AFGHANISTAN PROTECTION ANALYSIS UPDATE

OCTOBER 2021

REPORT SUMMARY

Since 15 August 2021, the political, social, and economic situation in Afghanistan has been seriously impacted, affecting the lives of people across the country, particularly marginalised populations such as women, children, and persons with disabilities. Major concerns continue for the human rights of Afghans, belonging to certain groups and populations such as human rights defenders, ex-soldiers, ex-government employees, journalists, and persons belonging to religious, ethnic and other minority groups.

Serious violations and human rights abuses have been reported, including summary executions and targeted killing, limited freedom of religion and expression and limited freedom of movement. Discriminatory and punitive gender norms are also identified as an increased protection threat during the reporting period.

Food insecurity, acute malnutrition, reduced access to healthcare and scarcity of basic commodities have resulted in a coping crisis forcing households to restore to negative coping strategies, including borrowing money, child labour and selling assets.

Conflict and its aftermath contributed to the suspension of activities by most humanitarian organizations while others maintained a presence in the field and resumed operation as soon as it became possible. Delivery of safe, dignified, and inclusive assistance is hampered by multiple factors, including restrictions on the participation of female staff in certain provinces and sectors.

Front page picture: Kotal Khairkhana park in Kabul hosting 700 IDPs households in makeshift tents (©UNHCR/Tony Aseh)

KEY PROTECTION FIGURES

Damage to civilian infrastructure: **218 acts** of violence/threats against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities reported in Q3, **230 % increase** (66 acts) compared to Q2 2021 *(HAG report)*.

Displacement trends: 5.5 million IDPs across the country with **677,000 people** displaced between Jan-Sep 2021. Thousands of people have been evacuated or have left Afghanistan since August 2021.

Protection PIN: **2,13 million people** reached out of **12.8 million people** in need in the sectors of CP, GBV, HLP, MA and Protection.

Flash Appeals: **$ 45,3 M** needed for priority protection responses for **1,5 million** vulnerable people (GBV AoR: 500K, CPiE AoR: 153K, HLP AoR: 100K, MA AoR: 1,5M, Protection: 500K)

METHODOLOGY

The report was prepared in collaboration with six partners undertaking protection monitoring: DRC, INTERSOS, IOM, IRC, NRC and UNHCR, using the data collected in Q3 from 6,661 Household-level Surveys (HH), 723 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 1,075 Key Informants Interviews (KII). In Q3, 52% of respondents were IDPs, 25% undocumented returnees, 20% host community, 3% IDP returnees, 1% refugee returnees and 0,5% refugees and asylum seekers. 63% of the respondents were male while 37% were female. The analysis is guided by the Global Protection Cluster Protection Analysis Framework (PAF). Other sources of data that are referenced include OCHA Displacement Trends, WFP Countrywide Monthly Market Price Bulletin, IOM Return of Undocumented Afghans Situation Reports, Human Rights Watch.

LIMITATIONS

Widespread insecurity severely impacted data collection and interrupted humanitarian activities in the field. Protection components related to human rights and protection monitoring were particularly impacted throughout Q3, with disruptions and capacity gaps further worsening in the second half of August and into September, following the Taliban's takeover.

Protection Monitoring in Trinikot City, Urozgan Province (©UNHCR)

Limitations and considerations regarding Q3 data include:

- Many partners including those involved with protection monitoring, opted to diversify or change **the modalities of data collection** as the context changed. In remote locations instead of in-person interviews, monitoring activities took place by phone. Community-based protection monitoring was impacted by the restrictions to work placed on female staff and remote work arrangements did not enable sufficient space and privacy to guarantee full protection of female beneficiaries.

- **Serious concerns exist about data protection**, especially on GBV. Recording and storage of GBV data was put on hold until its collection could be done in a safe manner in accordance with GBViE Minimum Standards for data protection.

- Direct **data on GBV is limited** by the risks of asking and reporting on questions that may lead to disclosures that can be retraumatizing and be especially harmful in areas where there is no response service. As such, there is limited data on the perpetrators of threats against women and girls.

- The **lack of availability of cash and the closure of banks** impacted protection monitoring activities, which are staff-intensive, and challenged the collection of data at provincial levels.

- The range of security challenges and operational constraints including **movement restrictions** imposed by the Taliban administration impeded the capacity of protection partners to collect high quality data and to deliver humanitarian assistance.

- UNAMA experienced increasing difficulty in maintaining its **verification standards for civilian casualties**, due to human networks (sources and witnesses) fleeing/being displaced, and lack of cell-phone coverage due to parties' intentional or inadvertent destruction of cell-phone towers.

