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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 [2489 \(2019\)](#), 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 his previous report, dated 3 September 2019 ([A/74/348-S/2019/703](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. Presidential elections were at the forefront of political developments in Afghanistan during the reporting period, as the first contest for the executive branch was held since the start of the Transformation Decade (2015–2024). Turnout for the elections on 28 September 2019 was lower than in the previous presidential and parliamentary elections, in 2014 and 2018, respectively. The outcome of the election was still pending at the time of writing the present report. The decision by the United States of America to halt talks with the Taliban, announced on 7 September, was followed by a series of diplomatic engagements by stakeholders seeking to encourage a peace process. The security situation remained volatile, with a high number of security incidents, particularly in the southern, eastern and northern regions. From 1 July to 30 September 2019, the number of civilian casualties was the highest recorded in a single quarter since systematic documentation began in 2009. Discussions continued between the Government of Afghanistan and key donors on the implementation of the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework. The humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate, with 9.38 million people estimated to be in need in 2020, compared with 6.3 million in 2019.



A. Political developments

4. In preparation for the presidential elections, the Independent Election Commission recruited and trained over 200,000 polling staff for assignment at the 5,373 planned polling centres. Around 125,000 individuals, 37 per cent of whom were women, were accredited by 131 entities to monitor the process on election day, including candidate agents, political party monitors, domestic observers, national and international media representatives and special guests. Afghan National Defence and Security Forces provided security and logistical support, assisted by the Resolute Support Mission of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The elections were conducted under a new legal framework, which accommodated political demands and reforms based on lessons learned from the 2018 parliamentary election, including demands for the enhanced use of technology.

5. The official campaign period ended on 25 September, in accordance with electoral law. Some presidential candidates complained of an uneven playing field and called for the election to be delayed, citing loss of campaign time amid uncertainty surrounding the peace process. Four of the 18 presidential candidates, namely, Zalmay Rassoul, Shaida Mohammad Abdali, Haji Mohammad Ibrahim Alokozay and Noor ul-Haq Ulumi, officially withdrew from the process and endorsed the candidacy of President Ashraf Ghani. Although he did not officially withdraw his candidacy, Hanif Atmar announced that he would suspend his participation in the election. He did not endorse an alternative candidate.

6. The Taliban issued several statements ahead of the elections to discourage citizens from going to the polls. Two days before election day, the Taliban's Military Commission called on Afghans to boycott the presidential elections and stated its intention to target the associated "offices and centres". Taliban fighters were instructed to make use of "everything at their disposal" for this purpose.

7. Voting on 28 September took place at 4,678 polling centres across most of the country, with the remainder of the centres closed primarily due to insecurity. Technical issues reported on election day included incomplete or incorrect voter lists and non-functioning biometric devices. Nine out of 34 provinces faced severe if not total telecommunications outages due to Taliban attacks. On 3 October, the Independent Election Commission announced a provisional voter turnout of 2.69 million people, out of 9.6 million who had registered. The turnout figure was based on rough estimates gathered through the Commission's provincial offices.

8. The immediate post-election environment was marked by initial claims of victory, conflicting views on the validity of biometric versus non-biometric votes and demands for an early release of election results. On 30 September, Chief Executive Abdullah in a press conference stated that the results would be announced by the Independent Election Commission but claimed to have received "the most votes". On 1 October, President Ghani's first Vice Presidential running mate, Amrullah Saleh, declared that his team's figures indicated a first-round "landslide victory".

9. On 2 October, the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan, a non-governmental organization, called on the Independent Election Commission to tabulate and announce results in a transparent, impartial and independent manner. It stressed the need for timely and accurate information on the electoral process and called on the Electoral Complaints Commission to address electoral complaints in a timely manner in line with the legal framework.

10. In addition to providing technical electoral support to the Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continued its engagement around elections with

national and international partners, reiterating the call for transparency, impartiality and independence in the processing of results, accurate and timely information to the parties and voters and for the candidates to continue to engage in a constructive manner. UNAMA also called on the parties to take full responsibility for the process, including by addressing any complaints through the appropriate channels and procedures.

11. In the weeks that followed the election, sensitive electoral materials were retrieved and results forms were tallied, in the presence of candidate agents and observers. The Electoral Complaints Commission received a total of 4,528 complaints relating to the polling and counting processes, primarily linked to voter lists and malfunctioning biometric devices.

12. Political reactions and manoeuvring regarding biometric voter verification remained at the centre of the post-electoral controversy. Although seen by many candidates and political parties at the outset of the process as the technology solution to prevent fraud, the actual implementation of the devices and software applications faced challenges. On 11 October, the Council of Presidential Candidates, an informal grouping of several presidential candidates, warned it would not accept the outcome of the elections if non-biometrically verified votes were considered valid. The Council reaffirmed that position in a statement on 17 November. At least eight electoral teams announced that they would not accept votes cast without biometric verification. Chief Executive Abdullah supported that stance, stressing that only biometrically verified votes should be counted. On 13 October, three smaller political parties demanded that non-biometrically verified votes also be counted.

