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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 12 March 2021 ([A/75/811-S/2021/252](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. Efforts to reinvigorate the peace negotiations slowed following the postponement of a proposed high-level conference in Istanbul, Turkey, highlighting the need for a renewed commitment by the parties to fully and constructively engage in talks. With the announcements by the United States of America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on the withdrawal of their remaining military forces by September 2021, the Taliban stated that they would defer their attendance of any high-level events until such time. Efforts to foster unity around the peace process by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan faced difficulties, while the Government attempted to promote greater regional consensus on intra-Afghan peace and reconciliation, economic cooperation and connectivity. Calls continued for a more inclusive peace process as well as the preservation of fundamental rights and freedoms. Security incidents remained at high levels, with the number of civilian casualties increasing by 29 per cent in the first quarter of 2021 in comparison with the same period in 2020. Ongoing violence, natural disasters and heightened levels of food insecurity contributed to increased suffering, further compounded by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.



A. Political developments

4. Ministerial and senior-level appointments continued during the reporting period, including in the security sector. On 19 March, the President, Ashraf Ghani, replaced the Minister of the Interior. On 24 April, several senior-level appointments and replacements were announced in the Office of the National Security Council and the National Directorate for Security, with the declared aim of accelerating security sector reform efforts and meeting the demands of the security transition. Mr. Ghani also nominated a new acting attorney general and appointed two new senators, a presidential adviser on education, several ambassadors and officials in agencies and directorates, including the national procurement and civil aviation authorities, as well as governors. In the parliament, meanwhile, calls were reiterated to formally introduce acting ministerial and other relevant nominees to the Wolesi Jirga (lower house) for confirmation in accordance with the Constitution and to replace those nominees rejected during previous confirmation hearings in November and December. The Chairperson of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, and other opposition officials, including Marshal Rashid Dostum, raised concern over the lack of consultation on appointments, in particular the replacement of the Minister of the Interior and the Provincial Governor of Faryab, calling for the implementation of the arrangements stipulated in the political agreement of 17 May 2020 between Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah.

5. The President also continued to replace provincial and district governors, with the stated objectives of improving security, subnational governance and development. Since the President's inauguration in March 2020, only 6 of the 34 provincial governors have remained in their posts. In line with the presidential decree of 6 July 2020 establishing the position of Second deputy provincial governor for social and economic affairs in each of the 34 provinces, 27 women have been appointed, including 12 in 2021. All the positions are to be filled by women. Pursuant to the presidential decree of 4 October 2020, by which a greater role was assigned to district governors in security matters and conflict resolution, the performance of more than half of the 387 district governors has been assessed. Most were subsequently replaced. In the absence of new competitive civil service recruitment procedures, deputy provincial governors and district governors are serving in acting capacities.

6. The electoral management bodies continued preparations to hold provincial council, district council and municipal elections, as called for in the political agreement of May 2020, as well as the delayed Wolesi Jirga elections for Ghazni Province. On 8 March, the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan concluded its review of the election law and submitted draft amendments to the Ministry of Justice. The proposed amendments include changes to the electoral system for the Wolesi Jirga elections, voter registration, the use of technology and the results management system. On 19 April, the Commission secretariat formally advised the Commission that conducting elections in 2021 would not be possible, as electoral planning required preparatory time of at least one year.

7. The peace negotiations in Doha continued at a slow pace. In March, proposals by the United States to accelerate the peace talks, and a meeting in Moscow between Afghan political leaders and the Taliban, brought increased momentum, including to convene a high-level conference in April in Istanbul between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

8. In preparation for the conference, the High Council for National Reconciliation announced the receipt of more than 25 peace proposals from political leaders and civil society for consolidation into a draft peace plan. Many were reportedly in response to draft proposals circulated by the United States concerning guiding principles for

the future of Afghanistan, a transitional peace government and political road map, and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. On 14 March, Afghan women activists published a position paper on the draft United States proposal, demanding inclusiveness, the upholding of the Constitution and women's rights, and alignment with international obligations under Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and United States obligations under the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017. On 3 April, Mr. Ghani hosted meetings with foreign ambassadors to present his vision for peace and a "sovereign, democratic, united, neutral and connected Afghanistan". He proposed the establishment of an interim peace government, followed by the holding of elections. He stressed the need, in order to sustain peace, to focus on national reconciliation, the reintegration of combatants and refugees and the process of defining new security, development and governance priorities following the elections.

9. To strengthen political inclusion and national consensus, on 28 February Mr. Ghani inaugurated a high council of State, as envisaged under the political agreement of May 2020. Its first meeting, on 10 March, brought together several political leaders, including government and opposition actors. Consultation with the opposition over the final membership is ongoing. On 1 March, the President chaired the first meeting of the High Council for Women, created by presidential decree in August 2020 to support the implementation of the Government's commitments regarding women's rights. On 28 March, Mr. Ghani inaugurated the High Council for Youth, comprising 45 members elected to provide recommendations to the Government in different areas, including the peace process.

