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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 the previous report dated 10 December 2019 ([A/74/582-S/2019/935](#)) and until the end of February 2020.

II. Relevant developments

3. Uncertainties surrounding the electoral process and the resumption of talks between the United States of America and the Taliban were at the forefront of political developments in Afghanistan during the reporting period. On 18 February, the Independent Election Commission announced that Ashraf Ghani had won a second term as President, with 50.64 per cent of the votes. The results were rejected as “illegal” by the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, who announced plans for the formation of an alternative, “inclusive” government. Meanwhile, talks between the United States and the Taliban resumed on 6 December. After a reduction in violence beginning on 22 February, the two parties signed an agreement in Doha on 29 February on a timeline for the withdrawal of foreign troops and counter-terrorism guarantees. In parallel, Afghanistan and the United States signed a joint declaration in Kabul, reaffirming commitments to continue supporting Afghanistan. These developments should help to pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations. The security situation remained volatile, with a high number of security incidents, in particular in the southern, northern and eastern regions, before a period of reduction in violence. For 2019, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)



documented 10,392 civilian casualties, a 5 per cent decrease compared with 2018. The humanitarian situation remained dire.

A. Political developments

4. On 22 December, the Independent Election Commission announced the preliminary results of the presidential election held on 28 September 2019, reporting that Mr. Ghani had won 50.64 per cent of the votes, while Mr. Abdullah had secured 39.52 per cent. This followed a prolonged blockage by some presidential candidates of the audit and recounting process and marked the start of a three-day period for candidates to submit their complaints to the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission. The Commission registered a total of 16,545 complaints, primarily from the teams of Mr. Abdullah (5,564), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (3,711) and Mr. Ghani (3,302).

5. On 14 January, the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission announced that its provincial offices had concluded the adjudication of complaints in all 34 provinces, rejecting 9,866 complaints (60 per cent) owing to a lack of evidence and invalidating 109 polling stations. This marked the start of another three-day period for the submission of appeals against the decisions taken.

6. On 4 February, the Election Support Group, chaired by UNAMA and comprising key electoral donors, issued a statement urging the electoral institutions to ensure impartiality, transparency and compliance with electoral legislation. The Group called upon the stakeholders to respect the independence of electoral institutions.

7. On 5 February, the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission announced seven decisions on the adjudication of 6,292 appeals, which were grouped into categories. The decisions primarily related to complaints about 137,630 suspicious votes, 102,012 votes allegedly cast outside polling hours, 2,423 polling stations where voters' biometrics were not captured and cases in which the number of voters in the biometric devices differed from that on the paper results sheets. In accordance with the Commission's decisions, a special audit was ordered for 311 polling stations with suspicious votes and 1,086 polling stations with out-of-hours votes, as well as a recount at 298 polling stations where votes had not been biometrically verified. The Independent Electoral Complaints Commission's decisions directed the Independent Election Commission to conduct the special audits and formally announce the results.

8. Following these decisions, national observer organizations and candidate observers expressed concerns regarding the clarity and the legal basis for the decisions. The teams of Mr. Abdullah, Mr. Hekmatyar and Mr. Nabil rejected the rulings of the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission, stating that decisions were made under political pressure. Dissent among several commissioners of the Commission over the methodology became public, which further eroded public confidence in the process. Several presidential tickets, including that of Mr. Abdullah, refused to participate in the special audit and recount of disputed votes and questioned the procedures.

9. After the finalization of the special audit and recount on 16 and 17 February, the Independent Election Commission announced on 18 February that Mr. Ghani had won a second term as President with 50.64 per cent of the total votes. The runner-up, Mr. Abdullah, received 39.52 per cent of the total votes. The Commission confirmed 1.8 million valid votes, of which 31.5 per cent had been cast by women. The announcement followed a long process that lasted more than four months after the presidential elections held on 28 September 2019.

10. Following the announcement, Mr. Ghani stated his readiness to form a strong Government and work for unity, declaring that the participation of women would be vital. Mr. Abdullah rejected the results as “illegal”, proclaimed his Stability and Convergence ticket as the winner based on “clean votes” and announced his intention to form an alternative, “inclusive” government. Subsequently, his ticket began announcing the appointment of some provincial governors. International partners, including the United Nations, called upon stakeholders to exercise restraint and address grievances through dialogue and respect for the constitutional order.

11. Momentum towards a political settlement to end the conflict accelerated during the reporting period, bolstered by national and international efforts. Official talks between the United States and the Taliban resumed on 6 December in Doha. On 12 December, the United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, announced a “brief pause” in the talks, underlining that the “Taliban must show they are willing and able to respond to Afghan desire for peace”. Talks resumed in mid-January following reported internal consultation among the Taliban leadership around the details for a proposed reduction in violence.

