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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 9 December 2020 ([A/75/634-S/2020/1182](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. Government formation progressed with the confirmation by the Wolesi Jirga (lower house of parliament) of the ministerial nominees of the President, Ashraf Ghani. The Afghanistan peace negotiations in Doha saw agreements on a code of conduct and the start of agenda discussions, with the negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan now backed by the newly formed Leadership Committee of the High Council for National Reconciliation, chaired by Abdullah. The United States of America completed the further reduction of its forces in Afghanistan to 2,500 as at mid-January 2021. Security incidents in 2020 registered a record high and included increased numbers of targeted killings, adding to the toll of civilian casualties. The Government continued to promote a regional consensus on intra-Afghan peace and reconciliation, economic cooperation and connectivity. Humanitarian needs reached a record high owing to ongoing violence, natural disasters and heightened levels of food insecurity, further compounded by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.



A. Political developments

4. The government formation process, including efforts to accommodate political opposition actors, continued. From 16 November to 2 December 2020, the Wolesi Jirga held six hearings and three votes for the confirmation of 23 ministerial and 3 other nominees introduced by Mr. Ghani on 21 October, pursuant to the political agreement of 17 May 2020 with Mr. Abdullah. Of the 23, 19 appointments (including 2 women) received confirmation, while nominees (including 2 women) were rejected for the positions of women's affairs, education, culture, rural rehabilitation and development, and central bank governor. The President subsequently dismissed two confirmed ministers: the Minister of Public Health on 31 December 2020, following the arrest on corruption charges of individuals affiliated to him, and the Minister of Finance on 19 January 2021, inter alia citing non-observance of constitutional provisions, and nominated acting ministers in their stead. In addition, Mr. Ghani appointed a new State Minister for Martyrs and Disabled Affairs along with establishing the Presidential Legal Unit for International Trade and Economic Treaties and Agreements, the High Council for Revenue, the National Food and Drug Administration and the Energy Regulatory Authority.

5. Parliament reinforced its oversight of budgetary allocation and spending. On 9 December, the Ministry of Finance presented the first draft of the national budget for fiscal year 1400 (2021) to parliament, with two thirds allocated to operational and one third to development spending. The Wolesi Jirga returned the draft budget, requesting harmonization of civil service salaries and a balancing of provincial and sectoral development budget allocations. On 4 February 2021, the Ministry of Finance submitted a third budget draft with amendments.

6. In December and January provincial governors were replaced in Baghlan, Sari Pul, Kandahar, Jowzjan and Logar Provinces. Since the President's inauguration in March 2020, 26 of the 34 provincial governors have been replaced. On 6 December, nine women were appointed as second deputy provincial governors for social and economic affairs, in Badghis, Ghazni, Laghman, Logar, Kapisa, Kunar, Nimruz, Nuristan and Zabul. A total of 15 out of 34 second deputy provincial governors, a position reserved for women, have been appointed.

7. Efforts to undertake election reforms to prepare for constitutionally mandated and overdue provincial, district council and municipal elections, as outlined in the political agreement of 17 May 2020 between Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah, progressed slowly. On 15 December, the two electoral management bodies, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) signed the extension of the United Nations Electoral Support Project to continue United Nations technical assistance until the end of December 2021. Mr. Ghani and his two Vice-Presidents met with the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission on 17 and 19 January to discuss the holding of the delayed Wolesi Jirga election for Ghazni Province, as well as provincial council, district council and municipal elections. The electoral management bodies expressed their readiness to hold the elections in October 2021, contingent upon security, budget and staffing. Domestic election observation organizations, including the Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan and the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan, expressed scepticism regarding the practicality of holding elections in October. On 20 January, the electoral management bodies held a national election forum on proposed amendments to the election law. On 3 February, the Independent Election Commission published the draft amendments for public comments.

8. The Afghanistan peace negotiations saw continued meetings in Doha of the negotiating teams of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Agreement on a code of conduct was announced on 2 December, and preliminary discussions on agenda topics were held from 5 to 7 December. The code of conduct includes the defining principles for the negotiations, while proposed agenda areas included governance, security, human rights and war victims. The negotiating teams announced a three-week recess on 12 December. The negotiating teams met at the level of the contact groups on 9 and 10 January and at the leadership level on 17 January, after which no further meetings have been held.

9. In Kabul, the peace structures outlined in the political agreement continued to take shape. On 5 December the Leadership Committee of the High Council for National Reconciliation held its first meeting. On 17 December, the High Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Ministry for Peace launched monthly meetings with international and regional partners to discuss the peace process. On 9 January, the Leadership Committee adopted guidelines for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan negotiation team. The High Council formed 13 commissions to work on specific topics concerning the peace process with the involvement of civil society and international observers. On 2 February, the Commission on Women's Affairs held its inaugural meeting. Of the Committee's 46 members, 9 are women.

