,205 women and girls. In addition, a total of 37,600 internally displaced persons and returnees, and their host communities, were provided with sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial support services.

58. The United Nations continued to support the Government in implementing an alternative education plan in response to the pandemic. In the lead-up to and following the reopening of all grade levels in early October, the United Nations provided technical support for risk mitigation measures to enable students to return to school and make up for missed lessons. In addition, the United Nations continued to support the Government in finalizing the new competency-based curriculum framework aimed at transforming general education in Afghanistan.

V. Humanitarian assistance

59. Humanitarian needs continued to rise owing to ongoing violence, natural disasters and heightened levels of food insecurity, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that a record of 18.4 million people will need

humanitarian assistance in 2021, up from 9.4 million at the beginning of 2020 and 14 million at the middle of the year.

60. As at 15 November, some 43,240 people across Afghanistan were confirmed to have been infected with COVID-19, but the actual number was believed to be much higher. Hospitals and clinics continued to report challenges in maintaining or expanding their capacity to treat patients with COVID-19 as well as in maintaining essential health services, with anticipated higher mortality and morbidity rates in the coming months. Health and nutrition data showed that patients were not receiving basic health services because the system was overwhelmed, and many people were staying away from health facilities out of fear that they would be infected with the virus. In October, UN-Women and the International Rescue Committee released a national assessment of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women, in particular internally displaced women. It was noted in the study that 78 per cent of women experienced adverse mental health effects from the ongoing conflict and COVID-19.

61. Since the beginning of the pandemic, humanitarian aid workers have implemented a multisectoral response to COVID-19 needs and have reached over 3 million people across the country with COVID-19-specific assistance. This includes supporting the establishment of 14 laboratories with the capacity to process 5,500 tests per day; deploying 34,000 polio surveillance volunteers to engage in case identification and contact tracing activities; engaging over 61,400 community leaders and people of influence in almost 12,000 villages across 34 provinces to amplify risk communication and community engagement messages; supplying more than 1.1 million units of protective equipment to health providers and front-line aid workers nationwide; training more than 4,350 health-care workers in infection prevention and control measures, 193 health-care workers in medical laboratory testing and 160 health-care workers in mental health and psychosocial support; screening more than 519,000 people at points of entry; providing water and sanitation assistance to 2.92 million people, psychosocial support to more than 301,000 people and home-based education materials to nearly 119,500 children; and reaching more than 4.7 million people with COVID-19 awareness-raising activities.

62. Between 4 August and 12 November, health partners provided medical assistance to over 214,422 people, 58 per cent of whom were women and girls. The number of trauma cases decreased in the first half of the year but increased from the middle of the year onwards owing to renewed conflict. Between January and November, the United Nations and partners provided emergency shelter, household items and cash support to more than 581,300 people affected by conflict and natural disasters.

63. As at 12 November, 54 polio cases had been confirmed since 1 January, compared with 29 cases in the whole of 2019. Most of the cases occurred in areas where house-to-house vaccination campaigns had been banned since May 2018. Polio has now spread to eight new provinces, indicating declining immunity among people. In addition to wild polio viruses, Afghanistan has also experienced an outbreak of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 following a spillover from an outbreak in Pakistan, resulting in 136 confirmed cases.

64. Afghanistan is facing an acute food insecurity crisis, threatening the lives of millions of people. Over the past five years, the percentage of food-insecure people has almost doubled, while the proportion of people in a “crisis-level” or “emergency-level” situation has increased fourfold. Currently, 16.9 million people are at “crisis” and “emergency” levels of food insecurity – one of the highest figures in the world. Diminishing food security in all provinces coincides with soaring household debt and the ongoing socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, which has inflated market prices

for staple commodities. Between 1 August and 15 November, the United Nations and its partners provided 28,300 tons of food to food-insecure people, including 107,000 people displaced by conflict and 17,000 affected by natural disasters. To support people affected by the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, the United Nations and its partners have provided additional food assistance to 1 million people.

65. The number of returnees arriving in Afghanistan in 2020, totalling more than 725,000, has now surpassed 2019 levels by 41 per cent and is anticipated to become the largest ever return year for undocumented migrants. Between 4 August and 12 November, there were 1,316 documented and 239,501 undocumented returnees, primarily from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. Deportees make up 37 per cent of total returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran. A total of 9,062 Afghans have been deported from Turkey in 2020, including 1,339 in October.

66. From July to September 2020, the Mine Action Service and partners cleared 2.82 km² of land contaminated by high-impact explosives, safely removing over 90 items of explosive ordnance, benefiting 21 communities. In addition, 212,141 people in Afghanistan received explosive ordnance risk education during the reporting period.

67. Widespread insecurity continued to present challenges for humanitarian access. Since 1 January, humanitarian workers have reported 893 access-related incidents, a 57 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2019, 90 of which are related to the pandemic. Between 4 August and 12 November, 5 aid workers were killed, 17 injured and 21 abducted.

68. The international air bridge established by the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service primarily to facilitate the rotation of humanitarian personnel and supplies between Kabul and Doha continued to operate three times a week, transporting 310 passengers between 4 August and 15 November. The air bridge is scheduled to operate until at least the end of December.