- Protection monitoring **focuses on rural communities**, whose preoccupations are related to daily survival, resulting in human rights violations, including in relation to restrictions on women and girls, being difficult to monitor.

1. CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Insecurity worsened from May to August 2021 as the Taliban advanced with a widespread offensive against the Afghan Government (GoIRA) forces in rural provinces. The conflict culminated in the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban on 15 August 2021 with the entire country soon thereafter nominally under their control. Thousands of people fled Afghanistan through informal crossing points to neighbouring countries while evacuations by foreign governments through Kabul airport concluded on 30 August. Travellers had limited access to food, potable water, and basic health care and family separation was widespread. On 31 August, all USA and NATO troops were withdrawn from the country. On 9 September, the Taliban announced an interim government for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and appointed members of the Taliban and Haqani Network in military and civil positions. The collapse of the civilian government, and the consequent suspension of international funding, had an enormous impact on basic services, namely education and health, and financial systems, exacerbating already high levels of poverty and hunger. With only 17% of health facilities fully functional and two thirds lacking essential medicines and staff, the health system is at risk of collapse. Rising prices of wheat flour and diesel (rising 5% and 7.6% respectively) and restrictions on women's ability to work, further exacerbated the economic crisis, particularly for female-headed households.

5,5 million people remain displaced in Afghanistan, out of which 677,000[1] were displaced by drought and conflict since January 2021. Many are not able to return to their original homes which are destroyed or damaged. Despite the critical situation, returns from Iran and Pakistan remained at record levels (since January 1,016,835 undocumented Afghans returned[2]), with 62% consisting of deportations – the vast majority from Iran. Deprivation of basic services, violence and coercion such as recruitment are all threats forcing undocumented returnees to re-migrate through unsafe and irregular pathways. Unaccompanied children and single women faced heightened risks upon return to Afghanistan especially due to lack of access to essential services and safe onward transport to their final destination.

Cash for transportation for IDPs from Kabul who decided to voluntarily return to their former place of residence or origin (©UNHCR)

COVID-19 remains a concern as does the rate of vaccinations, especially among women. Unclear positioning from de facto authorities on the continuation of COVID-19 vaccination and high population movements may make a fourth wave of the pandemic a reality. Finally, the approaching winter season is likely to exacerbate humanitarian needs as many restrictions on electricity and fuel are anticipated.

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[1] OCHA, Afghanistan Population Movement Snapshot, October 2021

[2] IOM, DTM report, October 2021

2. PRIORITY PROTECTION RISKS

2.1 CURRENT THREATS TO THE POPULATION

2.1.1 Summary Executions and Targeted Killings

During the reporting period, hundreds of people were killed and injured in serious incidents perpetrated by IS(K), especially Afghanistan's Shia minority. Taliban Special Forces were ordered to hunt down IS fighters in Afghanistan and civilian casualties also occurred as a result of related gunfire and abandoned IED and unexploded ordnance (UXO) detonations. Summary execution of civilians and reprisal killings were also reported by OHCHR and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC)[3], as well as targeted killings of journalists[4], and ethnic and religious minority groups, including an instance of Taliban forces unlawfully killing 13 members of the Hazara community in Daikundi province, including 2 civilians and 11 former members of the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF), who had surrendered.[5] There were also widespread reports of Taliban officials imprisoning residents and inflicting beatings and corporal punishments, signifying a return to a harsh version of Islamic justice with execution and amputation. Four alleged kidnappers in Herat city were killed and their bodies hung in various squares of the city as a warning to others[6].

2.1.2 Limited Freedom of Religion and Expression

Religious minorities experienced fear and uncertainty with regards to their safety and security under Taliban rule. FGD respondents in Faryab, Kandahar, Khost, Nangarhar and Zabul raised ethnicity as a reason for social tension or discrimination, whilst in Faryab and Kandahar religion was mentioned. The Shia Ulema Council urged the

Taliban to ensure safety and equality for all, while it is estimated that 10,000 - 12,000 members of the Christian church in Afghanistan are in hiding. With the electronic database for the 'e-Tazkeras' ID holding data pertaining to the religion of individuals, there is a fear that these databases will be used by the Taliban to identify persons belonging to religious minorities. In further restrictions, the Taliban banned barbers from shaving and trimming beards on the basis that such activities breach their interpretation of Islamic precepts. According to organisations that support media freedom, 153 media outlets (radio, print and TV channels) stopped activities in 20 provinces since mid-August, owing to economic problems and restrictions. Growing concern over repression has prompted many users to increasingly abandon social media space.[7]