10. During the three-week recess in the negotiations, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan negotiation team members met with Mr. Ghani and the Leadership Committee of the High Council for National Reconciliation, civil society representatives and other stakeholders. From 16 to 18 December, a Taliban delegation led by the deputy leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, and including the chief negotiator, Sheikh Abdul Hakim, visited Pakistan for meetings with the Prime Minister, Imran Khan, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mahmood Qureshi, and other officials. On 24 and 25 December, the former Vice-President of Indonesia, Jusuf Kalla, visited Kabul, where he met with the Islamic Republic negotiating team for discussions on the peace process with an offer of support from Indonesia, which was reiterated to the Taliban team in Doha on 23 January.

11. During the first two weeks of January 2021, the United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, held various engagements in Doha and Kabul and in the region, calling for tangible progress in the negotiations and a reduction in violence or a ceasefire. On 15 January, the United States announced that the number of its military forces in Afghanistan had been reduced to 2,500. On 22 January, the United States National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, announced that the United States would review its agreement of February 2020 with the Taliban to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments.

12. From 26 January to 1 February, a Taliban delegation visited the Islamic Republic of Iran for meetings with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Javeed Zarif, and the Supreme National Security Council Secretary, Ali Shamkhani. From 1 to 4 February, the Special Envoy of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Afghanistan, Ebrahim Taherian, visited Kabul to discuss the outcomes of the Taliban visit with Afghan officials. On 28 and 29 January, a Taliban delegation visited the Russian Federation for meetings with the Russian Presidential Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov. On 5 February, a Taliban delegation visited Turkmenistan for meetings with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Rashid Meredov, and other officials. The Taliban publicly called for the United States to respect the agreement of February 2020, including the timeline for the withdrawal of international military forces by 1 May 2021, and claimed their commitment to upholding the accord.

13. On 11 February, the General Secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation issued a statement in which it condemned the surge of violence,

including targeted killings, in Afghanistan and urged all parties to concentrate on peace efforts. On 17 and 18 February, the Ministers of Defence of the States members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) met to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, among other matters. In a statement, the Secretary-General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, announced that the Ministers of Defence had decided to defer a final decision on the future of the NATO presence in Afghanistan pending further consultations ahead of the deadline of 1 May 2021. The statement expressed the strong support of NATO for the peace process and its continued commitment to the Resolute Support Mission, with training and funding provided to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

14. Civil society engagement in the peace process continued. From 15 to 20 November, Afghan women leaders met at a peace summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where recommendations were developed for the two negotiating teams. On 1 February, women members of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan negotiation team engaged in a virtual discussion with women representatives from 16 provinces on concerns about the peace negotiations. On 4 February, the Kabul-based non-governmental organization Women and Peace Studies Organization organized a virtual dialogue between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan negotiation team and civil society activists from 34 provinces. Participants expressed concern over continued violence, the loss of momentum in negotiations and the safeguarding of women's rights. On 4 February, the Afghan Women's Network reiterated its call for women's meaningful inclusion in the peace process. From November to January, a series of global open day events were held across the country, supported by UNAMA and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and focused on the inclusion of women in peace negotiations.

15. Women's networks continued to amplify calls for a ceasefire. On 6 February, in a virtual round table on the role of Afghan women in the peace process, a Taliban spokesperson justified the absence of women from the Taliban negotiation team by arguing that women did not fight in the war. Following that debate, on 7 February, 15 civil society organizations and the Afghan media formed a national consortium, the Women Initiative for Peace and Security, aimed at ensuring women's meaningful participation in the peace process.

16. UNAMA continued the implementation of 14 local peace initiatives, with 5 new initiatives launched in December 2020. These initiatives brought together youth representatives in Badakhshan, Baghlan, Balkh, Faryab, Kabul, Nangarhar, Paktiya and Samangan Provinces, women and religious scholars in Balkh, Baghlan and Badakhshan Provinces and youth and tribal leaders in Kandahar Province as part of a long-term initiative involving community leaders from across the southern provinces of the country, focused on local conflict resolution and the peace process.

B. Security

17. The security situation worsened in 2020, during which the United Nations recorded 25,180 security-related incidents, a 10 per cent increase from the 22,832 incidents recorded in 2019. This is the highest on record since the United Nations started documenting incidents in 2007 and despite the start of the Afghanistan peace negotiations. Whereas the number of air strikes declined by 43.6 per cent in 2020 after the conclusion of the agreement between the United States and the Taliban, from 1,663 in 2019 to 938 in 2020, the number of armed clashes increased by 18.4 per cent, from 13,155 in 2019 to 15,581 in 2020. In addition, the number of detonations caused by improvised explosive devices rose by 32 per cent, from 1,949 in 2019 to 2,572 in 2020, and assassinations by 27 per cent, from 782 in 2019 to 993 in 2020, amid rising concerns over the targeted attacks against State officials, civil society activists,

journalists, judicial personnel and ulama, among others. The Taliban captured seven district administrative centres in 2020, including four in November and December; all but two were recaptured by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

