

The HAG quarterly report analyses access restrictions encountered by humanitarian workers during the fourth quarter of 2020 (Q4 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	2019	2020	Tendency
1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities	70	293	↑
2) Levy Request	26	54	↑
3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity	93	200	↑
4) Movement Restriction	43	225	↑
5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure	21	69	↑
6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities	188	252	↑
7) Landmines/UXO	3	4	↑
<b>Overall Number of Access Constraints</b>	<b>444</b>	<b>1095</b>	↑

### Summary

- Humanitarian partners in Afghanistan continue to deliver much needed services to people in need despite a continuously challenging access environment;
- 2020, the HAG recorded 1095 access impediments, compared to 444 in 2019;
- The increase was driven by a fourfold rise in recorded interference attempts and movement restrictions by conflict parties;
- The number of access constraints recorded in Q4 (328) remained on par with incidents in Q3 (335);
- NSAG-TB initiated most access constraints in 2020 (679), followed by ACG (134), GOA (98) and ANSF (83);
- 2020 saw a renewed push by NSAG-TB to get humanitarian partners to register with them;
- The negotiation of levy exemptions became increasingly challenging for humanitarian partners, with NSAG-TB systematizing taxation of commercial vehicles along the major routes;
- September and November logged most access impediments in 2020, with the high numbers driven by a relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions and ongoing fighting in the Southern Region;
- 2020 logged 57 abduction incidents during which 110 humanitarians were abducted, compared to 22 abduction incidents impacting 49 humanitarians in 2019

### Overall Access Constraints

In 2020, the HAG recorded 1095 access constraints, compared to 444 in 2019 and 339 in 2018. While the significant increase in the number of access impediments is partially attributable to an improved reporting process, it also highlights an increasingly challenging access environment.

The increase in the number of access constraints was mainly driven by a fourfold rise in interference attempts and movement restrictions, both linked to the strengthening of NSAG-TB. In 2020, NSAG-TB not only significantly expanded their range of operations, including fortification of their influence along major supply roads, but also attempted to establish centralized structures to control operations of humanitarians, manifesting in repeated requests to humanitarian partners for registration and sharing of information.

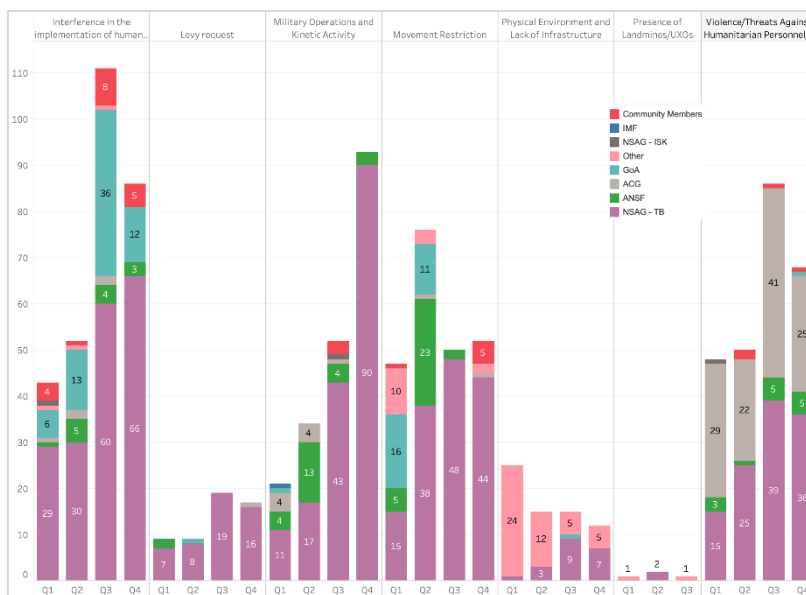


Figure 1: Access Constraints by Quarter in 2020

The threefold increase of the number of access constraints related to the physical environment can be attributed to heavy snowfall and flooding occurring in 2020. Meanwhile, the number of levy requests as well as access constraints stemming from kinetic activity doubled in 2020. Levies thereby continued to be one of the major challenges for humanitarian partners. The issue continued to be addressed at highest level with NSAG-TB interlocutors but remains largely unresolved, with NSAG-TB insisting on referring to it as 'security fee', claiming that they are providing security to humanitarian partners operating in their areas of control. 2020 saw the highest level of conflict activity since 2001, which also translated in an increase of access constraints due to kinetic activity.