10. On 13 April, Turkey, Qatar and the United Nations announced that they would co-convene a high-level and inclusive conference between the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban, to be hosted in Istanbul from 24 April to 4 May to accelerate and complement negotiations in Doha on the achievement of a just and durable political settlement. Later that day, the Taliban Political Commission stated that the Taliban would not participate in any conference that made decisions about Afghanistan until the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

11. On 14 April, the President of the United States, Joseph R. Biden, Jr., formally announced the withdrawal of the remaining United States military forces from Afghanistan by 11 September. The announcement was echoed by the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, who declared that the withdrawal of NATO allies by the same date would be orderly, coordinated and deliberate, and who reiterated their long-term commitment to Afghanistan. On 15 April, the Secretary of State of the United States, Antony J. Blinken, visited Kabul to express the continued commitment of his country to supporting the security forces of and democratic gains in Afghanistan. Afghan leaders stated that their Government would work to ensure a smooth transition.

12. Subsequently, on 21 April, the co-conveners of the Istanbul conference announced its postponement to a date when conditions for meaningful progress would be more favourable. They emphasized their commitment to supporting the peace process in Doha, where representatives of the negotiating teams of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban continued to hold discussions.

13. Civil society, including women's and youth groups, religious leaders and the media, continued to call for a more inclusive peace process, as well as the preservation of fundamental rights and freedoms and an end to violence. Several of the groups had planned to engage on the sidelines of the proposed Istanbul conference. On 29 and 31 March, the Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace and the Afghan Women's Network organized separate gatherings in Kabul to demand inclusivity in the peace process. The United Nations supported a consortium of women's networks that gathered in Kabul on 14 and 15 April to discuss issues related to ceasefires,

transitional justice, governance structures and constitutional review processes. Women leaders called for mechanisms to allow outcomes of civil society consultations to inform the agenda and format of the peace negotiations. The Group of Friends of Afghanistan and the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan, on 22 March, and the Friends of Afghan Women Ambassadors Group, on 8 April, issued statements in support of Afghan women's right to have an influential voice on the country's future. On 26 and 27 April, the Women in the Peace Process Coalition conducted events on women's concerns about the peace process, demanding a ceasefire and women's meaningful participation.

14. At the regional and international levels, China, the Russian Federation and the United States, along with Pakistan, known as the Extended Troika, held two meetings, in Moscow on 18 March and in Doha on 30 April, to discuss the peace process and ways to help the parties to reach a negotiated settlement and permanent ceasefire. On both occasions, the group met representatives of the negotiating teams of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. In their statement of 18 March, the four countries opposed the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In their statement of 30 April, they noted that a reduction in violence and sustained efforts by the Taliban to advance intra-Afghan negotiations would positively affect a review of the status of designations of Taliban individuals and entities on the sanctions list established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011). The countries also welcomed an expanded role of the United Nations in contributing to the peace and reconciliation process.

15. In a joint communiqué issued on 15 April, special envoys from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the European Union, called upon Afghan parties to resume negotiations and condemned the high level of violence. On 23 April, the ministers for foreign affairs of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey called upon all parties to reaffirm their commitment to an inclusive negotiated settlement. On 6 May, special envoys and special representatives of France, Germany, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States, the European Union and NATO, joined by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), met in Berlin to review the status of the peace process. The negotiating teams of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban joined the meeting separately by videoconference. In a communiqué issued after the meeting, the need to accelerate the negotiations was highlighted and an expanded role of the United Nations was welcomed.

16. UNAMA continued to implement nine local peace initiatives, including two new initiatives for engaging with young people and religious scholars on peace and mediation efforts in Nangarhar Province and Faizabad, while eight other initiatives were concluded. Throughout March, United Nations-supported grass-roots events involving several hundred participants were held in more than 30 provinces as part of International Women's Day to draw attention to the rights and leadership of women and their inclusion in the peace process. Focusing on social cohesion, United Nations partners jointly developed an initiative aimed at designing a peace curriculum in universities.

B. Security

17. The security situation continued to deteriorate. Between 12 February and 15 May, the United Nations recorded 6,827 security-related incidents, a 26.3 per cent increase from the 5,407 recorded during the same period in 2020 and only a modest 5.3 per cent decrease compared with the previous three-month period from 13 November 2020 to 11 February 2021. The number of armed clashes rose by 18.3 per cent, from 3,359 to 3,973, and of detonated improvised explosive devices by 46.9 per cent, from 515 to 757. As opposed to the trends seen in early 2020 following the conclusion of the

Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the United States of America and the Taliban, the number of air strikes, conducted primarily by the Afghan Air Force, rose by 83.2 per cent, from 161 to 295. The southern, eastern and northern regions recorded the highest number of incidents and collectively accounted for 63.6 per cent of all recorded incidents, with Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar the most conflict-affected provinces. Violence briefly abated from 13 to 15 May as the Government and the Taliban declared unilateral three-day ceasefires over Eid al-Fitr.