12. Mr. Khalilzad continued his engagement with Afghan and regional stakeholders. During his visits to Kabul on 17 and 18 December, 1 and 2 February and from 18 to 27 February, he gave briefings to Mr. Ghani, Mr. Abdullah and other Afghan political actors on the negotiations in Doha and the efforts to reduce violence and pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations. He emphasized that Afghans should continue to focus on bringing together an inclusive negotiating team in preparation for intra-Afghan negotiations. Mr. Khalilzad also visited Pakistan on 13 December, 31 January and 17 and 18 February, where he met the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the Chief of Army Staff, Qamar Javed Bajwa, and other officials to discuss mutual efforts to support a reduction in violence and a comprehensive ceasefire in pursuit of intra-Afghan negotiations.

13. The prospect of a reduction in violence compared with a ceasefire prompted a range of reactions. Mr. Ghani’s spokesperson stated that a ceasefire was a precondition for the commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations, while Mr. Abdullah stated that a reduction in violence would be acceptable, provided that a ceasefire could be addressed in the negotiations. On 11 February, Mr. Ghani welcomed the developments in the talks between the United States and the Taliban and noted that Afghanistan would “manage the next steps in a manner that positively supports the overall peace process”. Mr. Abdullah also welcomed developments in the talks on the reduction of violence and expressed hope that the Taliban would make use of that opportunity. On 18 February, the Government publicly committed itself to a reduction in violence and expressed the need for a ceasefire during intra-Afghan negotiations. Discussions to form an inclusive negotiating team continued with the Government and other political actors, with parties promoting their plans for intra-Afghan negotiations.

14. International partners continued to reaffirm their commitment to peace in Afghanistan. On 28 January, the Secretary-General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Jens Stoltenberg, reiterated the organization’s commitment to continuing to support the creation of conditions for peace in Afghanistan. Meeting in Brussels on 30 January, European Union and NATO member States reiterated their support for the peace process and inclusive intra-Afghan negotiations. On 13 February, NATO allies and partner nations meeting in Brussels discussed the Resolute Support Mission and expressed their “firm commitment to Afghanistan’s long-term security and stability”. Mr. Stoltenberg stressed that the focus would remain on the provision of training and financial support to the Afghan security forces. At the Munich Security Conference held on 15 February, Mr. Stoltenberg acknowledged the possibility of adjusting NATO force levels to help to pave the way

for intra-Afghan negotiations, if the Taliban demonstrated the will and ability to reduce violence and made compromises for peace.

15. On 21 February, the Secretary of State of the United States, Mike Pompeo, announced that United States negotiators had come to an understanding with the Taliban on a “significant and nationwide reduction of violence across Afghanistan”. He stated that, upon completion of the period of reduction in violence, the signing of an agreement between the United States and the Taliban was expected. The Taliban issued a statement confirming the agreement and providing instructions to its fighters, also noting that the parties would “structure a path for intra-Afghan negotiations”. On 21 February, Mr. Ghani welcomed the reduction in violence and assured the Afghan people that the country’s security forces would abide by the agreement, adding that the Taliban’s acceptance of a reduction in violence was “an important step towards reaching a ceasefire and restoring sustainable peace”. On 22 February, the period of reduced violence started.

16. On 29 February in Doha, the United States and the Taliban signed the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, which outlined a reduction in the number of United States forces to 8,600 troops and a proportional reduction in the number of coalition forces in 135 days, followed by a drawdown of all international forces within another nine and a half months, conditional upon the Taliban’s adherence to the various counter-terrorism commitments. On the same day, in Kabul, a Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan was released, in which agreement was noted between Afghanistan, the United States and coalition partners that, subject to the Taliban’s fulfilment of its commitments under the agreement between the United States and the Taliban, the current levels of international military forces were no longer necessary to achieve security objectives. The signatories to the joint declaration also reaffirmed the commitment of the United States to supporting the Afghan security forces and other government institutions. In both documents the efforts of the United States to facilitate dialogue with Afghanistan and the Taliban on confidence-building measures were noted, including the possible release of prisoners and detainees, ahead of intra-Afghan negotiations, as well as the intention for diplomatic efforts to be undertaken with regard to potentially lifting Security Council sanctions on Taliban members. The date and modalities of a permanent ceasefire are expected to be discussed in intra-Afghan negotiations.