The upsurge in conflict activity in 2020 did not lead to an increase in the number of humanitarians killed or wounded, with 23 humanitarians killed and 53 wounded in 2020, compared to 41 killed and 65 wounded in 2019. The number of fatalities as a result of kinetic activity remained unchanged at nine humanitarians killed in 2019 as well as 2020.

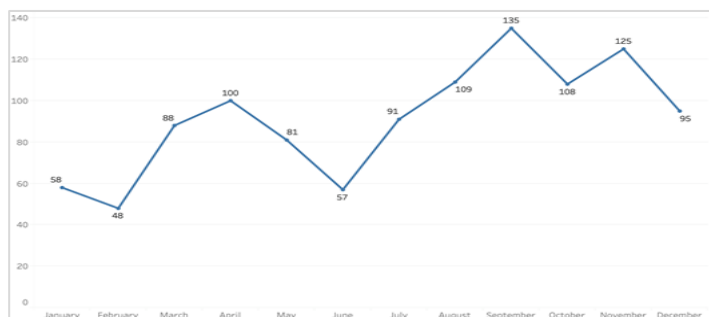


Figure 2: Access Constraints by Month in 2020

**1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities**

**i. 2020 Overview**

In 2020, the HAG recorded 293 interference attempts, compared to 70 such incidents in 2019. While this significant increase is partially attributable to an improved reporting process and partners more open to discuss and share their challenges, it also highlights an increasingly challenging access environment.

Most constraints stemmed from interference with programming (187), followed by bureaucratic impediments (40), interference with staff recruitment (37) and interference with beneficiary selection (29). NSAG-TB continued to author most interference attempts (186), with GOA and ANSF initiating 67 and 13 respectively.

The increase in bureaucratic impediments, from one recorded incident in 2019 to 40 such incidents in 2020, is indicative of a more tense relationship between the GOA and the humanitarian community. Of concern in 2020 was the request to international NGOs to purchase a local health insurance for the renewal of work permits for their international staff. The request came despite NGOs being already covered by their own health insurance and without any indication of actual coverage of services. While this issue was addressed at the highest GOA level, partners report the requests continue. Discussions about a revision to the NGO law containing problematical new language created confusion among NGO partners, with some provincial GOA members commencing implementation of the revised law despite it not having been approved by parliament yet.

Health partners continued to be particularly vulnerable to interference attempts, with 69 interference attempts directed against them, out of which 63 were initiated by NSAG-TB. There is a continued perception of NSAG-TB that health services in their areas of control are not sufficient to meet the needs of beneficiaries. Health partners were regularly approached with requests to deliver more and better medicines, hire additional and better skilled staff as well as to upgrade existing health facilities, including ambulances. Most of the time these requests were outside the scope of the funded activities, with partners unable to meet the demands even if they wanted. Refusal to agree to these requests often led to the closure of health facilities, with the HAG logging 22 instances of health facilities temporarily closed in 2020, with the longest closure lasting for five months. It is common NSAG-TB practice to close all health facilities in a province operated by a partner they disagreed with, leaving potentially hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries without access to health services.

**ii. Q4 Overview**

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Tendency
1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities	Bureaucratic Impediment	23	7	↓
	Interference with beneficiary selection	12	11	↓
	Interference with programming	64	62	↓
	Interference with staff recruitment	13	6	↓
	<b>Total</b>	112	86	↓

In Q4, the HAG recorded 86 interferences in the implementation of humanitarian activities, compared to 113 incidents recorded in Q3. While interferences with beneficiary selection and programming remained on par with numbers recorded in Q3, the number of bureaucratic impediments as well as interferences with recruitment decreased significantly. The number of bureaucratic impediments (7) were again on the level of Q1 and Q2, after Q3 saw a coordinated effort by humanitarian coordination bodies to measure the extent of bureaucratic impediments in Afghanistan. The decrease in interferences with staff recruitment is more difficult to explain, with Q4 logging the lowest quarterly number in 2020.

These interference attempts - of which NSAG-TB initiated 69 - had different impacts on humanitarian activities: In 36 instances, programs or projects were temporarily halted, sometimes for several weeks, with another seven incidents resulting in the temporary closure of humanitarian facilities, including in Nuristan, Takhar and Samangan provinces. In six instances, partners relocated their activities to another location after they were unable to come to an agreement with conflict partners.