13. On 11 November, several presidential candidates held separate press conferences to announce their positions regarding the presidential election. Presidential candidate Gulbuddin Hekmatyar alleged widespread electoral fraud, specifically referring to non-biometrically backed votes, and called for the establishment of an impartial commission or court to investigate electoral crimes and fraud. Presidential candidate Rahmatullah Nabil claimed similar large-scale fraud. Both raised concerns about missing biometric devices, alleging foul play.

14. After postponing the announcement of preliminary results from 19 October to 14 November, the Independent Election Commission had not announced another date. At a press conference on 16 November, the Commission announced the re-start of the audit and recount process – which had been halted the previous week owing to technical issues raised by several candidates – and that preliminary results would be made public once the process was complete. As at 17 November, the audit and recount process had re-started in parts of the country and was still ongoing. The Commission stated that the resumption had followed technical discussions with the presidential candidates' teams, in which their concerns had been addressed. Chief Executive Abdullah and the Council of Presidential Candidates, however, objected once again to the audit and recount process. The former repeated accusations about alleged fraud.

15. On 7 September, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, called off peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban. The draft agreement had reportedly covered the withdrawal of foreign troops and counterterrorism assurances and had been expected to pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations and a ceasefire. Since then, the Taliban restated its position that the conclusion of the draft agreement with the United States would be required before starting intra-Afghan negotiations. During September and October, Taliban delegations travelled to Moscow, Teheran, Beijing and Pakistan to discuss peace efforts.

16. On 14 September, a presidential spokesperson stated that the Government of Afghanistan would prioritize the conduct of a timely election, noting that “the key to the legitimacy of peace is in holding the [presidential] election”. Addressing the

General Assembly on 30 September, the National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib, recalled the demand by the Afghan people for a ceasefire, talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban and the preservation of the Islamic Republic as the foundation of the State.

17. International peace efforts focused on reviving the peace process. Special envoys and representatives of France, Germany, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States, as well as the European Union the United Nations, met in Brussels on 22 October to discuss ways to support the Afghan peace process. In a joint statement, they reaffirmed that a sustainable peace could only be achieved through a negotiated and inclusive political settlement, urged all parties immediately to reduce violence and civilian casualties and called on Afghan leaders to form an inclusive negotiating team for intra-Afghan negotiations. In Brussels on 21 October, the United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, briefed NATO.

18. On 25 October, the special representatives for Afghanistan of China, the Russian Federation and the United States met in Moscow for consultations, along with Pakistan, on the peace process in Afghanistan. In a joint communiqué, the participants stated their support for the peace process and called for a reduction of violence. They welcomed the proposal by China to host the next intra-Afghan dialogue, in Beijing.

19. Mr. Khalilzad continued his engagement with Afghan and regional stakeholders. This included visits to Pakistan from 2 to 4 October and from 28 to 29 October and to Kabul from 26 to 28 October and from 29 October to 1 November. In a statement, Mr. Khalilzad underscored the support of the United States for a political settlement to the conflict and stressed that a reduction in violence was necessary for lasting peace. From 2 to 4 November, the Special Envoy of Germany for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Markus Potzel, visited Afghanistan to discuss elections, development assistance and plans for possible intra-Afghan negotiations.

20. The media circulation of an internal seven-point peace plan by the Government created public debate. The plan foresaw intra-Afghan dialogue and peace negotiations with the Taliban. The National Security Adviser, Mr. Mohib, clarified that a month-long ceasefire would be required before the start of such talks. On 12 November, President Ghani announced that the Government of Afghanistan planned conditionally to release three prisoners from the Haqqani Network, “as a gesture towards peace and reconciliation”. On 19 November, in a statement, the United States welcomed the release of two professors from the American University of Afghanistan, one American and one Australian, who had been held by the Taliban since they were abducted in August 2016. It also welcomed “the Taliban’s impending release of 10 Afghan prisoners”. On the same day, a Taliban spokesperson welcomed the “positive step taken” in regards to the release of the three Haqqani Network prisoners and the “successful execution” of the release of the professors, along with 10 Afghan soldiers, noting that “these actions are a step forward in goodwill and confidence-building measures that can aid the peace process.”

21. UNAMA continued its engagement with national, regional and international partners to advocate for a reduction in violence and an end to civilian casualties to create a conducive environment for peace. On 24 September, my Special Representative for Afghanistan met in Doha with representatives of the Taliban to discuss the peace process, the protection of civilians and humanitarian access. UNAMA also sustained its efforts in support of local conflict resolution and reconciliation with communities and subnational government authorities. During the reporting period, UNAMA worked on five new and six ongoing local peace initiatives, one of which was concluded. The aim was to strengthen local conflict resolution mechanisms, support sustainable local peacebuilding and provide

discussion platforms for key issues, such as peace and elections, particularly for rural women and young people.