18. High-profile attacks continued countrywide. In total, 22 suicide attacks were documented, compared with 8 during the same period in 2020. Seventeen attacks involved suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, primarily targeting Afghan National Defence and Security Forces positions in contested areas, in particular in the south; one, against a security convoy on 20 April, was the first suicide attack recorded in the city of Kabul in 2021. The United Nations also documented 73 attacks using magnetic improvised explosive devices, including 10 in Kabul. The number of targeted, usually unclaimed assassinations rose by 40.1 per cent to 297, with victims including civil servants, two university lecturers in Kabul, three female polio vaccinators in Jalalabad and the head of the Ulama Council of Takhar. Two vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks, one near a guesthouse in Logar Province on 30 April and one, followed by two other explosions, near a high school in a Shia neighbourhood of Kabul on 9 May, sparked outcries over the high number of civilian casualties, which included numerous female students in Kabul.

19. No party to the conflict achieved significant territorial gains. The Taliban captured four district centres and maintained pressure on urban areas, including in Baghlan, Faryab, Ghazni and Helmand Provinces, and on transportation axes and infrastructure, including in southern, north-eastern and north-western Afghanistan. Apart from an attack on Kandahar airfield on 1 May, as at 25 May, the Taliban had not launched direct attacks on international military forces, despite stating that they had the right to do so given the delayed international military withdrawal.

20. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces continued to conduct operations to secure key highways and cities in the south and several other provinces, including Baghlan, Faryab, Ghazni and Nangarhar. The Government continued to reform the security sector through the Future Forces programme, with a focus on improving structures and promoting a more responsive approach to operations. Government officials noted that national security forces had conducted over 90 per cent of operations in 2020, with international military forces providing only aerial support.

21. Attacks claimed by or attributed to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) increased to 88, compared with 16 during the same period in 2020. ISIL-K continued to target civilians in urban areas. It claimed responsibility for the assassination of three female media workers and one female doctor in Jalalabad on 2 and 5 March, for explosions targeting two civilian vehicles in Kabul on 14 March and several civilian targets in Jalalabad on 21 March, and for attacks against a mosque in Kabul and a Shia gathering in Kunduz in mid-May. While most incidents occurred in Kabul and eastern provinces, the movement released a video on 22 February in which it announced its “return to Khorasan”. It subsequently claimed an incident in Ghor Province on 21 April, the first since 2017, and attacks against electricity pylons and fuel tankers in Baghlan, Kabul, Kunduz and Parwan Provinces in the first half of May. Not all claims could be verified amid continued controversy as to whether certain attacks claimed by ISIL-K were carried out by or coordinated with other groups. Afghan security organs also reported the arrests of several dozen ISIL-K suspects in two northern provinces, beyond the movement’s traditional areas of operations, in addition to the arrest in Nangarhar Province, on 24 March, of a suspected mastermind of the Kabul University attack in November 2020.

22. The United Nations documented 20 incidents affecting its personnel, including 11 cases of intimidation and 3 crime-related incidents.

C. Regional cooperation

23. Afghanistan and regional countries remained focused on enhancing cooperation and economic and infrastructure connectivity. On 19 February, the National Directorate for Security convened the first (virtual) regional conference of intelligence and security officials from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the United States, on cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

24. On 23 February, a delegation from Uzbekistan led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Abdulaziz Kamilov, visited Kabul and met Mr. Ghani, Mr. Abdullah, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Mohammad Haneef Atmar, and the National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, to discuss bilateral relations, regional cooperation and the peace process. Mr. Kamilov conveyed the support of Uzbekistan for an immediate halt to violence and for peace in Afghanistan. Both countries discussed an action plan for cooperation in trade, transit, energy, mines and agriculture, and a plan to launch the Mazar-e Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project to connect Central and South Asia through Afghanistan.

25. From 24 to 26 February, Mr. Atmar visited Moscow and met the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, and other senior officials. Speaking to the media during his visit, Mr. Atmar welcomed the position of the Russian Federation against the return of an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan and stressed that no United Nations sanctions on designated Taliban figures should be lifted until those behind the insurgency fully complied with their peace commitments. Mr. Lavrov reiterated the commitment of the Russian Federation to facilitating conducive conditions for intra-Afghan reconciliation through the Extended Troika format and expressed readiness to resume Moscow-format meetings with countries in the region and the United States. He also conveyed Russian concerns over the continued escalation of violence and the prevailing threat of illegal narcotrafficking to the region.

26. From 22 to 24 March, Mr. Atmar visited India and met the Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, and other high-ranking officials to discuss regional and international consensus on the peace process, and enhanced cooperation on security, economic, political and cultural issues. He presented the peace plan of the Government of Afghanistan and stressed that a republic was the only political structure that could guarantee the equal participation of citizens. Indian counterparts stressed the need for continued strategic cooperation between India and Afghanistan and expressed the full support of India for the peace process, including the consolidation of regional and international consensus.