18. The United Nations recorded 7,138 security-related incidents between 13 November and 11 February, a 46.7 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2020 and contrasting with traditionally lower numbers during the winter season. Established trends of incident types remained unchanged, with armed clashes accounting for 63.6 per cent of all incidents. Anti-government elements initiated 85.7 per cent of all security-related incidents, including 92.1 per cent of armed clashes. The southern, followed by the eastern and northern regions, recorded the highest number of security incidents. Those regions collectively accounted for 68.9 per cent of all recorded incidents, with Helmand, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Balkh Provinces recording most incidents.

19. High-profile attacks by anti-government elements continued countrywide, especially in the city of Kabul. Between 13 November and 11 February, 35 suicide attacks were documented, compared with 42 during the previous reporting period. Some 32 consisted of suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, primarily targeting bases and checkpoints operated by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. On 20 December, one of those detonated against the convoy of a member of parliament in Kabul, killing 10 civilians (including 3 children) and injuring another 44 (including 3 women and 10 children). In addition, 88 attacks were carried out using magnetic improvised explosive devices, 43 of those in Kabul, including against prominent public figures. Targeted assassinations, often unclaimed, further increased. They included the killings of three male prosecutors on 13 and 22 December, the Kabul Deputy Provincial Governor on 15 December, the Executive Director of the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan on 23 December, two female judges assigned to a Supreme Court directorate on 17 January, the Jamiat-e Eslah Council Chair and religious scholar on 2 February and a commercial court judge on 3 February.

20. No party to the conflict achieved significant territorial gains. The Taliban maintained pressure on key transportation axes and urban centres, including vulnerable provincial capitals such as in Farah, Kunduz, Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces continued to conduct operations to secure key highways and reverse Taliban gains, particularly in the south following recent Taliban offensives on Lashkar Gah and Kandahar cities.

21. The Government continued its security sector reforms through the Future Forces programme. Initiatives include the creation of the Afghan National Special Operations Command, leadership appointments, the dismantlement of the Afghan Local Police and the establishment of future resource requirements. Implementation of the Security Charter under the First Vice-President, Amrullah Saleh, continued in 10 cities. Early initiatives in Kabul, as the priority, included a focus on crime reduction and efforts to increase police presence in the city by handing responsibility to the army for checkpoints surrounding Kabul. Planning continued for the implementation of the Security Charter in all provinces.

22. The number of attacks claimed by or attributed to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) increased during the reporting period to 25, compared with 11 during the prior period. While many incidents occurred in the eastern provinces of Laghman, Kunar and Nangarhar, ISIL-K also continued to target civilians in urban areas using asymmetric tactics. ISIL-K claimed responsibility for two rocket attacks on the city of Kabul, first on 21 November, when 23 rockets hit populated areas, and then on 12 December, when 4 rockets reportedly hit the Hamid Karzai International Airport. The group also claimed attacks against a female

journalist in the city of Jalalabad on 10 December and against medical staff and government officials in Kabul on 22 and 28 December, respectively.

23. The United Nations documented 27 incidents affecting its personnel during the period under review, including 8 cases of intimidation and 12 criminal incidents. A United Nations staff member was abducted and released, and a team of the Afghan Directorate of Protection Services dedicated to the protection of the United Nations in Afghanistan was fired on while protecting a United Nations convoy travelling from Jalalabad to Kabul, resulting in the killing of five personnel of the Directorate of Protection Services.

C. Regional cooperation

24. Efforts to enhance regional cooperation and economic and infrastructure connectivity continued. On 10 November, at the virtual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Mr. Ghani underlined that a strong consensus within the Organization would enable Afghanistan to reach an agreement on the process of making peace. Mr. Ghani also offered to expand his country's cooperation with the Organization's members and observers on counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics. Participants expressed support for the ongoing peace efforts in Afghanistan, noting that increased stability would pave the way for the opening of new transport corridors connecting Central and South Asia.

25. On 19 November the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, visited Kabul, where he met with Mr. Ghani and other senior officials to discuss the Afghan peace process, bilateral relations, refugees, trade and transit and other bilateral matters. Mr. Khan assured them that Pakistan would do everything possible to help to reduce violence in Afghanistan. The two sides concluded an agreement on establishing a shared vision to support peace and stability in both countries and the wider region.

26. Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran continued high-level consultations over a comprehensive partnership agreement. On 15 November, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Mirwais Nab, visited Tehran to conduct the fifth round of negotiations. On 11 December, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Abbas Araghchi, visited Kabul. On 22 December, the National Security Adviser of Afghanistan, Hamdullah Mohib, visited Tehran to discuss the security situation in Afghanistan, as well as the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country.