22. National and international efforts continued to support Afghan women in their efforts to achieve meaningful participation in the peace process. For example, from 29 August to 1 September, a high-level negotiations workshop for Afghan women was held in Istanbul to help prepare Afghan women from the political sector, civil society and academia for their potential roles in the peace process. On 23 October, UNAMA opened the nationwide Global Open Day on Women, Peace and Security with a symposium in Kabul focusing on the meaningful participation of women in peace efforts. This was the first in a series of events countrywide for hundreds of women, including representatives from Government offices, religious institutions, academia and civil society. On 6 November, UNAMA engaged with women from Koh-e Safi district of Parwan Province, aimed at hearing rural women's views on elections, peace, girls' education and subnational governance. In Khost Province, UNAMA supported women from remote districts to participate in local peace and mediation efforts and engaged with radio stations to promulgate the role of women in local peace efforts. On 18 November, Afghanistan and the United Kingdom launched the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan in New York. The Group aims to strengthen women's participation in public life and leadership roles, to promote and protect the rights of women and to incorporate women's voices in the peace and security agenda.

23. Following the resignation of Salahuddin Rabbani on 23 October, the Government announced the appointment of Deputy Minister Idrees Zaman as the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs.

B. Security

24. The security situation remained volatile, with a high number of security incidents. In total, between 9 August and 7 November 2019, UNAMA recorded 6,654 security-related incidents, a 13 per cent increase compared with the same period in the previous year. The highest number of incidents occurred in the southern region, followed by eastern and south-eastern regions, with those three regions accounting for 60 per cent of all incidents. The most active areas of conflict were Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar Provinces. After a decrease in fighting during the Eid-al-Adha holiday in mid-August, the conflict intensified in September. A total of 2,780 security incidents were recorded in September, the highest number of attacks in one month so far in 2019, and a 44 per cent increase compared with September 2018.

25. Established trends remain unchanged, with 3,666 armed clashes accounting for 55 per cent of all incidents, representing a three per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018. The use of improvised explosive devices remained the second highest type of incidents, with a 9 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018, while suicide attacks increased by 24 per cent. The 488 air strikes by Afghan and international military air forces during the reporting period represented a 32 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018. Helmand and Ghazni Provinces alone accounted for 40 per cent of air strikes.

26. On Election Day, the United Nations recorded 643 security-related incidents, the highest such figure on an election day since 2004. They included 113 incidents relating to improvised explosive devices and 126 standoff attacks. Incident patterns revealed a high tempo of small-scale attacks to prevent or disrupt the electoral process, with Kunduz and Kabul City recording most incidents. In total, 77 attacks were directed against polling stations, including 35 schools.

27. Despite the high tempo of the conflict, neither pro-government forces nor anti-government elements achieved significant territorial gains during the reporting

period. The Taliban maintained pressure on urban areas, mostly in the north-east and launched two offensives against the provincial capitals of Baghlan and Kunduz in early September. The Taliban captured Anar Darah District Administrative Centre in Farah Province and temporarily overtook seven other district administrative centres in Takhar (Darqad, Chah Ab and Khwaja Ghar), Kunduz (Dasht-e Archi, Qal'ah-ye Zal and Khanabad) and Baghlan Provinces (Guzargah-e Nur). During the presidential election, the Taliban overran three district administrative centres in Takhar Province (Khwaja Ghar, Baharak and Chah Ab) as well as Qush Tepah District in Jowzjan Province.

28. In response, Afghan National Defence and Security Forces launched large-scale operations to decrease Taliban pressure on the main roads and highways, for example, in the southern part of Zabul Province and in the north-eastern provinces. Afghan forces recaptured district administrative centres in Yamgan, Warduj and Kiran-wa-Munjan in Badakhshan Province, Dahana ye-Ghori in Baghlan Province and Jaghatu in Ghazni Province, some of which had been under Taliban control for three to four years.

29. High-profile attacks by anti-government elements increased, with 31 suicide attacks during the reporting period, compared with 25 in the same period in 2018. Of those attacks, 17 were reported in September, many targeting Afghan National Defence and Security Forces installations, as well as Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and International Military convoys. On 2 September, the Taliban attacked for the second time this year and for the fifth time overall the “green village” compound in Kabul. On 5 September, a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device detonated at an Afghan National Defence and Security Forces checkpoint in Kabul near the United States Embassy and the headquarters of the NATO Resolute Support Mission. The Taliban claimed responsibility for suicide attacks targeting an elections rally in Parwan Province by President Ghani and in Kabul, both on 17 September.

30. Afghan and international military forces maintained pressure on Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant–Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) strongholds in Eastern Afghanistan, and the movement was involved in continued clashes with the Taliban in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces. During the reporting period, 194 incidents were attributed to ISIL-KP, compared with 94 in the same period in 2018. ISIL-KP claimed only one attack during the reporting period, the 17 August attack against a Shia wedding celebration in Kabul City, compared with nine attacks claimed in the same period in 2018. While no anti-government element had claimed responsibility for the attack inside the mosque in Nangarhar Province on 18 October, ISIL-KP was also suspected of having been responsible for that attack. On 28 October, in Herat City, an ISIL-KP suicide bomber suspected of being en route to a Shia mosque prematurely detonated his explosive devices after being detected by Afghan security forces at a checkpoint.

31. On 29 October, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement objecting to “the recent rocket firing of Pakistani Military” across the border into Kunar Province. In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan issued a statement on 30 October saying that the Afghan military had resorted to “unprovoked mortar and heavy weapon firing” on Pakistani military posts.

32. There were four incidents involving United Nations personnel, including two criminal-related incidents, one of intimidation and one relating to small arms fire on United Nations vehicles. A United Nations staff member was abducted and later released.