17. Local movements continued their advocacy for peace. Throughout the reporting period, community representatives, activists and grass-roots movements facilitated consultations with local communities and organized events to rally support for an inclusive peace process. On 24 December, 27 members of the People’s Peace Movement were abducted in Farah Province while engaging in a series of local consultations and were released after two days. On 16 February, in Ghazni Province, members of the People’s Peace Movement convened a rally in support of peace, which was attended by 400 people from Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik communities. The participants called for durable peace, a ceasefire and an end to violence.

18. UNAMA continued its engagement with national, regional and international stakeholders to advocate a reduction of violence and to build momentum for intra-Afghan negotiations. On 28 December, my Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, met in Doha with representatives of the Taliban to discuss the peace process, protection of civilians and humanitarian access. On 17 January, he convened a group of special envoys and representatives on Afghanistan in Doha to take stock of international support for the peace process and next steps. On visits to the Islamic Republic of Iran from 26 to 28 January and Pakistan from 16 to 19 February, he held discussions on the peace process with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and the

Minister for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, as well as other officials.

19. During the reporting period, UNAMA sustained its support for subnational authorities and communities on conflict resolution through eight local peace initiatives. In Helmand Province, UNAMA provided a platform for dialogue between religious scholars and women to promote local efforts to reduce violence and enhance the role of women, young people and minorities in support of peace. In Herat, Badghis, Ghor and Farah Provinces, UNAMA worked with more than 1,000 women over a five-month period to help to formulate their vision for peace. On 9 January, 100 participants released a 13-point declaration, highlighting the need to preserve the gains of the past 18 years, address past atrocities, ensure a victim-centred peace process and establish a monitoring mechanism for any eventual peace agreement. From 15 to 17 December, UNAMA co-hosted a workshop in Kabul with Afghan women on strategic engagement in a peace process. On 12 February, it facilitated dialogue with the National Masculinity Alliance, a network of civil society representatives, religious leaders, government officials and the private sector. Participants agreed to mobilize a network of male champions, including religious leaders, to promote gender equality and strengthen the effective participation of women in the peace process. On 20 February, UNAMA facilitated consultations with government and civil society leaders, including women activists, to support leadership roles for women in the Government and future intra-Afghan negotiations.

20. A series of new government appointments was made. On 14 January, Mr. Ghani appointed a new acting Deputy Minister of the Interior, Chief of Staff of the Ministry of Defence and Head of the Education Department of the Ministry of the Interior. On 21 January, he appointed a new acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Haroon Chakhansuri. An acting Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, Mohammad Yama Shams, and an acting Minister of Energy and Water, Khan Mohammad Takal, were announced as well. On 30 December, the parliament approved the State Ministry of Peace as an independent government entity. On 8 January, Mr. Ghani signed a decree instructing the Ministry to coordinate peace-related issues across all relevant ministries. On 22 January, the parliament approved the national budget for the 2020 fiscal year, which included funding for the Ministry. The parliament also established a peace committee to support peace efforts, which held its first meeting on 14 January.

B. Security

21. The security situation remained volatile. Between 8 November and 6 February, UNAMA recorded 4,907 security-related incidents, a similar number as during the same period in the previous year. The highest number of incidents occurred in the southern region, followed by the northern and eastern regions, which together accounted for 68 per cent of all incidents. The most active areas of conflict were Kandahar, Helmand, Nangarhar and Balkh Provinces. Fighting decreased at the end of 2019 and in early 2020, in line with seasonal trends during the winter months. A nationwide reduction in violence commenced on 22 February, as a result of talks between the United States and the Taliban, and in consultation with the Government of Afghanistan.

22. Established trends remain unchanged, with 2,811 armed clashes accounting for 57 per cent of all incidents, representing a 4 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2019. The use of improvised explosive devices remained the second highest type of incident, with a 21 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2019, while suicide attacks decreased by 25 per cent. The 330 air strikes by Afghan and international military air forces during the reporting period represented an 18 per

cent decrease compared with the same period in 2019. Helmand, Kandahar and Farah Provinces accounted for 44 per cent of air strikes.

23. On 31 December, the Taliban reportedly took control of Darzab district in Jawzjan Province following the withdrawal of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. The Taliban also temporarily captured Arghandab district in Zabul Province, while the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces recaptured Guzargahi Nur district in Baghlan Province, which had been under Taliban control since September 2019.