2.1.3 Limited Freedom of Movement

Freedom of movement decreased during the reporting period with 78% of respondents mentioning that they can move freely, while it was 85% in Q2 and 84% in Q1. From January to September, the percentage of people who cited inability to move freely was higher among male (58%) than female (42%). Respondents highlighted fear for personal safety (26%), lack of trust in the community (14%), socio-cultural barriers (13%), discrimination (10%), safety concerns related to debt (9%), lack of documentation (8%), personal hostility (6%), checkpoints (5%) and demands for bribes by authorities (4%) as contributing to the range of issues that prevent them from feeling safe when moving. There is a 7% increase in fear for personal safety and a 9% increase for lack of trust in the community compared to Q2 and Q1. The data also showed that despite the change of regime, no particular restrictions were placed on freedom of movement by the Taliban at formal checkpoints (with only 5% indicating that

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[3] Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission ; OHCHR | 31st Special Session of the Human Rights Council - The serious human rights concerns and situation in Afghanistan

[4] https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/attack-mediajournalists-174893

[5] https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/10/afghanistan-13-hazara-killed-by-taliban-fighters-in-daykundi-province-new-investigation/.

[6] Taliban hang up bodies of alleged kidnappers in Afghan city | Toronto Sun

[7] Afghanistan: Social media users delete profiles over fear of attack - BBC News.

checkpoints provide a limitation on freedom of movement). However, ethnic and religious minorities as well as women and girls remain particularly at risk of limited freedom of movement with, for example, Hazara not being able to move freely in some areas of the country and families prohibiting women and girls from leaving their homes without a male guardian, due to Taliban ruling.
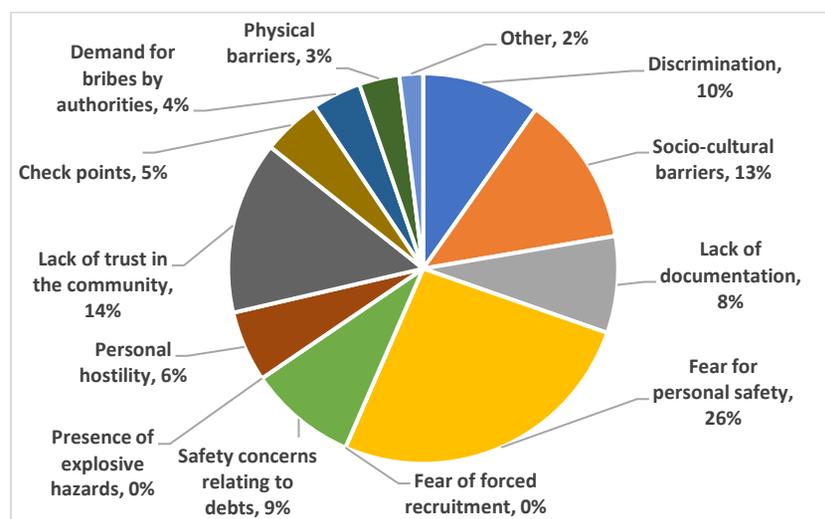
Reasons for inability to move freely (all provinces)

2.1.4   Discriminatory and Punitive Gender Norms

The Taliban reiterated their commitment to women's rights, but these assurances materialized to varying and limited degrees, with impositions introduced on the education, right to work and freedom of movement of girls and women. Schooling for girls has been capped to primary level, women's return to work has not reached national level agreement and the Ministry of Women's Affairs has been replaced by a new Ministry of Vice and Virtue, referencing conservative and restrictive rulings, and fearing a return to a justice system based on the interpretation of Sharia law, with women and girls at high risk of systematic subjugation, exclusion and violence.

Credible reports continued to emerge that single women and girls aged 15 – 45 are being forced to marry fighters, despite assurances from the authorities that women's rights are being upheld. The movement of women and girls is severely restricted, with the imposition of strict rules on having male escorts in some provinces, whilst in others the proliferation of social restrictions is causing women to self-limit their movements as a strategy to remain safe in an increasingly hostile environment to women and girls.

In Q3, protection monitoring data collected through Household Surveys showed that almost 35% of female respondents reported feeling unsafe whilst 25% of male respondents reported the same. Similarly, 35% of FGD stated that women do not feel safe, due to cultural reasons (15%), growing insecurity (11%), GBV risks (8%) and armed groups (5%). With GBV consistently underreported, 8% of FGDs *explicitly* stating GBV is indicative of the elevated GBV risk. Furthermore, the mention of cultural reasons likely implies harmful gender norms that discriminate, disadvantage, and endanger women and girls.

The pinpointing of cultural and family restrictions as reasons for women and girls feeling unsafe suggests that the threat of GBV also emanates from within the family and community. With pervasive harmful gender norms in what is one of the most unequal countries in terms of gender equality and women's rights, it is estimated that circa 90% of Afghan women have experienced GBV, the majority through intimate partner violence, with husbands as the principal perpetrators. Growing reports of early and forced marriage of girls and women by family members also align with evidence from other contexts showing that GBV often stems from within the family.