C. Regional cooperation

33. Afghanistan continued its engagement with countries in the region through multilateral forums. On 7 September, Afghanistan participated in the third Afghanistan-China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, in Islamabad. In their joint statement, the three countries agreed to continue to build political mutual trust and support reconciliation efforts. They also agreed to support other key areas of trilateral cooperation, including regional peace and stability, development cooperation and connectivity, security cooperation and counter-terrorism, as well as to explore "China-Afghanistan-Pakistan plus" cooperation. The meeting was followed in October by a joint training for diplomats from the three countries, in Pakistan. On 27 September, a meeting of senior officials of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process was held in New York, focusing on the implementation of the framework's confidence-building measures. On 8 and 9 November, the Council of Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization met in Turkey. In its communiqué, it reaffirmed Member States' commitment to promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan in support of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process and encouraged member States to contribute to the Organization's Fund for Afghanistan.

34. On 18 September, Afghanistan and Pakistan initiated around-the-clock operations at the Torkham border crossing. In the following two weeks, trade through Torkham increased by 50 per cent. The border crossing facilitates the crossing of some 10,000 people per day. Previously, it had been operational for 12 hours a day, creating delays for traders and civilians.

35. UNAMA advocated with the Government of Afghanistan, the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan and regional countries to facilitate exports from Afghanistan and enhance regional trade connectivity, which received a further boost with the inauguration of a freight train route from Afghanistan to China, in cooperation with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The first train departed on 4 September.

36. On 9 October, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), organized a round table in Kazakhstan on "Afghanistan and the OSCE: Fostering Opportunities for Partnership and Cooperation". Participants in the event noted the importance of developing synergies between key international and regional organizations involved in assisting Afghanistan, particularly through expanded partnerships between OSCE and the United Nations, and with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It was further noted that there was a need for broader regional engagement in support of peace, stability and economic development in Afghanistan.

37. At the beginning of November, Afghanistan participated as an observer in the 18th meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Heads of Governments, in Uzbekistan. In total, 14 documents were adopted, including the decision to sign a road map for further action by the Organization's Afghanistan Contact Group. Chief Executive Abdullah stressed the need for further cooperation among the countries to boost peace and stability in Afghanistan and to improve regional connectivity.

38. On 11 November, a delegation from Pakistan led by Inter-Service Intelligence Chief Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed and Foreign Secretary Sohail Mahmood met with the National Security Adviser, Mr. Mohib, in Kabul on forming a technical committee to solve issues between the two countries, including continued meetings under the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity.

III. Human rights

39. On 17 October, UNAMA released its third quarterly update on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.¹ In it, the Mission documented 8,239 civilian casualties, including 2,563 deaths and 5,676 injured, which was similar to the figures for the same period in 2018. Of the civilian casualties, 41 per cent were women or children. From 1 July to 30 September, UNAMA recorded the highest number of civilian casualties in a single quarter since it began systematic documentation in 2009, with July marking the highest number of civilian casualties recorded in a single month. The high number of civilian casualties was mainly due to attacks involving suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices from anti-government elements, which continued to cause most civilian casualties. The Mission recorded a continued increase in civilian casualties from aerial and search operations carried out by pro-government Afghan forces. In October, UNAMA documented around half the number of civilian casualties it had recorded in September.

40. UNAMA attributed 62 per cent of civilian casualties to anti-government elements (46 per cent to the Taliban, 12 per cent to ISIL-KP and the remaining civilian casualties to undetermined anti-government elements). It also attributed 28 per cent to pro-government Forces (15 per cent to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, 8 per cent to international military forces, 3 per cent to multiple or undetermined pro-government forces and 2 per cent to pro-government armed groups). The remaining civilian casualties resulted from incidents that could not be attributed to either anti-government elements or pro-government forces, including civilian casualties caused by crossfire between the parties to the conflict.

41. The combined use of suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices was the leading cause of civilian casualties, responsible for 42 per cent of all civilians killed and injured, followed by ground (29 per cent) and aerial (11 per cent) operations. From 1 July to 30 September, UNAMA documented a 72 per cent increase in civilian casualties from suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices compared with the same period in 2018. Aerial operations remained the leading cause of civilian deaths (23 per cent) in that same period. UNAMA documented the highest number of civilian casualties recorded from both aerial and search operations in the first nine months of any year since UNAMA began systematic documentation, in 2009.

42. Election-related violence, mainly coming from the Taliban's deliberate campaign of violence and intimidation to disrupt the presidential election in Afghanistan, severely affected civilians. UNAMA documented that attacks between 8 June and 30 September targeting the electoral process had caused 458 civilian casualties (85 killed, 373 injured), 277 of which (28 killed, 249 injured) were on the day of the election itself. Of all the civilian casualties on election day, 103 (more than one third) were children. UNAMA also documented a pattern of abductions, threats, intimidation and harassment by the Taliban against civilians. Overall civilian casualties on election day were lower than on the day of the 2018 parliamentary election, but higher than each of the election days of the two rounds of the 2014 presidential election.