24. High-profile attacks by anti-government elements continued, with 8 suicide attacks recorded during the reporting period, compared with 31 in the previous period and 12 in the same period in 2019. Of those, the majority targeted the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and international military forces. On 11 December, the Taliban launched a complex attack against the Bagram military air base by detonating a large suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. This attack coincided with resumed talks between the United States and the Taliban. The Taliban also deployed suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices against Afghan National Defence and Security Forces installations in Kandahar, Helmand and Balkh Provinces. On 8 February, in Nangarhar Province, an individual wearing an Afghan National Army uniform opened fire on international military forces, killing two United States soldiers and one Afghan National Army soldier. A suicide attack targeting a military academy in Kabul on 11 February, the first major attack in the city in months, killed at least 6 people and wounded more than 10. There were no claims of responsibility for either attack.

25. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-KP) came under sustained pressure in its strongholds in eastern Afghanistan. Reportedly, over 1,400 ISIL-KP fighters and affiliates have surrendered since October, among them women and children. While ISIL-KP was largely expelled from Nangarhar Province in November 2019, it reportedly continues to have a presence in pockets of western Kunar Province. During the reporting period, 49 incidents were attributed to ISIL-KP compared with 194 incidents in the previous period and 68 in the same period in 2019. While there were no high-profile attacks attributed to, or claimed by, ISIL-KP, its potential for conducting future attacks, including in major cities, remains a threat.

26. On 24 November, a United Nations staff member was killed and two others were injured when an improvised explosive attached to their vehicle detonated in Kabul. There were 12 other incidents involving United Nations personnel during the reporting period, including one involving an improvised explosive device, four incidents of intimidation and six criminal-related incidents. On 4 December, the head of a Japanese non-governmental organization, along with five Afghans, was shot and killed in Jalalabad. On 27 December, in the city of Herat, two armed men assassinated two guards from a private security company contracted to provide unarmed security services at the United Nations compound.

C. Regional cooperation

27. Afghanistan continued its engagement with the region through multilateral forums. On 9 December, the Government of Turkey hosted the eighth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference, at which Mr. Ghani presented a series of steps for the advancement of intra-Afghan talks. In the subsequent Istanbul Declaration, the participating States and partners reiterated their commitment to revitalizing the peace process. They adopted the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process working guidelines and implementation plans for confidence-building measures, endorsed the establishment of a new confidence-building measure on agriculture development and expanded the

confidence-building measure on disaster management to include environmental protection. A proposal to establish a confidence-building measure on the empowerment of women was also supported. Tajikistan agreed to be the Co-Chair, with Afghanistan, of the 2020 ministerial conference and to host it.

28. On the margins of the conference, Afghanistan, the United States and Uzbekistan inaugurated a trilateral format to discuss issues of common interest and cooperation. Inaugural discussions were focused on establishing a strategic partnership between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, bilateral cooperation on trade, transit and investment, and United States support for regional connectivity and trade.

29. On 14 January, the port of Gwadar in Pakistan officially started taking cargo under the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, with an initial consignment unloaded and transported to Afghanistan through the Chaman border crossing in Balochistan Province. This followed the official opening of the port for commercial shipping in October 2019, as a component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. On 4 February, the Government of India allocated \$13.9 million for the further development of the port of Chabahar in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with some cargo from India already having been delivered to Afghanistan through the port.

30. Afghanistan continued to expand its engagement with Central Asian States. On 28 January, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan attended a meeting in Berlin hosted by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany, Heiko Maas, along with the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, for the launch of the Green Central Asia initiative. As part of a strategy on Central Asia adopted by the European Council in 2019, the initiative supports regional dialogue on climate change and associated risks, thus fostering further regional integration between the six countries involved.

31. On 1 February, Mr. Ghani met the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, in Kabul to discuss bilateral relations, peace efforts and connectivity projects between the two countries, including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan electricity transmission project. After the inauguration of the gas pipeline in Afghanistan in February 2018, challenges continued to be faced in its construction owing to political instability and security challenges.

32. On 2 February, the Special Envoy of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Afghanistan, Ebrahim Taherian, met Mr. Ghani, Mr. Abdullah, the former President, Hamid Karzai, and the National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, in Kabul. Discussions were focused on bilateral relations, including economic cooperation, counter-terrorism and the fight against extremism and drug trafficking. The Office of the President communicated that both sides had agreed to an expansion of bilateral ties.

33. On 6 February, Mr. Ghani laid the foundation stone for the Central Asia-South Asia power project in Surobi district, Kabul Province. The ambassadors of Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan attended, since the project links Central and South Asia. The project, which is estimated to be completed in 2022, is aimed at transmitting 1,300 MW of electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, through Afghanistan, to Pakistan. Construction is ongoing in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with support from the World Bank.