27. In a virtual ceremony on 10 December, Mr. Ghani and the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, inaugurated the first three sections of the 225-km-long railway which will connect the Iranian city of Khaf in Khorasan Razavi Province with Herat Province in Afghanistan. On the same day, the Afghanistan Railway Authority launched the construction of the final section of railway from Rozanak to Robot Paryan, both in Herat Province.

28. On 8 and 9 January, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, visited Afghanistan, where he met with Mr. Ghani and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Haneef Atmar, to discuss the Afghan peace process and the expansion of bilateral relations. Mr. Meredov stated that Ashgabat was committed to cooperating with Afghanistan on the political, economic and regional connectivity tracks and considered successful Afghan peace talks fundamental to the aforementioned peace process and expansion of bilateral relations. On 14 January, Mr. Ghani and the President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, inaugurated three infrastructure projects intended to boost economic ties between the two countries. They include a 30-km railway link, a power transmission line and the installation of fibre optic communication lines.

29. On 13 January, the National Security Adviser of India, Ajit Doval, visited Kabul and met with Mr. Ghani to discuss counter-terrorism cooperation and efforts to build a regional consensus in support of the Afghan peace process. Mr. Doval offered assurances of his country's commitment to continuing cooperation and support for the Constitution of Afghanistan and democratic achievements.

30. From 19 to 22 January, Mr. Atmar visited Saudi Arabia, where he met with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud; the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Yousef bin Ahmad al-Othaimeen; and the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Nayef Falah al-Hajraf. Interlocutors highlighted the role of Islamic scholars in supporting a political solution to the Afghanistan conflict.

31. From 30 January to 3 February, Mr. Atmar led a high-level delegation to Tashkent for bilateral exchanges. He also participated in a trilateral meeting of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan aimed at strengthening regional connectivity, expanding trade and transit and promoting regional cooperation. Representatives signed a road map for the implementation of a railway project from Mazar-e Sharif through Kabul to Peshawar, Pakistan.

III. Human rights

32. In 2020, civilians continued to bear the brunt of the armed conflict, as documented in the annual report on the protection of civilians in Afghanistan published by UNAMA and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on 23 February. UNAMA documented 8,820 civilian casualties (3,035 killed, including 390 women and 760 children; and 5,785 injured, including 756 women and 1,859 children) in 2020. This represents a 15 per cent decrease compared with 2019, mainly because of fewer civilian casualties from suicide, from complex attacks carried out by anti-government elements and from air strikes by international military forces. However, UNAMA documented increases in civilian casualties from targeted killings by anti-government elements, Taliban pressure-plate improvised explosive devices, and Afghan Air Force air strikes. In the last quarter of 2020, UNAMA documented a 45 per cent increase in civilian casualties compared with the same period in 2019.

33. In 2020, the majority of civilian casualties were caused by anti-government elements (62 per cent), mainly by the Taliban (45 per cent), ISIL-K (8 per cent) and undetermined anti-government elements (9 per cent). A quarter of all civilian casualties were attributed to pro-government forces, mostly caused by Afghan national security forces (22 per cent), followed by international military forces, pro-government armed groups, and undetermined or multiple pro-government forces. Ground engagements were the leading incident type causing the most civilian casualties (36 per cent), followed by suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices (34 per cent), targeted killings (14 per cent) and air strikes (8 per cent).

34. The armed conflict continued to inflict serious casualties on children. During the fourth quarter of 2020, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 837 grave violations against 770 children (526 boys and 244 girls), including 729 child casualties verified in the fourth quarter of 2020 (196 killed, including 67 girls and 129 boys, and 533 maimed, including 172 girls and 361 boys). Anti-government elements were responsible for more child casualties (365) than pro-government forces (227). Ground engagements remained the leading cause of child casualties, with 264 child casualties (70 killed and 194 maimed) accounting for approximately 36 per cent of the overall total.

35. The country task force verified the recruitment and use of 33 children (all boys) by the Taliban (25) and by the Afghan Local Police and a pro-government militia (8) compared with 119 children during the previous quarter. It verified the abduction of 12 children (8 boys and 4 girls) by the Taliban (11) and a pro-government militia (1). Of the 12 children abducted, 1 was killed, 10 were released to safety, and 1 is still in the custody of the pro-government militia. The country task force verified 17 attacks on schools, a decrease from the previous quarter (25), attributing incidents to the Taliban (11), the Afghan National Army (2), undetermined armed opposition groups (2) and crossfire during operations between armed opposition groups and pro-government forces (2). Attacks against hospitals tripled, with 39 verified attacks against hospitals and health-care personnel compared with 13 verified in the previous quarter. Thirty-one were attributed to the Taliban, six to fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, one to pro-government militia, and one to ISIL-K.