Most interference attempts related to interference with programming (62), with NSAG-TB initiating 54 of these incidents. In at least nine instances, conflict parties disagreed with the location of an intervention. It was mostly NSAG-TB members approaching humanitarian partners, pushing them to intervene in NSAG-TB controlled areas instead of in government-controlled areas but there were also a few cases where GoA or ANSF officials attempted to prevent humanitarians from operating in NSAG-TB controlled areas. In at least nine instances, NSAG-TB requested partners to register with them, often asking for sensitive documents, including budget details or donor contracts. These registration requests continued to put partners in a difficult situation and while engagement with NSAG-TB is recommended, the HAG advises against the sharing of sensitive documents such as budgets as these are likely to lead to levy requests. Another seven interferences related to requests for better or additional equipment, with NSAG-TB mainly targeting health partners with these demands. The HAG also reported at least five instances, where NSAG-TB opposed the presence of female staff members as well as at least three cases of opposition to the collection of beneficiary data.

In Q4, the HAG recorded 11 instances of interference with the beneficiary selection of partner organizations, compared to 12 such incidents in Q3. Most of these interferences were initiated by NSAG-TB and community members with the objective to shift assistance to different locations and/or add additional beneficiaries to the lists. In one instance, in Hilmand Province, NSAG-TB stopped an IO food distribution to school students, with NSAG-TB insisting for the assistance to go to male students of a Madrasa (religious school) rather than to a government-run girl's schools. While disagreement over the beneficiary selection led to the temporary

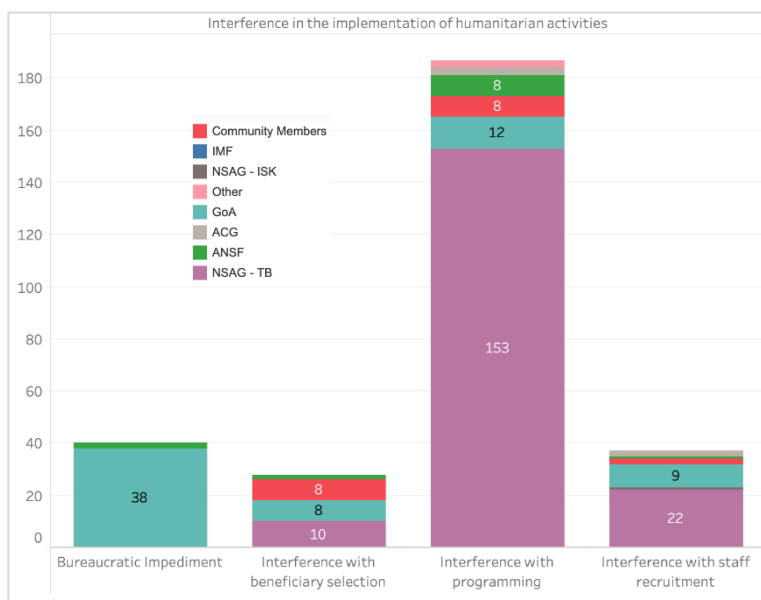


Figure 3. Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities by Incident Type

suspension of humanitarian activities in seven cases, it was comparatively easy for partners to resolve these issues through dialogue and engagement.

The HAG recorded seven bureaucratic impediments in Q4, compared to 21 in Q3, with GOA and ANSF initiating all of them. Four out of seven instances were recorded in the Western Region, in Hirat and Ghor provinces in particular. Slow bureaucratic processes within GOA departments causing delays in project implementation were worrying, especially for emergency response activities. Partners also raised the issue of some provincial GOA departments requesting for confidential documents that were either already shared at a national level or should not be shared at all, including beneficiary data. The monitoring of humanitarian activities by GOA officials also created challenges for partners, with GOA members sometimes unable to travel to NSAG-TB controlled areas but refusing to sign off on activities without a monitoring visit.

In Q4, the HAG recorded six interference attempts with staff recruitment, compared to 13 such incidents logged in Q3. NSAG-TB interfered with recruitment in five instances, with GOA authoring one incident, a decrease compared to the six recruitment interferences in Q3. Interference with recruitment by both parties to the conflict is reported throughout the country, but also significantly underreported as these incidents rarely cause a serious threat or lead to suspensions of project activities. In most cases, partners pressured to hire specific individuals did not outright reject the request but invited the demanding individual to apply through the official process, explaining their internal HR rules. Partners often highlighted the Joint Operating Principles as being a helpful tool to push back on these requests in a principled manner.

## 2) Levy Request

### i. 2020 Overview

In 2020, the HAG recorded 54 levy requests, compared to 26 requests logged in 2019 and 10 in 2018. While the increase is significant, it does not necessarily mean that NSAG-TB are now asking twice as often for levies, rather it also highlights a new openness of partners to disclose these issues with the HAG.