GBV has severe consequences on the safety, dignity, and wellbeing of Afghan women and girls, including short and long-term effects on their physical, sexual and reproductive and mental health and their

social well-being. Whilst not highlighted in protection monitoring data, the use of practices such as honour killings of GBV survivors is widespread in Afghanistan, with survivors also dying due to serious injury inflicted during sexual assault or through sexually transmitted infections. A lack of specialized health services, including Sexual Reproductive Health Services (SRHS) and safe access to these where they do exist further compounds the harmful effects of physical injuries to survivors.

2.1.5 Poverty, Growing Hunger and a Coping Crisis

According to a rapid appraisal on economic instability after 15 August by UNDP,[8] Afghanistan will face universal poverty by mid-2022 and a staggering 97% of the population is at risk of sinking below the poverty line. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator warned that a food crisis is looming, potentially within a month, adding that more than half of all under-fives are suffering from extreme malnutrition, and more than one-third of citizens are not getting enough to eat[9]. Furthermore, as winter approaches and colder weather sets in, the situation for those living in poverty or experiencing displacement, often without adequate shelter, is set to worsen. In consequence, the general sense of anxiety amongst the population is further aggravated, along with concerns for the protection outlook, particularly for at-risk groups and vulnerable persons, as people have depleted individual and community social and financial capacities and restored to negative coping strategies.

According to the Household Survey data for Q3, borrowing money is the strategy used most often (31%), followed by child labour (15%) – sending children to work locally, in other parts of the country or to neighbouring countries – and selling assets (14%). The same coping mechanisms were prevalent in Q1 and Q2. Other coping mechanisms include use of migration, spending remittances, engaging in

hazardous work, recruiting children to armed groups, and forced and child marriage. The prevalence of child marriage was the highest in Helmand Province, followed by Kandahar and Faryab provinces. When the Household survey data is disaggregated based on the respondents gender the three main coping mechanisms remain the same for men and women. Selling assets is the second most reported by men. Child labour is by far the second most reported by women. This difference is most likely linked to unequal access to household assets.

i. **Borrowing money and debt** is reported as the main mechanism used to cope with shocks, limited livelihood opportunities and loss of income. Since the beginning of the year, 78% of Household Survey respondents mentioned that they borrowed money (71% in Q1, 80% in Q2, and 79% in Q3).

ii. **Child labour** has dramatically worsened from Q1 to Q3. Since January 2021, 27% of Household Survey respondents mentioned that they had to resort to child labour (13% in Q1, 30% in Q2 and 30% in Q3). The highest percentage of respondents reporting child labour is found in Sar-e-Pul, Badakhstan, Faryab, Himand, Nangahar, Nimroz and Bamyan – mostly rural and border provinces relying on agriculture and informal labour with movement to third countries. The worst forms of child labour in Afghanistan include the production of bricks and carpets, work in the agriculture and mining sectors, and work in the streets as beggars, shoe shiners, porters, and garbage collectors.

iii. **Selling assets** has increased in Q3. Since the beginning of the year, 32% of the Household Survey respondents mentioned that they had to sell some assets (26% in Q1, 34% in Q2 and 37% in Q3). Usually selling assets is not the first coping

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[8] UNDP - 97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid-2022.

[9] Afghanistan crisis: Food supply for millions could run out this month | UN News

mechanism used by households due to its potential long-term impact on the household vulnerability. Hence, the steady increase, during this year, shows that households have exhausted any other preferred coping strategies and are now faced with no other choice – as an indicator of the depth of the crisis faced by many.

2.1.6 Other Key Protection Risks

Increased conflict in Afghanistan, and the subsequent takeover of the government by the IEA, adversely impacted the **safety and wellbeing of boys and girls**. Household Survey data across all provinces this quarter showed that 2% were child-headed households and 1% children-at-risk headed households. Households headed by unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) were not reported in this quarter. Morevowe, 12% of households reported having children at risk, whilst 1% reported having UASC and 1% having children engaged in armed conflict. According to interlocutors in the field, both Taliban/IEA/de facto authorities and ISKP recruit widely and use children in their ranks.

Presence of **mines and other explosives** remained prevalent across the provinces surveyed, reported by also at least a quarter of undocumented returnees. The Household Survey revealed that a majority (82%) of households lack awareness about mines and other explosives and 65% indicated that they lack awareness on where to report explosives. Children were particularly at risk of death or serious injury as a result of ERW – one of the top three impacts of mine presence reported by those who had awareness or information about mines is that children cannot access school safely (24%) – and a very real risk remains of death or serious injury of children if this situation is not addressed (27%). Other reported concerns were people not being able to access services (21%), effects on livelihood

such as restrictions on animal grazing (14%), and household chores such as collecting water (11%).