36. UNAMA documented 86 cases of violence against women and girls from November 2020 to January 2021, including 10 cases of murder, 14 cases of rape, 22 cases of beating, 11 cases of harassment, 8 cases of forced marriage, 8 cases of forced self-immolation or suicide, 7 cases of child marriage and 6 cases of causing injury or disability.

37. On 25 November, UNAMA hosted seven awareness-raising and outreach meetings to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and to launch the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign. In December, UNAMA held nine additional events in support of the campaign, while UN-Women engaged a total of 22,074 people through support for 52 women's rights activists and for organizations in 27 provinces and also shared 568 radio messages on violence and gender equality. On 7 December, UNAMA and OHCHR released a joint report, *In Search of Justice for Crimes of Violence against Women and Girls*. Examining the response by the justice system and the redress provided to survivors in reported cases of violence, the report authors found that the justice system continues to fail women and girls in many respects.

38. The Government also conducted activities to support the above-mentioned 16 Days of Activism campaign, with reports on violence against women issued by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and, for the first time, the Attorney General's Office. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission released a report which recorded an 11 per cent decrease in the number of cases received compared with the same period in 2019, reflecting challenges in gaining access to justice institutions, a deterioration in the security situation and movement restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

39. On 3 February, UNAMA and OHCHR published their sixth report on torture and ill-treatment in the custody of the Government of Afghanistan. Based on 656 interviews with those deprived of liberty for security and terrorism-related offences, the report highlights that torture allegations are prevalent and that there is widespread disregard for the procedural rights of detainees. While acknowledging efforts made by the Government, in particular the National Directorate for Security and the Anti-Torture Committee of the Attorney General's Office, to eradicate torture, the report stresses the need to enhance capacity, resources and training for law enforcement officials.

40. Human rights defenders and media workers faced increasing security threats. During the reporting period, three human rights defenders were killed in three separate attacks by unknown perpetrators in Kabul and Kapisa Provinces. Another was injured in a Taliban-claimed explosion of an improvised explosive device attached to a police vehicle in Baghlan Province. Eight human rights defenders were

threatened by unknown perpetrators; 13 others were arrested and released after three days by the government in Bamyan Province. One civil society activist was arrested by the Afghan National Police in Kabul and released after one day, allegedly on account of a complaint by community elders.

41. UNAMA recorded three journalists and a media worker killed in three separate attacks, one of which was claimed by ISIL-K, in Nangarhar, Ghazni and Ghor Provinces, and three injured in three separate unclaimed attacks (two in Kabul and one in Faryab) during the reporting period. Thirteen journalists were threatened (of which seven cases were attributed to the Taliban) in eight provinces and two others allegedly intimidated by law enforcement actors. A local radio station in Kunduz city was attacked by a crowd for broadcasting music. Another local radio/television station in Nimruz Province was threatened, allegedly by the Taliban, for perceived biased reporting.

42. In a special report published on 15 February, UNAMA noted an increase in the deliberate killings of human rights defenders, journalists and media workers in Afghanistan in the last quarter of 2020. Mostly unclaimed, those killings have generated a widespread sense of insecurity among civil society actors all over the country, exacerbated by the appearance and circulation on social media of an anonymous “target list” on 4 January. On 1 December, a presidential decree established the Joint Commission for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, chaired by the Second Vice-President.

43. UNAMA continued to support the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission on issues related to peace, human rights and victim-centred justice. On 10 December, UNAMA participated in the Victims National Convention, organized by civil society in Kabul.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

44. The Government of Afghanistan, UNAMA and the World Bank co-led coordination efforts in partnership with donors to identify steps for the implementation of a transparent monitoring and review mechanism to track progress against the principles, outcome indicators and priority action targets outlined in the Afghanistan Partnership Framework. A steering group and a task force were constituted to facilitate and oversee implementation of the Framework, leading up to the annual review at the Senior Officials Meeting in November 2021. The first meeting of the task force was held on 11 February. Discussions commenced between the Ministry of Finance, UNAMA and UNDP on a results framework and monitoring system for the second version of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework.

45. Work intensified towards meeting the Afghanistan Partnership Framework benchmarks with strengthened conditionality on corruption prosecution. In late November, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre adopted an action plan to accelerate prosecutions. From 1 December to 14 February, 9 cases were processed at trial and 10 cases at the appeals level. On 6 February, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre Primary Court convicted three members of the Meshrano Jirga (upper house of parliament) on allegations of corruption and sentenced each to 10 years and 1 month imprisonment and a cash fine. On 2 January, a special panel at the Supreme Court convicted the former Minister of Mines and Petroleum, Wahidullah Shahrani, on charges of misuse of authority, to one year and one month of imprisonment and restitution of funds.