NSAG-TB authored the vast majority of levy requests (50), with the impact on humanitarian activities being significant: Partners suspended their operations temporarily (22), relocated to another location (7) or even suspended their operations permanently (3) following unsuccessful engagement on levy exemptions. Levy requests were reported across the country, with the Southern and Western regions logging most requests (10 and 11 respectively). In conversation with partners, NSAG-TB often referred to a security fee rather than asking for taxation or levies. The claim that they were ensuring security for humanitarian partners during their responses often went hand in hand with an indirect threat that non-payment would result in safety issues for partners.

### ii. Q4 Overview

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Tendency
2) Levy Request	In cash	19	17	↓
	In kind	0	0	→
	<b>Total</b>	19	17	↓

In Q4, 17 levy requests were reported to the HAG, nearly on par with the 19 requests recorded in Q3. In 15 incidents, NSAG-TB directly requested levies from humanitarian partners, while two incidents related to indirect taxation, with NSAG-TB requesting payment from private contractors hired by humanitarian partners. The real number of indirect levy requests is likely significantly higher, with NSAG-TB having systematized taxation of commercial transport companies, including those contracted by humanitarian partners, along the major highways in the country. The levy amount generally amounts to 10 per cent of the overall budget, although in several cases NSAG-TB seemed willing to accept five or less percent. In cases where humanitarian partners withstood pressure and refused to pay levies, NSAG-TB members often directly levied beneficiaries, with the latter likely to withhold this information from humanitarian partners due to fear of humanitarian assistance being withdrawn.

While it is not uncommon for implementing partners of IO agencies to be approached for taxation, with seven such incidents on record for Q4, HAG logged the first incident of an IO directly approached for taxation in December 2020. When the IO operating in a Southern Province rejected the levy payment, the NSAG-TB NGO Commissioner ordered the suspension of their activities, with negotiations continuing in January 2021.

This is a clear sign of an emboldened NSAG-TB, with partners increasingly struggling to negotiate levy exemptions with their district or provincial level NSAG-TB interlocutors. While it was never easy to negotiate levy exemptions, partners with good local acceptance, a long history in the region and skilled in humanitarian negotiations were able to find local solutions in the past. Nowadays, district or provincial NSAG-TB interlocutors seem no longer willing or able to make these decisions, with levy negotiations increasingly elevated to the national NSAG-TB NGO Commissioner for NGOs and Companies. Engagement with NSAG-TB at a national level is slow and replies can take several weeks. While some partners have become skilled in operating in a void, using the absence of a definitive reply to continue their implementation, others require more certainty for their operations, with slow replies or lack of clarity from the NSAG-TB Commissioner resulting in sometimes month-long suspensions of activities with devastating impacts for beneficiaries. The fact that NGOs are treated in the same way as companies under the responsibility of the NSAG-TB NGO Commissioner to Commissioner for NGOs and Companies continues to be problematic and skews the profile of NGOs.

### **3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity**

#### **i. 2020 Overview**

2020 recorded a significant uptick in conflict activity, making it the most kinetic year since 2001, with the rise in conflict partially attributed to a number of key political developments. In February 2020, the US and NSAG-TB signed an agreement in Doha, Qatar which foresaw the gradual withdrawal of the US Forces from Afghanistan by the end of April 2021. Prior to the signing of the agreement, NSAG-TB had agreed to a seven-day reduction in violence. However, in early spring, NSAG-TB resumed the pace of their attacks and even managed to expand their ground control countrywide. In September, the start of the peace talks between GOA and NSAG-TB in Doha created hope for a reduction in violence. However, so far, the NSAG-TB approach 'talk and fight' led to an increase in conflict activity, rather than a decrease. 2020 also saw a change in NSAG-TB tactics from complex attacks to targeted assassinations and MIEDs, in line with the February agreement not to attack urban settings.