Cash assistance for shelter and protection in Kandahar (©UNHCR)

Lack of housing and accommodation is also a significant protection risk. Rent dispute was the highest reported **land-related issue** with 17% in Q3, followed by ownership, inheritance and use/access disputes and lack of documentation. The increase in rent disputes and rent payable might be explained by the economic crisis affecting households in the country and especially the most vulnerable. Of the respondents reporting HLP issues, Kabul, Nangahar, Takhar, Hilmand and Nimroz recorded the highest percentage of rent disputes which were mostly reported by returnees. **Eviction** is also an issue reported by 8% of the respondents, resulting in increased displacement and more cramped living conditions. Many of these evictions have targeted Hazara Shia communities, as well as people associated with the former government, as a form of collective punishment.[10]

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[10] https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-taliban-forcibly-evict-minority-shia

2.2 EFFECTS ON POPULATION

2.2.1 Denial of Access to Services

31% of Household Survey respondents reported denial of access to services in Q3, mainly livelihood support (17%), health (14%), support for persons with specific needs (9%), education (7%), WASH (7%) and child protection (6%). This represents an increase of 1% compared to Q2. The reasons attributed to the above included assistance not free (24%), assistance not reaching people in need (23%), people lacking the required documentation (15%), discrimination (11%), and assistance not being what people need (10%). Importantly, the Province disaggregation indicates that Ghazni had the highest rate of respondents who reported denial of access to services (50%), followed by Wardak (48%), Hirat (40%), Parwan (39%), Ghor (37%), Nimroz (33%), and Faryab (11%).

2.2.2 Inability to Access Existing Services

63% of Key Informants Interviews respondents reported that their community members were unable to access existing services, mainly livelihood support (11%), health (10%), shelter (9%), education (9%), WASH (8%), support for persons with special needs (7%) and psychosocial support (7%). The most affected groups are female headed-HHs (15%), child headed-HHs (11%), persons with disabilities (11%), elderly person headed-HHs (10%), single male headed-HHs (7%), persons with life-threatening health issues (7%) and unaccompanied and separated children (6%). The main reasons for being unable to access these services are being unable to pay for the service (22%), lacking documentation (19%), facing discrimination/exclusion (15%), assistance not reaching people in need (16%), and assistance not being what people need (14%).

Protection monitoring data highlighted that women and girls face increased barriers to accessing services, with their freedom of movement being limited. This is further compounded by the low rates of women's access to civil documentation, with 35% of FGDs stating that women and girls lack the Tazkera, compared to only 1% of FGDs stating the same for men. In Households Surveys, 22,8% of female respondents reported lacking documentation compared to 9,9% of male respondents.

2.2.3 Feeling of Safety

The feeling of safety was impacted during this reporting period, with a 10% decrease in the percentage of those that responded that they feel safe (69% in Q3 compared to 79% in Q2). In Q3, 27% of respondents stated that there was no change in their security situation (30% decrease from Q2 and 36% decrease Q1), 37% mentioned that the security situation had worsened (7% increase from Q2 and 9% decrease Q1) and 36% mentioned that the security situation had improved (23% increase from Q2 and 37% increase from Q1). The contributing factors indicated for the worsening security situation data are increased conflict between government and anti-government elements (38%), criminality (23%), targeted attacks (15%), fighting for resources (12%) and protests/civil demonstrations (10%).

Based on FGDs findings from Q3, 69% of respondents mentioned that men and boys feel safe in the community, slightly higher than for women and girls who indicated that they felt safe in the community (64%). In Q3, more than 32% of the respondents sometimes felt unsafe in their shelter. The four major shelter problems reported in Q3 were lack of privacy and overcrowded shelters, unsafe shelters due to lack of doors and lack of washing facilities. IDPs and host communities are the highest categories reporting shelter issues. Lack of privacy and over-crowded space were primarily reported by individuals living in settlements and shared accommodation. The dataset indicates that these issues are prevalent in woman and child-headed households.

With respect to population groups, at the household level, refugees reported the highest number of people feeling unsafe (48%), followed by host communities (34%) and refugee returnees (34%), undocumented returnees (30%), IDP returnees (29%), and IDPs (20%).