43. The conflict in Afghanistan remained the world's deadliest for children. More than 2,400 children were killed or injured in the first nine months of 2019, an 11 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018. From 1 July to 30 September, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on violations against children in armed conflict verified 368 incidents resulting in 1,220 child casualties (867 boys, 350 girls, 3 sex unknown), including 291 children killed and 929 children maimed.

¹ Available at https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_-_3rd_quarter_update_2019.pdf.

That is more than double the number of child casualties recorded in the previous quarter. The growth was due primarily to a surge of suicide and complex attacks by the Taliban, the continuing high rate of aerial attacks and the attacks by the Taliban during the presidential elections. Some 729 child casualties were attributed to armed opposition groups, mainly the Taliban (585) and ISIL-KP (123), while 315 child casualties were attributed to pro-government forces. The United Nations also reported 330 child casualties (91 deaths and 239 injured) resulting from explosive remnants of war in the first nine months of 2019, constituting 77 per cent of overall civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war. In my fourth report on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan ([S/2019/727](#)), released on 2 October, I expressed concern that more than 14,000 grave violations against children had been verified between January 2015 and December 2018, and that more than 12,500 children had been killed or maimed in the same period.

44. Between 1 July and 30 September, the task force verified 25 incidents affecting education and education-related personnel. This was a significant increase compared with the seven incidents in the previous quarter, and was primarily due to attacks on education facilities on election day. Of the 25 incidents, 21 were attributed to the Taliban, 2 to ISIL-KP, 1 to international military forces and 1 to the National Directorate of Security. Four attacks deliberately targeted schools, while 12 indiscriminate attacks caused damage to schools. There were two cases of incidental damage to schools, six incidents involving threats against teachers and students and two cases where educational personnel were abducted. The task force also verified the use of a school for military purposes by the Afghan National Army.

45. The task force verified 26 incidents relating to health care and related personnel, which was more than double the number of such incidents in the previous quarter. In total, 20 of the incidents were attributed to the Taliban, 2 to the National Directorate of Security, 2 to the Afghan National Army, 1 to ISIL-KP and 1 to international military forces. There were 11 cases of threats made against health-care personnel and facilities, 5 indiscriminate attacks on health-care facilities, 5 incidents of intentional killing or wounding of health-care personnel, 4 cases of incidental damage to health-care facilities and 2 abductions involving seven health-care personnel.

46. The task force verified four incidents of the recruitment and use of children by the Taliban involving 4 boys, compared with eight incidents involving 19 boys in the previous quarter. It received allegations of the recruitment and use of an additional 15 boys by parties to the conflict, which were still being verified, and it verified one incident of sexual violence in which a Taliban commander's bodyguard raped an 8-year-old girl. Moreover, the task force verified the abduction of three boys aged between 10 and 17 years in three separate incidents, two of which were attributed to the Taliban and one to pro-government militia. One of the boys was killed and one escaped from the Taliban, and the other was released after 10 days.

47. The Government continued to improve legislative protections to eliminate violence against Afghan women and girls. The Legislative Committee of the Ministry of Women's Affairs proposed substantive amendments to the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women. On 12 November, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the support of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and UNAMA, launched the second National Action Plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#).

48. On 8 October, the Cabinet Legislative Committee suggested an amendment to article 640 of the Penal Code. While the amendment suggested taking away the possibility of a forensic "virginity test", upon the consent of a woman, it maintained the possibility of such a test pursuant to a court order. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and civil society organizations expressed concern that the

suggested amendment did not expressly prohibit all kinds of forensic gynaecological testing for any reason.

49. Media workers and human rights defenders continued to be affected by intimidation and violence. On 5 September, Abdul Samad Amiri, Acting Director of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in Ghor Province, was reportedly killed by the Taliban, leading to the temporary suspension of the Commission's activities in high-risk provinces. On 11 October, a local journalist was kidnapped by the Taliban in Faryab Province and released after one day. On 14 November, following extensive media coverage of their research on the practice of *bacha bazi* in Logar Province, five civil society activists received serious threats from governmental actors in the Province.

50. UNAMA organized 45 events in eight provinces on the promotion and protection of human rights, women's participation in the peace process and the Access to Information Law, which were attended by 1,069 participants, including 267 women. UNAMA also continued to promote and support gender-sensitive approaches for the implementation of its mandate. Following the visit of the Deputy Secretary-General to Afghanistan, the country had been included in the joint United Nations-European Union Spotlight Initiative to combat sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

51. UNAMA had commenced coordinating with the Government in preparation for the 2020 Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan and initiated discussions with potential hosts for the event. The Conference will determine donor funding for the final four years of the Transformation Decade (2015–2024), aimed at establishing Afghan self-reliance. UNAMA is coordinating with donors, the World Bank and the Government of Afghanistan to encourage donors to maintain their development investments until 2024. The international community continued to finance 45 per cent of gross domestic product and 75 per cent of government spending.

52. On 14 November, the draft third quarterly report on the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework was circulated to donors for comments and consultations. The report highlighted the conduct of the 2019 presidential elections, the approval of new indicators for the 2017 anti-corruption strategy and the development of a joint action plan for improving the detection and prosecution of corruption cases. It was noted that the proportion of women in the civil service had increased from 22 to 27.5 per cent and that 10,489 economic self-help groups had been formed, of which 80 per cent were women's groups. The completion of five out of six reviews of the Extended Credit Framework of the International Monetary Fund, and the resulting release of \$37.3 million to the Government, was also highlighted. The sixth Afghanistan Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative was prepared and published, and 60 per cent of the core reforms under the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund were implemented.