One of the main reasons underlining NSAG-TB success in 2020 was attributed to the decrease in the number of preventive airstrikes conducted by IMF in line with the February agreement signed earlier in



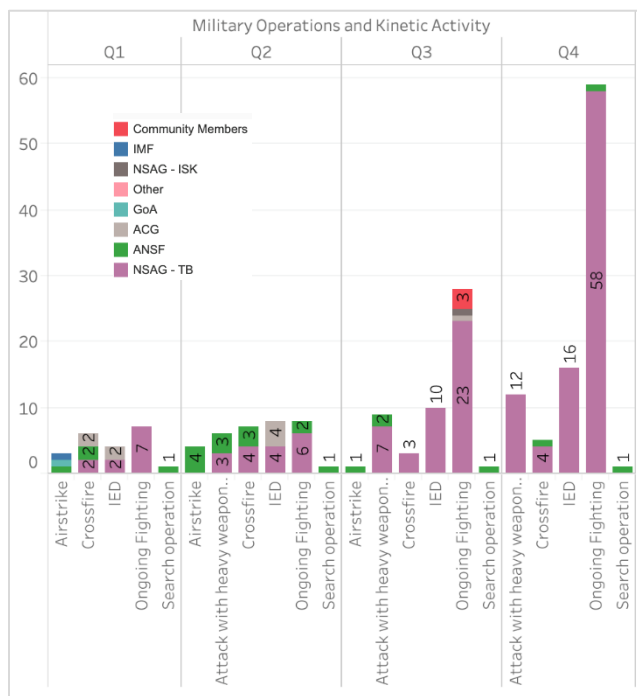


Figure 4. Access Constraints due to Military Operation and Kinetic Activity

February. Lacking ground and aerial support from IMF, ANSF members took a defensive position, focusing their troops around major military institutions and district and provincial capitals. NSAG-TB started expanding towards the mains roads to disrupt the main supply chains, thereby limiting ANSF capacity to support their personnel in remote areas.

The expansion of NSAG-TB in 2020 significantly affected humanitarian operations in multiple areas around the country. As a result of intensifying armed confrontations, multiple organizations were forced to significantly limit their presence in the field, especially in contested areas.

In 2020, the HAG recorded 200 access constraints stemming from military operations and kinetic activity, compared to 93 incidents in 2019. Q4 saw most conflict activity, with the number of access incidents gradually increasing throughout the year from 27 incidents in Q1, 34 in Q2, 52 in Q3 to 93 in Q4.

In 2020, the HAG logged 38 IED incidents impacting humanitarian actors, compared to 10 such incidents in 2019 and 17 in 2018. With the HAG only recording IED incidents directly impacting humanitarians, these number do not show the whole picture however. 2020 saw another significant increase in IED attacks, with INSO recording 6877 incidents, compared to 5568 in 2019 and 4405 in 2018. 1680 or nearly 25 per cent of all IED recorded in 2020 occurred in the Southern Region which saw a flare of conflict activity in the last four months of 2020, which NSAG-TB mining whole road sections, thereby significantly impeding humanitarian movement over months to come.

Overall, in 2020, eight humanitarians were killed and another 19 wounded due to military operations and kinetic activity, compared to nine killed and 11 wounded in 2019. Humanitarians were not a direct target but continued to be collaterally impacted by ongoing fighting between ANSF and NSAG-TB.

### ii. Q4 Overview

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Tendency
3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity	Airstrike	1	0	↓
	Attack with heavy weaponry	9	12	↑
	Crossfire	3	5	↑
	IED	10	16	↑
	Ongoing Fighting	28	59	↑
	Search Operation	1	1	→
	<b>Total</b>		52	93

Following a pattern observed throughout the year and in line with ANSF taking a defensive approach, in Q4, NSAG-TB initiated the predominant number of kinetic incidents affecting humanitarians (90), with five incidents resulting from ANSF activity.

The number of access constraints stemming from ANSF initiated kinetic activity thereby remained relatively low and on par with patterns observed in Q1 and Q3. In 2020, the HAG recorded seven incidents of aerial operations affecting the humanitarian community, although none reported in Q4, compared to eight such incidents in 2019. While the number of aerial operations affecting the humanitarian community were nearly on par in 2019 and 2020, it is important to keep in mind, that the overall number of aerial operations significantly decreased in 2020, with US Forces reducing their air support and starting to hand over targeting responsibility to AAF. This highlights the importance of continued engagement with ANSF on their IHL responsibilities, including the protection of civilian and humanitarian facilities.

In two instances, humanitarian partners were collaterally impacted by inaccurate ANSF fire.

Out of the 95 security incidents recorded in Q4, 58 incidents were related to ongoing fighting in areas with humanitarian operations. While humanitarians were not a direct target of conflict parties, 90 per cent of these incidents resulted in the temporary suspension or halt in programming activity, with humanitarians unable to continue programming in a safe and secure manner during ongoing fighting. The predominant number of these incidents was concentrated around Kandahar (23 incidents) and Hilmand (10 incidents) provinces, with the Southern Region seeing a number of NSAG-TB offensives in Q3 and Q4.