2.2.4 Psychological Distress of Women and Children

Overall, 36% of HH respondents reported experiencing psychological distress. Of these, 4% cited family violence (compared to 8% in the period January to July) and 1% cited early marriage as causes of distress (compared to 3% in the period January to July). Whilst GBV is not stated explicitly, given the risks and sensitivities of disclosure, global evidence shows that the presence of family violence mainly affects women and children, and is a proxy indicator for GBV risk in the family. Equally, trends in early marriage indicate girls are disproportionately affected. Family violence and early marriage as contributing factors in physiological distress highlight the detrimental impact of GBV on the mental health of women and girls, with post-traumatic stress as a common consequence of GBV globally.

77% of children who needed psychological support services were not able to access it because of a lack of information (38%) and the cost of services (37%). Conflict was the leading reason for children experiencing psychological distress, with 24% of respondents reporting this. Exposure to conflict resulted in a change in children's behaviour. 17% of respondents reported negative changes in the behaviour of children in the last 6 months, representing a 3% increase from Q2. Of those who reported negative changes in children's behaviour, 43% reported violent behaviour, 30% eating disorders, 11% self-harm, and 1% suicidal tendencies. With safety networks such as schools disrupted, children had fewer points of access for support outside of the home, with this being particularly concerning for adolescent girls who have not been permitted to return to school since August 2021 in some areas of the country.

Nine-year-old girl in a camp for displaced people in Afghanistan (©UNHCR/Edris Lutfi)

2.2.5 Social Cohesion and Dispute Mechanisms

Data from the reporting period shows that social cohesion has been negatively affected by recent events, with increased tensions and breakdowns in social relations within communities and between different community groups and reports of violence doubling compared to the previous quarter. FGDs consisting of host and displaced/returnee population groups also revealed tensions driven by social-cultural differences and discrimintation. Respondents from more than half of surveyed provinces reported negative community relationships - particularly across Panjshir, Kapisa, Faryab, Herat and Badghis. Humanitarian needs and the dire economic outlook also meant an increased competition for jobs and resources. FGDs and KIIs cited increased reports of insecurity – targeted killings, kidnapping, theft, and debt-related harassment – as causing stresses within communities and eroding otherwise trusting relationships.

Concerns over access to justice and equitable dispute resolution systems are not new in Afghanistan. In areas under Taliban control, parallel court systems already existed, while the imposition of fees and the experience of discrimination consistently impacted access to formal justice. Household Survey data this quarter showed that both fees and discrimination have reduced and that male respondents are more likely to approach community elders and religious leaders (Mullah, Shura Council) to resolve disputes, whereas women go to family and friends or resolve disputes themselves. FGD respondents from IDP and host communities from Baghlan, Ghazni, Herat, Kandahar, Kunar, Logar, and Sur-e-Pul indicated that they were going to the Taliban to resolve their disputes.

Overall, evidence suggests that dispute resolution mechanisms (DRM) favour host communities over returnee and displaced communities. 87% of host community respondents said their disputes had been resolved compared with 77% of IDPs. Returnees (undocumented, refugee and IDP) were the least likely to be satisfied with the quality of decisions (91%) compared to host communities (95%) and IDPs (96%) this quarter. Whilst fees as a barrier reduced across the board, host community members reported the biggest reduction (13%, yet still impacting 33% of IDPs). In localities like Badakhshan and Herat the 'lack of female representation' is raised for the first time as a barrier.

2.3 EXISTING CAPACITIES TO ADDRESS PROTECTION RISKS

It is to be noted that the Taliban have been unambiguous in saying that they wish for humanitarian actors to remain in Afghanistan and to provide humanitarian assistance, which is a positive and welcome signal. At present, however, the most pressing concern is how to ensure sufficient access to vulnerable groups and individuals, so that they may be provided with humanitarian assistance and able to realise their fundamental human rights.

2.3.1 Community-Based Protection and Shuras

Community-Based Protection structures and male and female Shuras exist in communities. Given the imposed restriction on freedom of movement on minorities, and on women and girls, it is reasonably considered that members of traditional community structures could play a role in making the communities aware of the existing services and helping them to access those services. In this regard, it is important to note that no restrictions have been placed on female health workers and female teachers. The construction of new community-based centres and women friendly spaces and expansion of the existing centres, run by women, for women and girls, could be a real entry point to maintain access to women and girls, and to provide them with much needed services.

2.3.2 Community-Led Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Culture, religion and ethnicity create community cohesion and provide support. This has helped some of the most vulnerable in communities in the absence of external resources or income with humanitarian response beset by access restrictions. However, exacerbated needs, particularly for displaced communities and returnees, has increased competition for limited resources and stretched the social fabric. A key factor in maintaining good relations is reliance upon a community leader to decide on and resolve issues. Women and girls and to an increasing extent all community members rely upon the family and community-level mechanisms closest to them. This means decision-making processes and the resolution of disputes is well established and continues despite more formal mechanisms not providing adequate protections for equitable resolution of challenges.