27. In an effort to facilitate cross-border transportation and trade, the Afghan authorities, with the assistance of the United Nations, established an international transit warranty and payment computerization system at four major border-crossing points to Iran (Islamic Republic of), Pakistan and Uzbekistan on 23 March and implemented the Automated System for Customs Data World in the Ghulam Khan customs house, bordering Pakistan, on 25 March. During the reporting period, Afghan and Uzbek customs authorities implemented the first phase of an online transit data exchange service.

28. On 29 March, Mr. Ghani travelled to Dushanbe for a two-day State visit and to participate in the ninth Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process Ministerial Conference. He met the President, Emomali Rahmon, and discussed strengthening bilateral ties. During the

visit, Afghan and Tajik officials signed five memorandums of understanding, on road maps for political, security, trade, transport, transit, energy and cultural cooperation.

29. On 30 March, the ninth Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process Ministerial Conference was held, bringing together foreign ministers involved in the Process, heads of delegations of donor countries and regional and international organizations. Participants adopted the Dushanbe Declaration, in which they welcomed renewed diplomatic efforts by all countries to accelerate the peace process through meaningful negotiations, including the talks in Doha, the Extended Troika meeting and preparations for a high-level meeting in Turkey. In the Declaration, participants condemned the persistently high levels of violence, expressing concern over continued ties between the Taliban and other terrorist groups, including Al-Qaida. They also endorsed an implementation plan for the new women's empowerment confidence-building measure.

30. On 1 April, Afghanistan and Pakistan extended their transit trade agreement for three months to further strengthen regional connectivity. On 10 May, the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, accompanied by the Director General of Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan, General Faiz Hamid, and the Chief of the Defence Staff of the United Kingdom, General Sir Nicholas Carter, visited Kabul. Mr. Bajwa met Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah to discuss the peace process and the strengthening of bilateral security and defence cooperation, including on border management.

31. In separate calls with Mr. Atmar and Mr. Mohib on 17 May, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Wang Yi, emphasized the importance of the strategic partnership between China and Afghanistan and the willingness of China to deepen counter-terrorism and security cooperation efforts with Afghanistan. He also stressed the readiness of China to play a constructive role in an effort to advance the peace and reconciliation process. The Government of Afghanistan expressed appreciation for the positive role of China in supporting the peace process and stability in Afghanistan and the region.

32. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, continued to meet regularly with the ambassadors to Afghanistan of six neighbouring countries and the wider region to discuss regional cooperation. She also coordinated with United Nations partners in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries on cross-border activities such as trade and transit, infrastructure connectivity and movements of people. In addition, the Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General on Afghanistan and Regional Issues, Jean Arnault, who was appointed in mid-March, began his engagement to assist in achieving a political solution to the conflict.

III. Human rights

33. On 14 April, UNAMA released its first-quarter update on the protection of civilians. From 1 January to 31 March, the Mission documented 1,783 civilian casualties (573 killed, including 64 women and 151 children, and 1,210 injured, including 168 women and 401 children), a 29 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2020. The number of women casualties increased by 37 per cent compared with the first quarter of 2020. UNAMA documented increased civilian casualties from ground engagements and non-suicide attacks, and a rise in the number of targeted killings by anti-government elements in comparison with the first quarter of 2020, whereas the number of civilian casualties from suicide attacks and air strikes conducted by international military forces fell. Of specific concern, the Mission documented a 38 per cent increase in the number of civilian casualties in the

six months after the start of the Afghanistan peace negotiations in September 2020 in comparison with the same period one year earlier.

34. In the first three months of 2021, almost two thirds of civilian casualties were caused by anti-government elements (61 per cent), mainly by the Taliban (43.5 per cent), ISIL-K (5 per cent) and undetermined anti-government elements (12.5 per cent). Approximately one quarter of all civilian casualties were attributed to pro-government forces (27 per cent), mostly caused by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (25 per cent), while the remaining 2 per cent were caused by pro-government armed groups or undetermined pro-government forces. More than one third (38 per cent) of civilian casualties were caused by ground engagements. Non-suicide improvised explosive devices, targeted killings and air strikes caused 31 per cent, 19 per cent and 5 per cent of civilian casualties, respectively.

35. During the first quarter of 2021, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 636 grave violations against 587 children (402 boys and 185 girls), including 552 child casualties (151 killed, comprising 52 girls and 99 boys, and 401 maimed, comprising 133 girls and 268 boys). Anti-government elements were responsible for 226 child casualties, while pro-government forces were responsible for 207. Ground engagements remained the leading cause of child casualties, at 270 (71 killed and 199 maimed), accounting for approximately 49 per cent of the overall total.

36. The country task force verified the recruitment and use of 14 children (all boys) by the Taliban (7) and pro-government militias (7), compared with 33 children during the previous quarter. It verified one case of sexual violence against a child and the abduction of 22 children (21 boys and 1 girl) by the Taliban. Of the 22 children abducted, 17 have been released, 1 was killed and 4 remain in Taliban captivity. The country task force verified 13 attacks on schools and educational personnel, a slight decrease from the previous quarter (17), attributing incidents to the Taliban (4), joint pro-government forces (2), joint fighting between pro-government and armed opposition groups (2), the National Directorate for Security (1), pro-government militias (1), the Afghan National Army (1), unspecified Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (1) and an undetermined armed opposition group (1). The country task force verified 21 attacks against hospitals and health-care personnel, compared with 39 in the previous quarter. These attacks were attributed to the Taliban (9), the Afghan National Army (5), ISIL-K (4), the National Directorate of Security (1), pro-government militias (1) and the Afghan National Police (1).