In Q4, in at least 16 instances, humanitarian workers were unable to proceed with their operations due to presence of IEDs along main supply routes as well as in their areas of operation. This resulted in at least seven temporary suspensions and two relocations of project activities. Seven of these incidents occurred in the Southern Region, with NSAG-TB planting IEDs along the roads to obstruct ANSF movement. Even in the best-case scenario of a reduction in conflict activity in the area, the presence of IEDs will continue to impede humanitarian movements over the months to come. In two incidents, humanitarians were wounded in IED detonations in Hilmand and Khost provinces, bringing the total number of casualties of humanitarian aid workers in 2020 due to IEDs to eight wounded and three killed.

At least 12 incidents involving the use of heavy-yield explosives were reported during Q4. In all 12 instances NSAG-TB members targeted ANSF personnel and positions, collaterally impacting humanitarian facilities and residences of humanitarian personnel.



During the last month of Q4, the overall conflict dynamic saw a gradual decrease, which can be predominately attributed to the weather conditions. It is expected that in the absence of an agreement on reduction of violence coming out of Doha, kinetic activity will remain high in Q1 and Q 2021. Limited ANSF capacity as well as the withdrawal of US Forces even raise concerns that the level of hostility might surpass 2020 levels. While it is not expected that humanitarian workers will become a target in 2021, the continuing high level of conflict activity makes it extremely challenging for humanitarian organizations to operate in a safe and secure manner.

#### 4) Movement Restrictions

##### i. 2020 Overview

In 2020, the HAG recorded 225 movement restrictions, compared to 43 in 2019. The biggest impediment to humanitarian movement was the presence of checkpoints along the major routes. Out of 161 checkpoints NSAG-TB manned 137, while 21 were manned by ANSF, with the latter occurring mainly during the government imposed Covid-19 lockdown in March and April 2020. In 2020, NSAG-TB consolidated their presence along the main supply roads across Afghanistan. Although NSAG-TB did not have full control of the roads, their presence and/or partial control in specific locations allowed them to systematically tax commercial vehicles across the country.

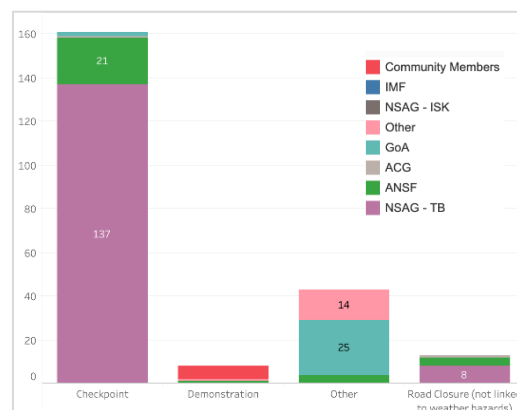


Figure 5. Movement Restrictions by Incident Type in 2020

##### ii. Q4 Overview

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Tendency
4) Movement Restriction	Checkpoint	47	43	↓
	Demonstration	0	6	↑
	Other	0	1	↑
	Road Closure (not linked to weather hazard)	3	2	↓
	<b>Total</b>	50	52	↑

The number of incidents relating to movement restrictions remained relatively stable over the year. In Q4, the HAG recorded 52 movement restrictions, of which 43 related to humanitarian movement being impeded through the presence of checkpoints, with all except one established by NSAG-TB. In 14 instances, humanitarian partners were directly impacted by a checkpoint. In addition to many temporary ad-hoc checkpoints, NSAG-TB also established permanent checkpoints to tax commercial vehicles as well as to search for GoA and ANSF personnel. One of these permanent checkpoints was located in Bala Buluk District along the Hirat-Farah Road and while humanitarian partners were not the main target, the

HAG in December recorded two incidents of an IO convoy stopped at gunpoint at this checkpoint. A number of partners started to only transport goods with a permission letter issued by NSAG-TB in order not to be stopped at checkpoints. While this system indeed seems to facilitate movement, it is no guarantee for not being stopped at checkpoints. NSAG-TB members manning the checkpoints seem to closely verify the authenticity of these letters which sometimes can take up to 24 hours during which trucks are prevented from continuing. There is also one incident on record, where the license plate indicated in the permission letter did not match with the license plate of the truck which resulted in NSAG-TB withholding the trucks for weeks and launching an investigation into the contracted driver.