46. In collaboration with international partners, UNAMA provided technical support for developing the draft amendments to the Law on the Structure and Authority of the Attorney General's Office, aiming to strengthen its independence and reinforce merit-based elements in prosecutorial appointments. On 12 November, the President appointed five commissioners of the new Anti-Corruption Commission, which made the Commission operational. The Commission began integrating into its structure the staff and resources of existing institutions, including the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, the Special Anti-Corruption Secretariat and the Asset Registration and Verification Agency. Parliamentary approval of the Anti-Corruption Law continued to be pending, but the Law remained in force as a presidential legislative decree.

47. The Government continued to implement measures to strengthen the capacity of subnational institutions and to improve subnational governance. During the reporting period, Badakhshan, Balkh, Jalalabad, Kunduz and Uruzgan Provinces started to implement the presidential decree issued on 4 October requiring district governors to undergo a performance evaluation. On 1 February, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance submitted the draft local administration law for Cabinet deliberations; it clarifies the relationships between institutions at the subnational level and addresses subnational planning and budgeting.

48. On 10 January, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission completed the 2020 countrywide annual mass recruitment examinations for 12,291 vacant civil service positions in all 34 provinces. It also completed the recruitment process for 495 senior positions to replace acting staff, with women constituting about 30 per cent of those recruited. On 13 January, the Commission launched its new civil servant performance appraisal system, which includes provisions to prevent harassment in the workplace and to provide citizens access to government information.

49. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have an impact on the lives of Afghans, the United Nations developed a "One United Nations" plan for COVID-19 vaccination support and established an inter-agency task force to identify areas of support for the planning and implementation of the Government's vaccination programme.

50. Ahead of a formal launch on 1 February of the European Union-United Nations Spotlight Initiative for Afghanistan programme, a multi-year partnership to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030, the European Union, the United Nations and the Government of Afghanistan co-hosted the first stakeholders meeting attended by donor, government and civil society representatives. The partner ministries (women's affairs, education, health, and hajj and religious affairs) and implementing United Nations entities (UN-Women, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund and UNDP) presented the programme of work to address gender-based violence in Afghanistan through a multisectoral approach.

V. Humanitarian assistance

51. Humanitarian needs continued to rise owing to ongoing violence, natural disasters and heightened levels of food insecurity, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 18.4 million people, or almost half the population, a record number, need humanitarian assistance in 2021, up from 9.4 million at the beginning of 2020. From 5 to 11 December, the Acting Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator visited Kabul and Kandahar to draw attention to the dramatically escalating needs.

52. As at 13 February, more than 55,000 people across Afghanistan were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19, but the actual number was believed to be much higher. 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 contract the virus.

53. Since the beginning of the pandemic in Afghanistan in March 2020, humanitarian aid workers have reached more than 4.7 million people with COVID-19-specific assistance. This includes supporting the establishment of 15 laboratories; deploying 34,000 polio surveillance volunteers to assist with case identification and contact tracing; supplying more than 40 million units of protective equipment to health providers and front-line aid workers nationwide; training more than 22,000 health-care workers in infection prevention and control; screening more than 4.6 million people at points of entry; providing water and sanitation assistance to almost 3.3 million people; and reaching more than 4.7 million people with COVID-19 awareness-raising activities.

54. Between 15 November and 13 February, health partners provided medical assistance to over 34,500 people, 52 per cent of whom were women and girls. The number of trauma cases in the reporting period was almost 12 per cent higher than the same period in 2020.

55. In 2020, 56 polio cases were confirmed, compared with 29 cases in 2019. Most of the cases occurred in areas where house-to-house vaccination campaigns had been banned since May 2018 by anti-government elements. Polio has now spread to 14 provinces, indicating declining immunity among people. In addition to wild polioviruses, Afghanistan has also experienced an outbreak of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 following a spillover from an outbreak in Pakistan, resulting in 303 confirmed vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 cases in 2020.

56. Afghanistan is facing an acute food insecurity crisis driven by poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic. By March 2021, 16.9 million people are expected to be at “crisis” and “emergency” levels of food insecurity, including 5.5 million people at “emergency” levels – the second highest in the world. Almost one in two children under 5 will face acute malnutrition in 2021. Between 1 November and 31 January, the United Nations and its partners provided more than 15,600 tons of food to nearly 3.4 million food-insecure people and supported more than 954,000 shock-affected people with livelihood assistance. The already dire situation of food insecurity could further deteriorate because of the high likelihood of low rainfall and high temperatures related to the La Niña weather event affecting the country.

57. The year 2020 recorded the highest annual number of undocumented returnees coming home to Afghanistan, with 865,793 crossing the country’s borders. The vast majority (859,092) returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran, driven by the COVID-19 outbreak and related restrictions, limited access to health care and the associated deteriorating economic circumstances. An additional 2,030 refugees returned from neighbouring countries in 2020. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees visited Afghanistan from 14 to 18 November, calling for international solidarity as well as support for Afghanistan and refugee-hosting countries in the region. Between 15 November and 4 February, 188,193 undocumented Afghans returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. A total of 11,258 Afghans were deported from Turkey in 2020.