37. On 15 February, the National Commission on Protection of Child Rights endorsed the national child protection policy, which was developed in line with the Law on Protection of Child Rights. The country task force was actively engaged in the development of the policy, including ensuring that the prohibition of child recruitment and sexual violence (including *bacha bazi*), along with other child protection measures, was mainstreamed throughout the policy.

38. Budget constraints in the Office of Prison Administration resulted in significant staff cuts at juvenile rehabilitation centres. Among the positions cut were teachers, vocational trainers, caregivers and observers, undermining the care and rehabilitation of children in custody. With the Government, the country task force continued to advocate the release and effective reintegration of children, including foreign children, held in detention for alleged or actual association with armed groups or for charges related to national security, and worked with the prison authorities to improve detention conditions. The country task force also continued to work with the Government on the development of a framework for the reintegration of children.

39. The increase in the prison population recorded since mid-August 2020 continued, with overcrowding having serious implications for detention conditions, including increased vulnerability with regard to COVID-19. By the end of March 2021, at least 30 out of 38 prisons nationwide had exceeded full capacity, with an average occupancy rate close to 200 per cent.

40. Several government entities celebrated International Women's Day, including with a national event hosted by the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul on 7 March. UNAMA also supported several events to mark the day, including girls' sports events, radio programmes and public celebrations to raise awareness of women's rights. On 11 March, the Ministry of Education released a memorandum banning schoolgirls over the age of 12 years from singing at public events. After a backlash, the Ministry rescinded the memorandum, stating that it had been misunderstood. In early April, the Ministry of Women's Affairs released a public report on the implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law from March 2017 to March 2019. The report includes an analysis of cases of violence against women and girls registered by the Ministry (6,549 cases, of which 65 per cent were criminal and 35 per cent were civil), the Attorney General's Office (5,331) and the Afghan National Police (2,568), showing an increase in the number of cases reported. For instance, the report indicates a year-on-year increase in cases registered by the Afghan National Police: 698 in 2015, 748 in 2016, 1,328 in 2017 and 1,240 in 2018.

41. Human rights defenders and media workers continued to face security threats. UNAMA recorded the killing of three female media workers in two separate attacks claimed by ISIL-K in Nangarhar Province, and the killing by unknown perpetrators of one former journalist in Kandahar Province and one civil society activist in Paktiya Province. Three human rights defenders (including a woman) and one journalist were allegedly threatened by the Taliban in Baghlan, Kunduz and Bamyan Provinces. Two women human rights defenders and one journalist allegedly received threats from unknown perpetrators in Nangarhar, Takhar and Bamyan Provinces.

42. Following the announced withdrawal of international troops and uncertainties around the peace process, human rights defenders and journalists raised with UNAMA their increased sense of insecurity. Since the beginning of 2021, the Human Rights Defenders Committee, a non-governmental organization, received 69 applications for support from civil society actors in Afghanistan, of which 22 were from women. On 27 March, the Joint Commission for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders under the Second Vice-President, Sarwar Danesh, met and agreed upon its rules of procedure and next steps. On World Press Freedom Day (3 May), UNAMA and several embassies publicly pledged continued support for free and independent Afghan media. On 5 May, media organizations condemned a warning by the Taliban to the media to maintain neutrality and requested clarifications from the National Directorate for Security about alleged statements perceived as hostile to media freedoms.

43. UNAMA, with technical assistance from the Mediation Support Unit of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, continued to engage with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission on issues related to peace, human rights and victim-centred justice.

44. On 7 May, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court met in The Hague with a delegation from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan led by Mr. Atmar to discuss issues related to the request from the Government to defer the Court's investigation pursuant to article 18 (2) of the Rome Statute.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

45. On 6 April, the Minister for Finance and the Head of the Administrative Office of the President met donors to present the Cabinet-approved Geneva 2020 Conference Commitments Implementation Procedure, in which mechanisms for the implementation of the Afghanistan Partnership Framework are detailed. In a joint letter dated 29 April, donors emphasized the need for enhanced strategic engagement with the Government on high-level policy dialogues. Furthermore, membership of the Framework task force was expanded to include the Administrative Office of the President and the European Union, in addition to the Ministry of Finance, UNAMA and the World Bank. On 22 April and 6 May, the expanded task force met to formulate a road map of key events and activities leading up to the senior officials' meeting, tentatively scheduled for November. The Government released the first report on the implementation of the Framework on 13 May, in which it highlighted that the 13 targets to be implemented in 2021 were on track to be completed by the fourth quarter of the year. Separately, on 20 April, the Government published a public investment management document, which is aimed at enhancing accountability in public investment projects. Development partners, including bilateral donors, multilateral financial institutions (World Bank and Asian Development Bank), UNAMA and the Government, continued to work on the results framework and monitoring system for the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II.