## 5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure

### i. 2020 Overview

In 2020, the HAG recorded 67 access constraints relating to physical environment and lack of infrastructure, of which 14 were due to natural disasters, including flooding or heavy snowfall blocking roads. Another 16 incidents stemmed from lack of phone coverage, with all of them authored by NSAG-TB interfering with the operations of telecommunication providers, including the suspension of their activities during nighttime or the destruction of telecommunication antennas. In five instances, access was impeded by the lack of road infrastructure following NSAG-TB attacks on key infrastructure.

### ii. Q4 Overview

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Tendency
5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure	Lack of Phone Coverage	7	5	↓
	Natural Disaster	6	4	↓
	Lack of Road Infrastructure	2	3	↑
	<b>Total</b>	15	12	↓

The 12 incidents recorded in Q4 are on par with the 15 incidents each logged in Q2 and Q3. In four instances, roads were blocked due to heavy snowfall. Another three incidents related to the lack of road infrastructure, out of which two were authored by NSAG-TB attacking critical infrastructure. In November, in Ghor Province, NSAG-TB destroyed the Kaminj main bridge to obstruct movement for ANSF. This is the second time after April 2020 that this bridge was destroyed by NSAG-TB, thereby not only impeding ANSF but also humanitarian movement. Similarly, in Faryab Province, NSAG-TB used an excavator to damage the road to obstruct ANSF advancement. Out of five incidents relating to the lack of phone coverage, three occurred in the southern provinces of Uruzgan, Kandahar and Hilmand which saw heavy fighting during the month of October. The shutdown of telecommunication networks during ongoing fighting is a frequent occurrence and enables NSAG-TB to obstruct the communication of ANSF.

### 6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities

#### i. 2020 Overview

In 2020, the HAG recorded 252 instances of violence and threats against humanitarian personnel, assets or facilities, compared to 188 such incidents in 2019. ACG continued to author most incidents (117), with NSAG-TB initiating 115 violent acts against humanitarians. Violence against humanitarians was driven by robberies, abductions as well as threats and intimidations. While the number of robberies remained relatively stable with 92 incidents recorded in 2020, compared to 81 in 2019, the number of abductions as well as threats and intimidations doubled from 2019 to 2020. In 57 abductions, out of which 55 were initiated by NSAG-TB, 110 humanitarians were abducted in 2020, compared to 22 abductions impacting 49 humanitarians in 2019. Abductions seem to have become a tool for NSAG-TB members to pressure humanitarians into agreeing to their demands, with some of the abductions likely also financially motivated. The increase in the number of threats and intimidation attempts, up from 22 in 2019 to 46 incidents in 2020, can equally be explained by financial motivation. While the majority of threats (32) was attributed to NSAG-TB, they were mostly driven by financial motivation rather than by ideology.