58. In 2020, 400,593 people were internally displaced by conflict. Between 15 November and 13 February, 24,000 people were newly internally displaced by conflict. Between November and mid-February, the United Nations and partners provided emergency shelter, household items, winterization assistance and related

cash support to more than 311,000 vulnerable people affected by the harsh climate, conflict and natural disasters.

59. From November to February, the Mine Action Service and partners cleared 1.74 km² of land contaminated by high-impact explosives, safely removing over 450 items of explosive ordnance, benefiting 32 communities. In addition, 150,795 people in Afghanistan received explosive ordnance risk education during the reporting period.

60. Widespread insecurity continued to present challenges for humanitarian access, with more than 1,000 incidents of interference reported by the end of 2020 – a 146 per cent increase compared with 2019. These incidents regularly delayed assistance and prolonged the suffering of vulnerable people. Since 1 January 2021, humanitarian workers have reported 210 access-related incidents, a 165 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2020. Between 12 November and 13 February, 9 aid workers were killed, 12 injured and 21 abducted.

61. The international air bridge established by the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service in April 2020 owing to the stoppage of international flights into Afghanistan because of COVID-19 ended operations on 31 December after transporting 1,097 passengers. The Service continues its domestic flights to 21 destinations across Afghanistan.

62. The 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan was only 49 per cent funded at the end of 2020, leaving a \$573 million shortfall and significant unmet needs. By the end of the year, humanitarian organizations had reached almost 11.8 million people with some form of humanitarian assistance across all 401 districts, against a target of 11.1 million people. This was partly achieved through higher-reach, lower-cost emergency activities, such as COVID-19 risk communication campaigns, and many people were not able to receive a comprehensive aid package owing to underfunding. Under the 2021 revision to the multi-year Plan, \$1.3 billion is requested to provide humanitarian assistance to 15.7 million Afghans; as at 14 February, the Plan was 3 per cent funded.

VI. Counter-narcotics

63. From 15 November to 15 February, law enforcement authorities in Afghanistan conducted a total of 971 counter-narcotics operations. Those operations led to seizures of 632 kg of heroin, 1,622 kg of opium, 201,935 kg of hashish and cannabis, 487 kg of methamphetamine, 180 kg of poppy seeds, 405 kg of ammonium chloride and 15 kg of methylenedioxymethamphetamine. The seizures resulted in the arrest of 1,156 suspects and the confiscation of 150 vehicles and 74 weapons. On 18 December, senior officials of the Counter-Narcotics Police and the Afghan Border Force inaugurated the Airport Interdiction Unit at Kandahar airport. The newly established unit includes four female officers.

64. As part of ongoing efforts to provide farmers with licit livelihoods to replace opium cultivation, the United Nations delivered alternative development activities that resulted in 3,895 farmers receiving extension services; six farmers' associations established; 2,495 women trained in animal husbandry and dairy processing; 1,700 women trained in poultry farm management; 280 farmers trained in pest and post-harvest crop management; two irrigation structures constructed in Jawzjan and Badakhshan Provinces; 20 women trained in small businesses development; and 240 women receiving vocational training.

VII. Mission support

65. As at 31 December, vacancy rates in UNAMA were at 14 per cent for international staff, 19 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 8 per cent for National Professional Officers and 3 per cent for national staff compared with approved rates of 8 per cent, 7 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, 14 per cent for National Professional Officers and 9 per cent for national staff.

66. While sustaining the delivery of critical programmes and activities in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, alternate work arrangements remained in place. UNAMA and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes decided not to increase the numbers of international personnel present at the duty station and of national staff reporting to work, with numbers to be reviewed regularly, taking into account potential changes in the COVID-19 caseload.

VIII. Observations

67. Despite slower progress in the recent period, I am encouraged by the public commitment reiterated by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban to achieving a peaceful solution. It is important to safeguard that commitment. I call upon both sides to continue discussions towards establishing a substantive agenda for the Afghanistan peace negotiations. I also urge both parties to refrain from any further military escalation, which would cause additional human suffering and risk public trust in the peace process. Both sides, but especially the Taliban, must heed the call of the Afghan people for an immediate cessation of violence, leading to a just, sustainable, and inclusive peace.

68. The sustained support of the international community, particularly the countries of the region, remains essential in creating a conducive environment for the Afghanistan peace negotiations. I welcome increased diplomatic engagement by Member States in support of the peace process, and their interest in leveraging multilateral forums to facilitate common messaging. The United Nations will remain actively engaged in existing multilateral efforts towards peace and stands ready to support proposed initiatives at the request of the Afghan parties.