46. On 20 February, Mr. Ghani appointed a four-member committee, chaired by the chief administrator of the judiciary, to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the financial and administrative problems, as well as the challenges to the integrity of the staff, of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre. The findings of the committee have not yet been made public. On 26 March, the chief prosecutor of the Centre resigned, alleging interference in his work. The President appointed a new chief prosecutor and new heads of prosecution units for the Centre.

47. In collaboration with development partners, UNAMA provided technical support and recommendations to the Anti-Corruption Commission on a draft interim national anti-corruption strategy for 2021, pending the adoption of the first long-term strategy since 2017, when the prior strategy expired. The streamlining of the institutional framework of anti-corruption bodies continued, with the announced integration of the Ombudsperson's Office into the Anti-Corruption Commission. On 12 April, the Wolesi Jirga approved a new law on the authority and jurisdiction of the courts, as well as the Whistleblowers Protection Law, which was adopted by presidential legislative decree on 5 September 2018. Both laws await approval by the Meshrano Jirga (upper house).

48. Some prosecutions of high-ranking public officials for corruption continued. On 28 February, a special panel of the Supreme Court convicted a former Minister for Commerce and Industry of embezzlement and sentenced him to one year in prison and a fine of \$864,000. The Attorney General's Office is investigating three other ministers. From 15 February to 5 May, the primary court of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre tried six cases involving 16 defendants, while the Appeal Court finalized four appeals with 12 defendants. On 7 March, the same court convicted a former provincial governor of Herat Province (who was also a former member of the Meshrano Jirga) of misuse of authority and sentenced him to two years and six months in prison and restitution of approximately \$1,400. On 3 April, the primary court also convicted a former mayor of Kabul of forgery and sentenced him to one year and one month in prison. The limited enforcement of arrest warrants and final judgments continued to jeopardize accountability.

49. The Government continued its efforts to build a meritorious public administration. On 8 April, the electronic human resources management information system, which will facilitate civil-servant pay, retirement and evaluation systems and allows governors to have access to information on provincial organizational structures and employee personnel records, was handed over to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance and local administrations.

50. To strengthen the oversight role of the parliament and increase the level of parliamentary engagement in the national budget preparation process, on 1 April the Minister for Finance announced that he would initiate consultations with the parliament to reform the process, including the mechanism for identifying and determining priority provincial budget allocations. He reported expenditure of 13 per cent for the first quarter.

51. On 7 and 9 March, the United Nations and the Office of the First Vice-President co-hosted the first in a series of stakeholder consultations to discuss the initial findings of the common country analysis and the strategic priority outcomes and theories of change derived therefrom. The findings will define the focus and structure of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for Afghanistan (2022–2025), ensuring alignment with and support for the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and addressing the priority needs of Afghanistan. Programming will also prioritize the combined impact of humanitarian, development and peace collaboration.

52. United Nations entities provided technical support to the Government for the preparation of the 2021 voluntary national report for Afghanistan on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, including the convening of a stakeholder consultation on 2 May. The report will be finalized by the end of June.

V. Humanitarian assistance

53. Sustained conflict, natural disasters, chronic poverty, food insecurity and the added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic caused increasing suffering. Some 18.4 million people, or almost half the population, need humanitarian assistance in 2021, up from 9.4 million at the beginning of 2020. Between January and March, humanitarian partners reached 3.7 million people, of 15.7 million, with some form of assistance.

54. As at 17 May, more than 62,000 people were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19, but the actual number was believed to be much higher. In total, Afghanistan has received 968,000 vaccine doses through the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility and bilateral donations. Close to 500,000 people have been vaccinated to date, although overall uptake remains slow owing to misinformation and rumours, resulting in public scepticism towards the vaccine. Since late May, cases of COVID-19 have escalated rapidly owing to the arrival of new variants of the virus.

55. Since the beginning of the pandemic in Afghanistan in March 2020, humanitarian aid workers have supported the establishment of 29 laboratories for COVID-19 testing, the redeployment of 34,000 polio surveillance volunteers to assist with case identification and contact tracing, the provision of more than 42 million units of protective equipment to health providers and front-line aid workers nationwide, the training of more than 25,000 health-care workers in infection prevention and control, and the screening of 11.66 million people at points of entry since the start of the crisis.

56. Between 13 February and 19 May, health partners provided medical assistance to more than 378,500 people, of whom 52 per cent were women and girls. The number of trauma cases in the reporting period was almost 24 per cent higher than for the same period in 2020.

57. One confirmed case of polio has been reported since the start of 2021. In addition to wild polioviruses, Afghanistan has experienced an outbreak of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 following an outbreak in Pakistan, resulting in 303 confirmed cases in 2020 and 38 in 2021. Most occurred in areas in which house-to-house vaccination campaigns had been banned since May 2018 by anti-government elements. Health partners have conducted three nationwide polio vaccination campaigns in 2021, each targeting 9.9 million children.