53. On 21 August, the World Bank launched a stakeholder's consultation to identify economic initiatives to support and sustain peace in Afghanistan should a political settlement be reached with the Taliban. On 19 October, the World Bank hosted a discussion on the next steps in post-settlement planning for Afghanistan, in which the Afghan Acting Finance Minister underlined private business development as among the Government's top priority areas. In its annual *Doing Business* report,² the World

² International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, *Doing Business 2020: Comparing Business Regulation in 190 Economies* (Washington, D.C., 2020).

Bank noted that Afghanistan had fallen in the “ease of doing business” ranking from 167th place out of 190 in 2018 to 173rd place in 2019.

54. The Government continued to implement reforms at the subnational level. On 29 and 30 October, the Office of the President and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance facilitated consultations with local officials, community leaders and civil society in four out of eight regions on the direction and challenges of subnational governance reforms, as well as actions to keep the process on track. The Independent Directorate also introduced the Law on Local Councils, approved 5 March 2019, to subnational authorities and civil society in a further 10 provinces, bringing to 15 the number of provinces that had been briefed on the Law. The implementation of the Law would define future council elections and provide oversight on subnational administration.

55. Progress was made with regard to civil service reform. On 5 August, to provide transparency in the recruitment of civil servants, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission expanded its capacity to test applicants by establishing computerized exam centres in six regional capitals, connected to Kabul through a secure communication system.

56. The output of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre increased during the reporting period. From 1 September to mid-November, its primary court adjudicated six cases, including the case of the seven former commissioners of the Independent Election Commission and three former commissioners of the Electoral Complaints Commission, for electoral crimes arising from the conduct of the 2018 parliamentary elections in Kunar Province. The court convicted all 10 former commissioners and sentenced each to five years in prison. The appeal court heard four cases between August and October. No significant progress was made in executing the 127 arrest warrants and summonses issued before the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan of November 2018. The Ministry of the Interior agreed that reforms in the Major Crimes Task Force were required to proceed with corruption prosecutions. By mid-November, the Centre’s primary court had tried 65 cases involving 253 defendants, which had resulted in 201 convictions and 47 acquittals (2 defendants had died during the course of their trials). The Supreme Court issued a directive regulating the procedures for the audio recording of corruption-related judicial hearings as a means of increasing transparency.

57. On 19 September, the United States issued a statement announcing the withdrawal of funding for selected projects in Afghanistan, including for the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee. The Committee would wind down its activities by the end of 2019. In the last quarter, the Committee had issued two follow-up reports on the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum and the General Directorate of the Pension Treasury and one quarterly monitoring report on the Ministry of Education.

58. In mid-October, the High Council on Governance, Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption met for the third time in 2019 and reviewed progress on implementing institutional reform plans. The anti-corruption strategy would expire in December 2019, and the mechanism to devise a follow-up strategy remained to be activated. On 26 October, the Ministry of Finance presented the anti-corruption reform acceleration plan with measures for 2020. The plan, once endorsed by the High Council, could be a step towards a longer-term strategy to be adopted in 2020. On 8 October, President Ghani inaugurated the office of a dedicated anti-corruption ombudsperson in the presidential palace.

59. From 16 to 18 September, the Supreme Court, supported by UNAMA, conducted a three-day conference to review the implementation of the 2017 Penal

Code in courts throughout Afghanistan and issued guidelines to clarify its application to judges where uncertainties had been reported.

60. On 17 September, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Court granted the prosecution leave to appeal the 12 April decision of the Trial Chamber not to proceed in the Afghanistan case. The pending proceedings before the Court brought additional attention to the issue of war crimes prosecutions in Afghanistan.

61. On 14 September the National Assembly approved the Access to Information Law, adopted through a presidential legislative decree on 3 March 2018 with only two amendments: one increasing the number of commissioners in the Access to Information Commission from five to seven and the other expanding the selection committee for commissioners by adding a representative of the Upper House of the Assembly and of the Ministry of Justice.

V. Humanitarian assistance

62. Humanitarian needs continued to grow in Afghanistan owing to ongoing violence resulting in internal displacement, and to growing food insecurity, escalating poverty and the upcoming winter season. Half of the population of Afghanistan (around 17 million people) lived in areas highly affected by conflict. Over 128,000 people were made newly conflict-displaced between 29 July and 11 November, increasing the number of people who had fled their homes to over 365,000 since the beginning of 2019. More than half of those (58 per cent) were children. Studies indicated that an estimated four million people had been displaced since 2012 and had not returned home. Many displaced families lived in informal settlements with limited access to basic services beyond initial humanitarian assistance and had no immediate prospect of returning to their homes.

63. The conflict continued to generate high levels of demand for trauma services. From 15 August to 15 November, over 32,700 people were treated for conflict-related traumatic injuries, an 18 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018. One in three trauma cases involved a woman or a child. The need for trauma care was particularly high in Helmand, Ghazni, Kandahar, Kunduz, Nangarhar and Zabul Provinces, where military clashes continued to reduce access to health care. Health partners provided medical assistance to over 52,000 people, 65 per cent of whom were women and girls. Over 19,600 children received psychosocial support through “child friendly spaces”.