2.3.3 Accessible Former Hard to Reach Areas

Since September 2021, the locations which were under Taliban control for some time, have become more accessible due to the end of wide-spread conflict, allowing the resumption of limited

humanitarian assistance and movement in previously hard to reach areas. This provides an opportunity to expand programmes in areas that were previously not covered and to renew the mainstreaming of protection principles in all activities, especially when related to the rights of women and girls.

3   RESPONSES

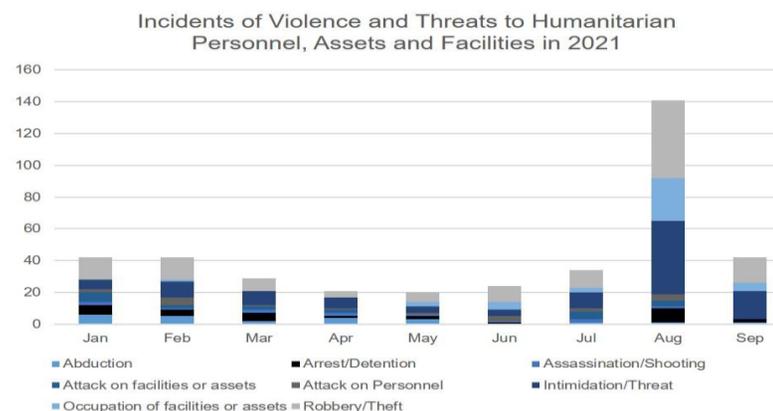## 3.1 OPERATIONAL CONTEXT INCLUDING ACCESS ISSUES

3.1.1   Humanitarian Access

Q3 can be divided into two distinct periods, exhibiting different access environments: **Period 1 (01 July to 15 August)** was marked by a high level of kinetic activity and movement restrictions, which resulted in many partners reducing their footprint and operation and shifting their focus on providing lifesaving assistance only. Airstrikes, attacks with heavy weaponry as well as IED explosions along roads resulted in significant collateral damage to partners, with three humanitarians losing their lives and another 14 injured when caught in crossfire between the ANDSF and the Taliban.
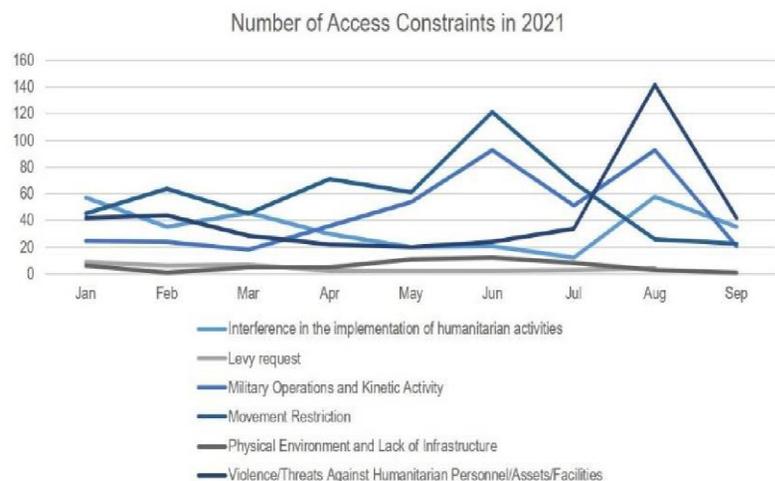
Period 2 (16 August to 30 September) was marked by an increase in incidents of interference in humanitarian activities as well as a peak in violence and threats against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities[11].

Overall, in Q3, 624 access constraints were documented, compared to 607 in Q2 and 508 in Q1. Incidents were dominated by 68 cases of **interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities** (+48% compared to Q2) and 218 acts of **violence and threats against humanitarian personnel**, assets and facilities (+230% compared to 66 acts of violence in Q2). Out of 68 incidents of interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities, 39 (57%) had a gender dynamic, with most of these relating to participation of female staff in humanitarian activities. Main actors responsible for all access constraints in Q3 include Taliban (80%), ACG (9%), community members (5%), ANDSF (4%), and ISK (2%). Meanwhile, incidents stemming from military operations and kinetic activity and movement restrictions decreased by 10% and 54% respectively[12].

Number of Access Constraints in 2021

Incidents of Violence and Threats to Humanitarian Personnel, Assets and Facilities in 2021

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[11] HAG Q3 Report - July Sept. 2021

[12] HAG Q3 Report – July Sept. 2021

3.1.2   Operational constraints

- The Taliban takeover in mid-August did **not bring about an end to all conflict-related activity**, with the Afghan Resistance Front continuing attacks on Taliban members in Panjshir Province and surrounding districts as well as IS(K) extending their activity to new provinces, including concentrated IED attacks against Taliban in Nangarhar province, resulting in civilian casualties.