69. All Afghan constituencies, including women, youth, minorities, victims of war and displaced persons, must have an opportunity to participate in the peace process. I welcome the establishment by the High Council for National Reconciliation of several commissions within its structure and its expanded outreach to diverse elements of Afghan society. More work must be done to connect grass-roots efforts with high-level decision-making to ensure that any eventual peace agreement will be accepted by all communities. The United Nations will continue its work to ensure that the voices of all relevant constituencies, including marginalized groups, are heard.

70. The full, equal and substantive participation of women at all levels will remain critical to ensuring the success of the peace process. However, women remain underrepresented in key bodies, including both negotiating teams, as well as the High Council for National Reconciliation. I strongly urge the Government to increase women's participation in all peace structures to ensure that their views are broadly represented. I similarly call upon the Taliban to include women meaningfully in their peace structures so that their interests and concerns are reflected at the negotiating table.

71. The role of civil society and the media is becoming ever more critical as the peace process evolves. I am outraged by the recent spate of targeted killings in Afghanistan. Such attacks are illegal and aimed at creating an atmosphere of fear. They also risk further constraining the civic space when debate and dialogue are most needed. I call upon all parties to cease such attacks immediately. I urge the Government to take steps to combat impunity for the perpetrators of such violence and to improve protections so that civil society actors are able to perform their roles safely and without fear. The United Nations stands in solidarity with members of the media sector, the non-governmental sphere, the public sector and the legal profession, among others, as they carry out their vital work in support of peace.

72. The worsening security situation in Afghanistan is of deep concern. Civilians continue to bear the brunt of the conflict. I regret that the peace process has not yet improved conditions for Afghan civilians, with UNAMA documenting an increase in civilian casualties since the start of the Afghanistan peace negotiations. I urge both parties to refrain from further military escalation and to end the violence, in order to save lives and to protect public confidence. I call upon the Taliban to cease the use of improvised landmines, which have caused an increased number of civilian casualties. I also call upon the Government of Afghanistan to redouble efforts to prevent and mitigate civilian casualties from indirect fire and air strikes; to improve the documentation of civilian casualties; and to conduct investigations with a view to ensuring accountability.

73. I am deeply disturbed by the allegations of torture and ill-treatment in Afghan detention facilities as documented by UNAMA and OHCHR. Torture is a grave affront to human dignity and has lasting consequences for its victims and their families. It exacerbates community tensions and creates new grievances, threatening the prospects for genuine reconciliation. I urge the Government to take concrete steps to eradicate the practice of torture, including by reforming the questioning techniques of law enforcement officers, ensuring respect for the procedural rights of detainees and prosecuting perpetrators of torture and ill-treatment. I also call upon the Government to undertake effective investigations into allegations of enforced disappearances, to determine the fate and whereabouts of those forcibly disappeared and to hold those responsible accountable.

74. Women and children continue to face extremely high levels of violence. Access to justice remains far too difficult for victims of gender-based violence. Lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened the risk of violence faced by women and children and made it still more difficult for victims to report violence to government authorities. I call upon the Government to strengthen the implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law, including by providing additional resources and training for police officers, prosecutors and legal aid networks and by implementing a functioning case management system for categorizing and tracking such crimes. The Government must do more to ensure that allegations of violence against women and girls are actively investigated and prosecuted.

75. I am distressed by the humanitarian needs in Afghanistan, which have reached a record high. The extremely high number of people facing “crisis” or “emergency” levels of food insecurity in Afghanistan is particularly troubling. I implore donors to step up and generously fund the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan so that Afghanistan and its humanitarian partners can urgently scale up life-saving activities. Noting the alarming increase in interference with humanitarian activities in 2020, I call upon all parties to refrain from attacks against humanitarian workers and facilities and to ensure safe and unimpeded access for humanitarian activities at all times.

76. Continued progress against corruption will be critical in building public trust in State institutions and ensuring the sustainable support of donors. I welcome the

important steps towards operationalizing the Anti-Corruption Commission, whose work could be further enhanced by adopting the pending anti-corruption legislation. The action plan by the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre to accelerate prosecution and the increase in the Centre's caseload over the last quarter of 2020 are encouraging signs.

77. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose a serious threat to the health, livelihoods and welfare of the Afghan people, the recent decline in the reported caseload notwithstanding. Continued vigilance will be needed to limit the transmission in Afghanistan of the virus responsible for COVID-19. Over the longer term, the country's economic recovery from the pandemic will depend on sustained financial, technical and in-kind assistance from the international community. I urge Member States to continue their support to the health and socioeconomic response of Afghanistan throughout the recovery process, in order to avert the worst effects of the pandemic while preparing the ground for a future of sustainable development beyond COVID-19.

78. 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.