64. The most recent surveys in Afghanistan showed that 25 of the 34 provinces are above the emergency threshold for acute malnutrition. Despite the relative optimism that resulted from good rainfall and pasture conditions in the previous quarter, the lingering impact of the 2018 drought continued to affect the nutrition situation. It was estimated that, in 2020, 14.3 million people would be either in crisis or at emergency levels of food insecurity (level 3 or 4 of the Integrated Phase Classification). The main drivers of the worsening situation were continued conflict and displacement, low access to health care and adequate sanitation facilities. From January to September 2019, the United Nations and its partners provided treatment services and supplementary specialized nutritious food for 388,546 children under the age of 5, and 102,613 pregnant and lactating women with acute malnutrition.

65. Despite security challenges, humanitarian organizations were able to reach 372 out of 401 districts across the country (93 per cent) in the first nine months of the year. For example, the United Nations and its partners completed food delivery to Chahar Sadah district of Ghor Province. For several months, Chahar Sadah had not been reached owing to complex access constraints. The distribution of 192 tons of

food for 11,648 beneficiaries in the district was secured in October 2019. Negotiating humanitarian access had been much more difficult across the country, particularly during the election period, when an escalation in violence and movement restrictions had resulted in increased delays to assistance programmes and longer negotiation time to reach populations in need.

66. A total of 146,337 undocumented persons and refugee returnees arrived in Afghanistan between 14 August and 15 November 2019. That included 4,369 undocumented returnees from Pakistan, 124,884 undocumented returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 16,302 undocumented returnees from European States and Turkey. That overall figure including 266 who had returned voluntarily and 16,036 who had been deported, mostly from Turkey (15,681 people), which represented a significant new trend in deportations to Afghanistan. The refugee returnees in the period included 427 from Pakistan, 347 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 8 from other countries. The number of registered refugees returning to Afghanistan was 55 per cent lower than during the same period in 2018. In 2019, there was a decrease in the number of undocumented returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan compared with 2018. In Pakistan, Afghan refugees were able to open bank accounts, and proof of registration cards for Afghan refugees were extended until 30 June 2020. On 11 October, Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees agreed on a strategy regarding the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees.

67. A total of 20 confirmed cases of polio were reported as at 13 November 2019, including 8 in Uruzgan, 5 in Helmand, 3 in Kandahar, 2 in Paktika, 1 in Kunar and 1 in Nangarhar. Of these cases, 16 were reported in the southern region, where a Taliban ban on house-to-house immunization campaigns had become a major challenge for the eradication of polio since May 2018. That was further exacerbated by a complete ban on all polio-related activities in April 2019. On 25 September, the Taliban partially lifted the ban, allowing for two health facility-based immunization campaigns to take place in October and November. In government-controlled areas, a house-to-house immunization strategy was implemented in August and September. Negotiations were ongoing at all levels in order to gain access to complete house-to-house campaigns across the entire country. The next vaccination campaign was planned to begin on 16 December.

68. The United Nations Mine Action Service and its partners increased their advocacy to reduce child casualties from explosive remnants of war by enhancing child-centred risk education. The Government of Afghanistan made progress on the action plan to promote adherence to Protocol V to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects. The action plan outlined the response and responsibilities to clear explosive remnants of war after the cessation of active hostilities, to minimize the effects and risk of explosive ordnance.

69. From August to October 2019, the United Nations and its partners cleared 5.2 km² of land contaminated by high-impact explosives, benefiting 45 communities. Responding to the protection concerns of returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, approximately 134,282 people in Afghanistan received risk education funded by the United Nations.

70. Widespread insecurity, mine contamination and difficult terrain continued to present challenges to humanitarian access and the safety of personnel. From 15 August to 15 November, 6 aid workers were killed, 9 injured and 16 abducted. In 2019, a total of 119 incidents involving humanitarian aid workers were reported, compared with 102 during 2018. Deliberate attacks on health workers and facilities and demining workers continued, particularly in the east and south. In 2019, aid workers reported

325 access-related incidents, similarly to 2018, when 380 access restrictions were reported. Over 136 access-related incidents had impacts on health personnel, assets and facilities.

71. According to the Financial Tracking Service, \$423.4 million in humanitarian funding had been received as at 17 November, or 69.2 per cent of the total funding required for 2019. By 30 September, some 5.4 million people had been reached, exceeding planned targets for 2019 owing to the significant drought response and related carry-over funding in the first half of the year. In 2020, humanitarian partners would aim to assist 7.12 million people with emergency, protection or recovery assistance, out of 9.4 million people in need, requiring \$732.6 million.

VI. Counter-narcotics

72. From 15 July to 31 October, law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 676 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 353 kg of heroin, 1,244 kg of opium, 3,026 kg of hashish, 226 kg of methamphetamine, 3,322 tablets of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, 5 kg of solid precursor chemicals, 113 litres of liquid precursor chemicals, 124,911 kg of poppy seeds and 4,450 kg of henbane. The seizures led to the arrest of 796 suspects and the confiscation of 111 vehicles and 59 weapons. In total, 10 officers of the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police were killed and 8 wounded while carrying out their operations.

73. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes supported the Ministry of Public Health in training 69 government staff, service providers and civil society organizations on evidence-based drug prevention, treatment and care services. Technical support was also provided to the Government on the revision and development of drug treatment and HIV-related strategies, policies, guidelines and protocols.

VII. Mission support

74. As at 4 November 2019, vacancy rates at UNAMA were at 7 per cent for international staff, 4 per cent for National Professional Officers and 2 per cent for national staff, compared with the approved rates of 7 per cent, 5 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively. The proportion of female staff remained low, at 35 per cent for international staff, 41 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 13 per cent for National Professional Officers and 9 per cent for national staff. Between 1 July and 30 September, UNAMA conducted 179 road and 21 air missions, as well as 1,065 outreach missions and meetings, during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

75. On 28 September, Afghan men and women across the country went to the polls, braving security concerns. I commend all Afghans who exercised their right to vote. I also commend the work performed by the Afghan security forces in supporting the election, through transporting and safeguarding the distribution and retrieval of sensitive election materials and ensuring the security of the polling locations so that voters, including women, could participate. Their participation is an enduring commitment to the democratic process and constitutional order. A credible election whose results reflect the genuine will of the Afghan people and are accepted by the broad range of stakeholders is fundamental for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. At

the time of issuance of the present report, the results of the presidential election in Afghanistan have yet to be announced.

76. Within a few months of assuming office, the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission were responsible for managing a process that was widely acknowledged to have been technically better prepared and planned than previous elections. A marked improvement was noted in the deployment of biometric devices for voter verification and results transmission, and the Independent Election Commission provided previously unseen levels of access for candidate agents and observers. While there was significant progress, challenges remained. Electoral management bodies and election observer groups noted technical glitches at polling stations and the malfunctioning of biometric voter verification devices, as well as difficulties in communication due to attacks on infrastructure.

77. As electoral management bodies are engaged in the results management process, it is imperative that the electoral institutions continually and consistently communicate with all stakeholders and respond to all questions being raised by candidates and others. I strongly encourage all stakeholders to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process and enable the electoral institutions to exercise their responsibilities in full, including by addressing all complaints through the appropriate legal and institutional channels. I call on presidential candidates to disavow fraud by their supporters, engage constructively in the process and respect the authority of the electoral management bodies. Once electoral complaints have been adjudicated in accordance with the law, I urge the candidates and their supporters to accept the outcome.

78. The ongoing military conflict is causing immense hardship and suffering for the people of Afghanistan. International and regional players have a critical role to play in regaining momentum towards a political settlement of the conflict. I urge all sides to redouble their efforts in that regard and build on achievements already made. I continue to believe that direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban are imperative for the achievement of a lasting and sustainable peace. The United Nations remains ready to support a sustainable peace in any way it can.

79. Remarkable progress has been achieved on women's rights and freedoms in Afghanistan in the past 18 years. To consolidate and build on that progress, Afghanistan needs peace, stability and reconciliation. However, for peace to be sustainable, women's rights must be safeguarded. Peace must take Afghan men and women forward, towards greater development and equality, and not backtrack on the progress that has been achieved. Women need to fully and meaningfully participate in every step of the peace process. I commend the Government for its commitment to enhancing women's participation in peace and security and decision-making processes and encourage further progress in that regard.

80. The intensifying conflict continues to take a heavy toll on the civilian population through deaths, injuries and displacement. I am alarmed by the unprecedented increase of civilian casualties during the period from July to September, the highest number ever recorded since UNAMA started systematic documentation in 2009. I reiterate again that all parties to the conflict must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law and take immediate measures to prevent civilian casualties. I call on the Government to take further steps in implementing its Mitigation of Civilian Casualties Policy.

81. Economic development and job creation for an overwhelmingly young population remain essential for peace. I am encouraged by ongoing initiatives to enhance regional connectivity and remove trade impediments within and beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The Government's focus on private business development is commendable, but further policy reforms will be required to generate private-sector growth and provide job opportunities for the next generation of Afghans. To support

the Government's vision towards economic self-reliance, measures to counter the illicit economy effectively, combat corruption and improve security will be crucial.

82. Sadly, freedom of expression in Afghanistan continues to be earned at an unbearable cost. Many journalists and human rights defenders have been killed in Afghanistan in targeted attacks throughout the conflict. Such targeted attacks are unacceptable, and perpetrators must be brought swiftly to justice to foster an environment that respects the rule of law.

83. I am concerned by the bleak humanitarian outlook, as conflict continues across much of the country, and call for increased attention from the international community to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. It is essential that Member States renew their engagement on multiple fronts, to meet urgent humanitarian needs, to protect development gains from being reversed and to promote sustainable solutions. I also remain concerned about the continued high number of attacks on humanitarian aid workers.

84. I thank the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfil our commitments in support of the Government and people of Afghanistan. I note with deep concern the recent attacks against United Nations personnel. I call on the Afghan authorities to spare no efforts to identify and swiftly bring to justice the perpetrators of such attacks and to strengthen measures to enhance the safety and security of United Nations personnel.