- **Limited cash-flow** in the country and the closure of banks were an impediment to cash assistance and complicated the functioning of partners, including payment of salaries, procurement and transportation of equipment and material.

- **Movement restrictions** limited the capacity of beneficiaries to reach services, while constraints related to procurement, pipeline and transportation from outside the country affected humanitarian aid delivery (i.e. dignity kits). Humanitarian air bridges resumed in mid-September.

- Community-based protection monitoring, identification of PSN and MHPSS services were impacted **by the restrictions to work placed on female staff**, limiting operating possibility to female staff throughout the overall response.

3.2 POPULATION REACHED & FUNDING DATA

From January to September 2021, Protection Cluster partners reached 2,130,000 individuals out of the total target of 3,969,191 (54% achieved). As of 30 September 2021, protection partners received $45,4 million (40%) out of the total funding required for 2021 HRP $114.5 million.

Protection Cluster: Population reached
January - September 2021

4 RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

For Donors & Members States:

1. **STRENGTHEN** equitable access to protection and multisectoral services through increased funding **TO** those humanitarian organizations committed to having female and male staff delivering assistance to all members of the affected population and who focus on displaced populations and marginalized groups **BY** ensuring:
   - Longer-term flexible funding for dedicated women and girls and GBV programming considering the increased and wide-ranging GBV risks.
   - Greater flexibility in implementation timelines because of the fluidity of assessed risks.
   - Partners are encouraged to find creative responses to the rapidly changing operating environment, so meaningful programmes are implemented based on robust risk analysis by local partners.

2. **STRENGTHEN** protection monitoring, case management, mental health and PSS support, job-skills training and victim's assistance, rehabilitation and reintegration services **BY** increasing funding.

3. **INVEST** in frontline responders by increasing human resources and capacity building **TO** support community-based mechanisms using a 'protection by presence' model.

4. **FOCUS** on considerations other than 'beneficiary-reach' numbers in programming related to women and girls **TO** encourage new ways of working and ensure inclusion of female beneficiaries.

For HC/HCT & Humanitarian Partners:

1. **ENSURE** the centrality of protection in the humanitarian response **BY** strengthen protection analysis capacities in order to prioritize emerging protection issues and integrate protection activities into all interventions.

2. **ENSURE** available services and assistance are not arbitrarily denied on the grounds of status or lack of documentation and are accessible to all groups especially women and girls **BY** reinforcing protection mainstreaming.

3. **MAKE** equitable access, capacity building and sensitization to foster acceptance key pillars in aid programmes **BY** encouraging community engagement and the development of community dispute resolution and feedback mechanisms that are inclusive and sensitive to gender, ethnic and religious status.

4. **ENGAGE** in advocacy and in continuous dialogue with the Taliban and other authorities **TO**:

   - **Promote** the full participation of women and girls in public life.

   - **Urge** the full and safe participation of female humanitarian workers to support service delivery for female beneficiaries.

   - **Restitute** the formal justice system and respect for international human rights law.

- **Work** with banks to increase cash flow and adapt to allow humanitarian partners to deliver assistance projects in a timely manner.

- **Reduce** the growing threat of forced eviction against thousands of families living on land belonging to the State.

- **Conduct** a national mine action survey to capture the extent of the contamination

- **Provide** unconditional access for humanitarian deminers to access communities for demining, education and ERW removal.

5. **ENGAGE** with emerging governance systems to sustain the gains made securing land rights, particularly women's through formal and informal systems in Afghanistan and to **USE** land issues as an entry point to strengthen women's rights by keeping a focus on documenting land rights (customarily or formally) as a foundation for women's social and economic empowerment.

6. **SUPPORT** removal of deadly contamination and mines, and facilitate access to educate men, women, boys and girls to the risks from mines, IED, and other explosive devices through risk education.

7. **MAINSTREAM** PSEA in all aspects of the humanitarian response, ensuring all humanitarian actors are accountable for their actions and uphold the highest standards of conduct and discipline.

8. **BUILD** capacities of humanitarian partners to identify potentially at-risk individuals or trafficking victims, and to provide multisectoral responses to increased risks of trafficking in persons **BY**:

- **Invest** in training and awareness raising of local health authorities and clinics to develop appropriate techniques for interviewing and examining patients who may be trafficked or at risk of being trafficked.

- **Support** flexible funding for local partners at border crossing points, so as to provide safe shelters, food and livelihoods, and health services to women and children at risk of being trafficked.

- **Invest** in data protection, management and storage to allow evidence and data gathering on trafficking in persons.