69. Under the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan, \$1.1 billion is requested to provide humanitarian assistance to 11.1 million Afghans. As at 15 November, the plan is 43 per cent funded, leaving a funding gap of \$640 million. By the end of September, the United Nations and non-governmental organizations had reached 7.6 million people in 390 of 401 districts with humanitarian aid, representing 68 per cent of the number planned for the year.

VI. Counter-narcotics

70. From 15 July to 14 November, law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 1,029 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 605 kg of heroin, 1,519 kg of opium, 5,078 kg of hashish and cannabis, 640 kg of methamphetamine, 74 litres of acetic anhydride, 320 litres of acetic acid, 2,029 kg of ammonium chloride, 995 kg of potassium chloride, 250 kg of ammonium nitrate and 240 kg of methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). The seizures led to the arrest of 1,202 suspects and the confiscation of 175 vehicles and 61 weapons. In addition, 7 ha of opium poppies and 7 ha of cannabis were eradicated in coordinated operations led by the Ministry of the Interior.

VII. Mission support

71. As at 31 October, vacancy rates at UNAMA were at 13 per cent for international staff, 7 per cent for National Professional Officers and 3 per cent for national staff, compared with the approved rates of 8 per cent, 3 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively.

The proportion of female staff remained low, at 36 per cent for international staff, 45 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 13 per cent for National Professional Officers and 9 per cent for national staff.

72. While sustaining the delivery of critical programmes and activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, alternate work arrangements remained in place. UNAMA and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes decided to gradually increase the numbers of international personnel at the duty station and national staff reporting to work, with numbers to be reviewed regularly considering potential changes in the COVID-19 caseload.

VIII. Observations

73. Afghanistan has taken a significant step towards peace with the start of the peace negotiations. I encourage the negotiating teams of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban to find the common understandings and agreements that can begin to end the tragic decades of conflict. I am grateful for the international commitments expressed at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference for building a shared, prosperous and peaceful future, as well as recognition of the need for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned resolution to the conflict. It is my deep hope that a lasting resolution can be achieved for the peaceful development of Afghanistan.

74. I am concerned that the continuing high level of violence could erode trust in the peace process even at this early stage. De-escalation of the conflict is needed in order to save lives and protect public confidence. Including the voices of victims in the early stages of the peace process will be a critical step towards achieving true reconciliation.

75. Civilians continue to bear the brunt of the armed conflict, with women and children comprising more than 4 of every 10 civilian casualties recorded. The continued indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices, especially devices that function as anti-personnel landmines, takes an appalling toll. Many victims feel that too little is being done to address the short-term and long-term harm that they suffer.

76. If the peace negotiations are to offer hope, they must bring a commitment by the parties to protect the human rights of all Afghans and uphold the international treaties to which the country is a party. I urge the parties to make unequivocal statements in this regard in order to contribute to an environment of trust and inclusivity. Women, young people, civil society actors and victims of war must have opportunities to contribute meaningfully to every step of the process. I call for an immediate cessation of attacks on civilians, the recent victims of which have included religious leaders, media representatives and civil society figures, and for the Government of Afghanistan to ensure accountability for such egregious crimes. I reiterate my support for the work of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in protecting and promoting the human rights of all Afghan women and men, including victims and vulnerable groups.

77. Peace in Afghanistan will help to promote stability across the region and will offer numerous political and economic opportunities, including enhanced trade and investment, improved development cooperation and expanded people-to-people links. In a year when in-person diplomacy has been constrained owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, I am heartened by the consistent messages from the regional partners of Afghanistan affirming the importance of a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

78. Women and girls continue to face serious barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights. The presidential decree stipulating that an individual's mother's name should be included on national identity cards is an important step towards the empowerment

of women in the public sphere, and I urge the Government to continue its efforts to improve the legislative and institutional environment for women. The ongoing failure to fully prohibit virginity testing in the Penal Code enables the continuation of this practice, which constitutes a serious violation of women's and girls' human rights.

79. Earlier in 2020, the Government prevented the spread of COVID-19 in places of detention by reducing prison populations through pardons and sentence reductions. I encourage the Government to sustain this measure by keeping prison populations as low as feasible, including consideration of pretrial detention and the use of alternative sentencing, and to take urgent measures to address overcrowding.

80. I welcome the adoption at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference of the communiqué affirming ongoing international support for Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Partnership Framework and the finalization by the Government of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II, which will be key in guiding progress towards peace and prosperity over the next four years. Continued international support, both political and financial, will be a critical element of the country's ongoing progress towards peace and self-reliance.

81. Improving the accountability of public institutions will be essential to securing the future prosperity of Afghanistan, including by prioritizing anti-corruption reforms and strategy. By creating an independent anti-corruption commission, the Government can streamline its structures and efforts to combat corruption in all sectors.

82. I remain deeply concerned about the health and socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular on the most vulnerable groups in Afghanistan. The pandemic has exacerbated humanitarian and development challenges, impeded access to health care and education and stymied economic growth, affecting millions of Afghans. As the winter season approaches, I am concerned that another spike in COVID-19 cases will strain the country's health system and economy, causing further suffering. I call upon donors to increase funding for the Humanitarian Response Plan to enable a robust and effective response to the pandemic, including measures to increase social protection for the most vulnerable people during the long recovery period.

83. I thank all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative and Head of UNAMA, Deborah Lyons, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfilling commitments in support of the Government and people of Afghanistan.