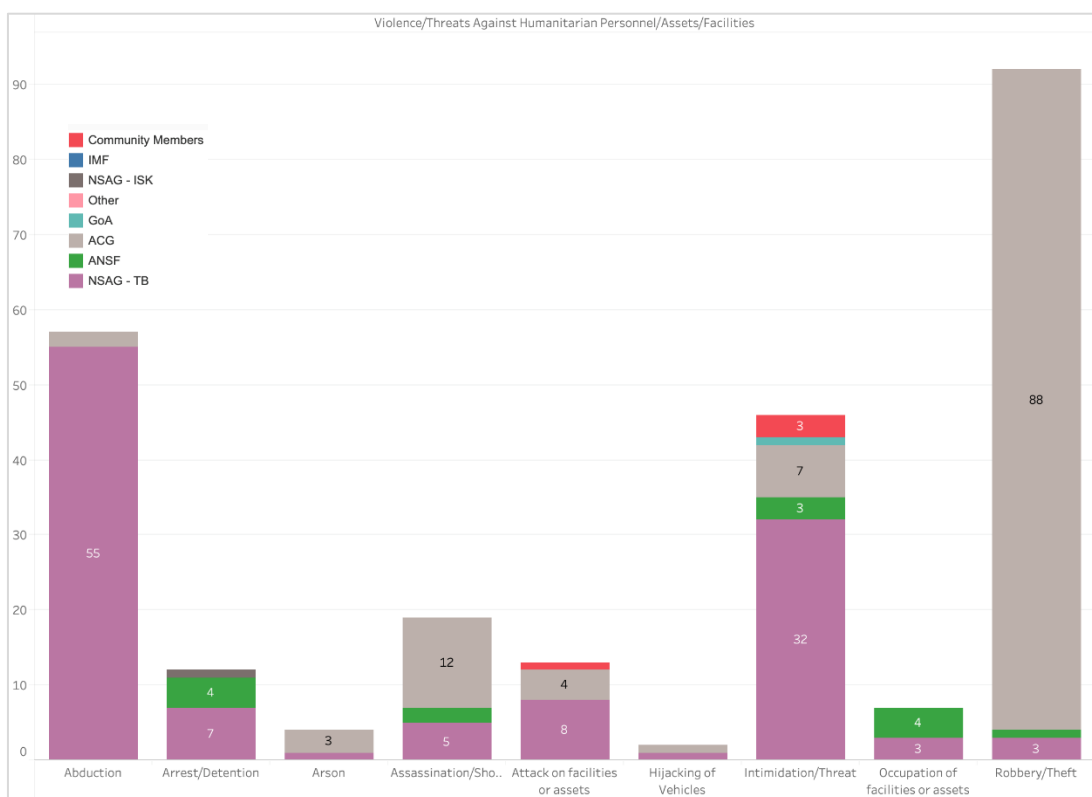


Figure 6. Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities in 2020

### ii. Q4 Overview

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Tendency
6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities	Abduction	17	15	↓
	Arrest/Detention	4	6	↑
	Arson	2	1	↓
	Assassination/Shooting	4	1	↓
	Attack on facility/asset	5	4	↓
	Intimidation/Threat	22	13	↓
	Hijacking of Vehicles	0	2	↑
	Occupation of facilities or assets	2	5	↑
	Robbery	30	21	↓
	<b>Total</b>		86	68

In Q4, the HAG recorded 68 incidents stemming from violence against humanitarians, a decrease compared to the 86 recorded in Q3 but nonetheless above Q1 and Q2 numbers. The drop can be predominantly attributed to a decrease in the number of incidents initiated by criminal elements. In Q4, 25 criminally-motivated incidents were logged, compared to 41 criminally-motivated security incidents affecting humanitarian personnel in Q3. However, criminally-motivated incidents often go underreported and Afghanistan's difficult economic situation, with the current unemployment rate standing at 11.16% (based on the International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database, as of September 20, 2020) pushes many individuals into criminality for survival. The COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to the difficult economic situation, making it less likely that levels of criminal activity will significantly improve in 2021.

Most of the incidents affecting Afghanistan's humanitarian community were opportunistic in nature, and there are currently no indications that humanitarians were targeted due to their occupation. However, at least four NGO casualties were reported in Q4 as a result of criminal activity. For comparison, the same number of humanitarian casualties were recorded during Q4 due to military operations and kinetic activity. Criminally motivated attacks therefore remain one of the major threats to the civilian population in Afghanistan, including to national and international staff members of the humanitarian community.

In Q4, the HAG logged 13 threats issued against members of the humanitarian community, bringing the number of threats and intimidation attempts in 2020 to 46, compared to 22 in 2019. 11 of the threats were assessed to be issued by NSAG-TB members, with community and GOA members initiating another threat each. National staff of IOs were targeted in five of these incidents, with NSAG-TB attempting to extort money from them.

NSAG-TB initiated 36 incidents involving violence against humanitarians in Q4, nearly on par with the 39 incidents recorded in Q3. This included 15 abductions and at least one temporary detention, during which at least 24 humanitarian workers were abducted or detained. The two main reasons leading to abductions were accusations by NSAG-TB that humanitarians supported the GOA or ANSF as well as allegations that NSAG-TB lacked prior information about arrival of humanitarians into their areas of control. Most of

the incidents were resolved within a few days, with the abductees being released following the authentication of their identity and/or mediation of the local community.

On the ANSF side, the HAG recorded two detentions of humanitarian in Q4, including one arrest by NDS on suspicion of cooperation with NSAG-TB, and one temporary detention of an NGO staff member by NDS due to an alleged misunderstanding. In five instances, ANSF members occupied humanitarian health facilities, including in Sar-e Pul and Hilmand provinces where they used them as firing positions. In Nangarhar, ANSF forcefully entered a humanitarian compound to get access to their CCTV cameras when searching for ACG members. They left the compound when the organization's security focal point addressed the issue with ANSF at senior level.

### 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 should be guided by the Humanitarian and Joint Operating Principles;
- 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;
- Unprincipled humanitarian action by individual organizations has negative impacts for the broader humanitarian community and, ultimately, the people we aim to serve;
- 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

AAF	Afghan Air Force
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
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NSAG-TB	Non-State Armed Group – Taliban
SVBIED	Suicide Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device
TPC	NSAG-TB Political Commission

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