58. Humanitarian partners provided sexual, reproductive health and gender-based violence response services to over 15,300 people at entry points with Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan between 15 February and 17 May. During the same period, 11 emergency reproductive health kits were distributed to maternity hospitals, supporting over 300,000 women and girls for three months.

59. Food insecurity remained at alarmingly high levels, with 27 out of 34 provinces above the emergency threshold of acute malnutrition. By the end of May, 14.1 million people are expected to be at “crisis” and “emergency” levels of food insecurity. It is expected that almost one in two children under 5 years of age will face acute malnutrition at some point in 2021. Between 1 February and 19 May, humanitarian partners provided more than 51,925 metric tons of food and \$16 million in cash to some 3.4 million food-insecure people and supported more than 318,000 shock-affected people with livelihood assistance. Worsening conflict and the high likelihood of drought triggered by the La Niña weather phenomenon will only exacerbate humanitarian needs.

60. The number of undocumented Afghans returning to Afghanistan remained high, whereas refugee returns remained low, albeit higher than the return figures recorded during the same period in 2020. Returns continued to be driven by the COVID-19 outbreak and related lockdowns and restrictions, limited access to health care and the associated deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances. Between 13 February and 19 May, 331,932 undocumented Afghan migrants and 392 refugees returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran, 3,946 undocumented Afghans and 200 refugees returned from Pakistan and 8 refugees returned from other countries. Since 1 January, 423,784 undocumented returnees and refugees have crossed into Afghanistan. The initial estimates of 654,000 undocumented returns included in the humanitarian response plan are likely to be significantly exceeded during 2021.

61. Conflict and disasters continued to create new humanitarian needs. Between 13 February and 19 May, over 31,000 people became internally displaced and some 12,000 were affected by natural disasters, mostly floods. Humanitarian partners provided emergency shelter, household items, winterization assistance and related cash support to some 31,000 vulnerable people affected by the harsh climate, conflict and natural disasters.

62. From February to April, the Mine Action Service and partners cleared more than 2.57 km² of land contaminated by high-impact explosives, safely removing over 775 items of explosive ordnance to the benefit of 80 communities. In addition, 198,290 people received explosive ordnance risk education.

63. Widespread insecurity continued to present challenges for humanitarian access. Between 1 January and 19 May, humanitarian workers reported 637 access-related incidents, a 76 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2020. Between 13 February and 19 May, 5 aid workers were killed, 17 injured and 19 abducted. Attacks on health care continued, with 15 incidents affecting nine health facilities in which 11 health workers and patients were killed and 6 injured.

64. Recognizing the multiple, overlapping challenges during the spring season, the inter-cluster coordination team developed a spring disaster contingency plan identifying \$390 million to meet the most urgent needs from March to June. The plan is a subset of the 2021 humanitarian response plan, which remains severely underfunded, with only 13 per cent of the total requirements of \$1.3 billion received as at 19 May. Furthermore, the capacity to provide essential health-care services and vaccinations, especially in areas of active conflict and non-government-controlled areas, is insufficient and limited owing to severe underfunding and the diversion of scarce resources to the emergency COVID-19 response. Humanitarian actors are unable to scale up and respond to additional needs unless more funding is provided.

VI. Counter-narcotics

65. From 15 February to 9 May, law enforcement authorities in Afghanistan conducted 812 counter-narcotics operations. They led to the seizure of 395 kg of heroin and 4,077 kg of opium, 53,630 kg of hashish, 5,631 kg of cannabis, 169 kg of methamphetamine, 3,311 kg of diverse chemical precursors and 56,289 tablets of methylenedioxymethamphetamine, as well as to the eradication of 126 ha of poppy cultivated land. The seizures resulted in the arrest of 917 suspects and the confiscation of 138 vehicles and 121 weapons.

66. On 17 and 21 February, the Airport Interdiction Unit, working with other law enforcement agencies at Hamid Karzai International Airport, seized 10 carpets impregnated with 7 kg of heroin and clothes impregnated with 7.5 kg of heroin. Five suspects were arrested.

67. According to the executive summary of the Afghanistan Opium Survey for 2020, supported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and published on 3 May, potential opium production in Afghanistan was estimated at 6,300 tons that year. The average opium yield was 28 kg per ha. The south-western region remained the major opium-producing region, accounting for 68 per cent of total opium production in the country. The farm-gate value of opium production in 2020 was estimated at \$300 million, its lowest level since 2009. This is because opium prices, at \$55 per kg, are at their lowest level since the beginning of systematic monitoring, rendering alternative development activities more profitable for some products than illicit opium cultivation.

VII. Mission support

68. As at 31 March, vacancy rates in UNAMA were 13 per cent for international staff, 13 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 10 per cent for National Professional Officers and 3 per cent for national staff, compared with approved rates of 6 per cent, 7 per cent, 3 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively. The proportion of female staff was 34 per cent for international staff, 47 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 13 per cent for National Professional Officers and 10 per cent for national staff.

69. While sustaining the delivery of critical programmes and activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, alternate work arrangements remained in place. In view of the precarious situation associated with the pandemic and compounded by the uncertain security situation, UNAMA and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes continued to enhance contingency planning and decided not to increase the levels of international personnel present at the duty stations and national staff reporting to work, with numbers to be reviewed regularly in consideration of potential changes in the COVID-19 caseload, along with regular assessment of security risks to United Nations personnel and operations.

70. The United Nations in Afghanistan has received 5,000 doses of the Covishield vaccine, covering 20 per cent of total eligible personnel, including staff of international non-governmental organizations. Vaccines are being administered to personnel who have registered in the vaccine registration and administration portal and are prioritized in accordance with the occupational health and safety guidelines of the World Health Organization.

VIII. Observations

71. Afghanistan is entering a new and uncertain phase of its decades-long conflict. Progress in the peace talks that began in September 2020 in Doha has slowed, and fighting continues around the country. While the three-day ceasefire around the Eid al-Fitr celebrations provided a brief respite from violence, fears of military escalation increasingly threaten the atmosphere for genuine negotiations. The announced withdrawal of the remaining international military presence, due for completion within months, has underscored the need for national unity around the peace process. I reiterate my call upon both parties to intensify their efforts in this regard, with the awareness that an inclusive peace process, in which women, young people and victims of conflict are meaningfully represented, is essential for a durable resolution of the conflict. It is only by a negotiated settlement that the violence can end.

72. Regional consensus holds that achieving peace in Afghanistan can benefit populations by virtue of improved conditions for economic cooperation, cross-border exchange and the revival of historic ties. Envisaged plans for greater connectivity would link Afghanistan to the region and the region to Afghanistan. Recognizing the important role of regional countries in achieving peace in Afghanistan and on the political front, I appointed Jean Arnault as my Personal Envoy on Afghanistan and Regional Issues. His work is complementary to and closely coordinated with that of UNAMA in supporting the peace process.

73. The security situation remains deeply concerning. In the six months following the start of the peace talks in September 2020, the number of civilian casualties has increased substantially compared with the same period in 2019. The welfare and protection of civilians is the responsibility of all parties. The deliberate targeting of civilians by anti-government elements, including the targeted killing of media workers, civil society activists, members of the judiciary and civil administration, and women, has been an abominable feature of the conflict. Such attacks must stop immediately and be publicly condemned by all parties, as well as being fully investigated, with perpetrators held to account.

74. The Government's efforts to promote and protect fundamental human rights are commendable. By focusing on the implementation of existing laws and policies, such as the Elimination of Violence against Women Law, specific actions can be taken more readily to promote and guarantee women's rights. Human rights defenders, civil society and the media are essential to the make-up of Afghan society. Continuous support for the human rights sector in Afghanistan during this delicate period, including advocacy for civic space, will be critical.

75. Overcrowding in prisons continues to have a negative impact on conditions of detention, including increased vulnerability to COVID-19. I call upon the Government to explore possible measures to reduce the prison population, including through careful consideration of limiting pretrial detention and increased use of alternative sentencing, as well as addressing overcrowding.

76. The humanitarian situation remains extremely precarious. The significant number of people facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity and the expected high rates of acute malnutrition in children under the age of 5 years are alarming. The substantial likelihood of drought triggered by the second La Niña weather event in three years will exacerbate the humanitarian needs. I call upon donor countries to mobilize early contributions in response to the 2021 humanitarian response plan, which remains severely underfunded, in order to allow humanitarian actors to urgently scale up life-saving activities. I urge all parties to refrain from attacks against humanitarian workers and facilities, ensure safe and unimpeded access and create an enabling environment for humanitarian assistance.

77. Afghanistan will continue to depend on civilian assistance for the foreseeable future. I welcome the progress made in taking forward commitments made at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference, in particular the Afghanistan Partnership Framework. Strong partnership between the Government and donors will be essential to clearly define priorities and support Afghanistan on the road to sustainable economic and social growth, including steps to curb the illicit economy.

78. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt, with concerns about increases in cases as a result of new variants. The start of the vaccination campaign and continued measures to limit the spread of the virus are important elements for sustainably reducing the caseload. The United Nations will continue to support the Government and the people in addressing the impact of the pandemic and is working to ensure equitable access to vaccines.

79. The drawdown of the international military presence reflects a significant change in the operating environment for the United Nations and non-governmental partners. The presence of the Organization remains premised on the principle of staying and delivering. The United Nations has stood by and worked with the people of Afghanistan for 75 years and remains committed to providing impartial, neutral and integrated assistance in support of peace, human rights and sustainable, inclusive development that provide hope and opportunities for all. I call upon all parties to maintain their commitment to protect United Nations and humanitarian personnel and enable them to carry out their vital work in a safe and unhindered manner.

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