34. On 11 and 12 February, a joint Afghanistan-Turkmenistan workshop on ensuring the security of regional infrastructure projects was held in Turkmenistan. The workshop was part of the confidence-building measure on regional infrastructure of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process and was supported by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Discussions were focused on the advancement of regional

infrastructure, including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan electricity transmission project.

35. On 12 February, in a joint statement, members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization expressed concern about the military and political situation in Afghanistan, including the presence of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and other terrorist groups. They underlined the link between the terrorist threat and drug production and trafficking and welcomed the efforts of the international community to secure peace.

III. Human rights

36. UNAMA released its 2019 annual report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict on 22 February. Since systematic documentation began in 2009, UNAMA has documented more than 100,000 civilian casualties, with more than 35,000 killed and 65,000 injured. The Mission documented 10,392 civilian casualties in 2019 (3,403 killed and 6,989 injured), the sixth year in a row with more than 10,000 documented civilian casualties. This represents a 5 per cent decrease in comparison with 2018. The reduction was driven by a decrease in civilian casualties attributed to ISIL-KP. Civilian casualties attributed to the other parties, in particular to the Taliban and international military forces, increased. Women and children represented 42 per cent of the civilian casualties. In January, UNAMA documented a significant decrease in civilian casualties in comparison with the same period in 2019.

37. Most civilian casualties (62 per cent) continued to be caused by anti-government elements, 47 per cent attributed to the Taliban, 12 per cent to ISIL-KP and the remainder to undetermined and other anti-government elements. Pro-government forces caused 28 per cent of civilian casualties (including 8 per cent by international military forces). UNAMA documented an 18 per cent increase in civilian casualties attributed to international military forces. Civilian casualties caused by the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces increased by 3 per cent. 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.

38. Suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, representing 42 per cent of the total, followed by ground engagements (29 per cent) and aerial operations (10 per cent). In 2019, UNAMA documented a 24 per cent increase in civilian casualties from non-suicide improvised explosive devices by anti-government elements in comparison with 2018. Civilian casualties from pro-government aerial and search operations reached record high levels, with a 3 and a 2 per cent increase, respectively, in comparison with 2018. UNAMA also documented the continued deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian objects by anti-government elements, including electoral officials and election-related facilities, judges, prosecutors, health-care workers and aid workers, as well as continued attacks against the Shi'a Muslim population.

39. Between 1 October and 31 December, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 687 grave violations affecting 653 children (186 girls and 467 boys), mainly attributed to the Taliban, the Afghan National Army and ISIL-KP. Some 237 incidents resulted in the killing of 214 children and the maiming of 405 children (185 girls and 434 boys). The task force attributed 324 child casualties to armed opposition groups and 183 to pro-government forces. In addition, the task force attributed 81 child casualties to armed opposition groups and pro-government forces. Some 7 children were injured

after cross-border shelling from Pakistan, and 24 child casualties could not be attributed to a specific party to the conflict.

40. The task force verified six instances of the recruitment and use of children by the Taliban, involving 19 boys aged between 10 and 17 years, of whom 18 performed a combat role and one a support role. The task force verified two incidents of sexual violence against children, involving 10 boys (attributed to the Taliban) and 1 girl (attributed to the Afghan National Police).

41. Some 18 attacks affected schools and related personnel, a slight decrease compared with the 25 incidents in the previous quarter. Of the 18 incidents, 9 were attributed to the Taliban, 2 to ISIL-KP, 2 to undetermined anti-government elements, 2 to the National Directorate for Security, 1 to the Afghan National Army, 1 to international military forces and 1 to cross-border shelling from Pakistan.

42. The task force verified 10 attacks against hospitals and protected personnel, a decrease compared with the previous reporting period (26 attacks). Attacks were attributed to the Taliban (eight) and ISIL-KP and the Afghan National Army (one each) and included the intentional killing or injury of health-care personnel, threats, intimidation, abduction, damage, looting, pillaging and deliberate targeting. The task force also verified the military use of a clinic by the Afghan National Army.

43. In December, UNAMA organized activities as part of the global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign throughout the country, including radio broadcasts in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces, an event with Ulema and civil society in Bamyan Province, and training in cooperation with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in Kunar Province. The United Nations Children's Fund also supported activities in Herat Province aimed at engaging religious leaders in mainstreaming messages against gender-based-violence in mosques.

44. In January, the Office of the Attorney General reported that during the previous fiscal year some 2,975 cases of violence against women and girls had been registered, a slight increase from the 2,701 cases registered in the fiscal year before that. Fewer than half of these cases resulted in convictions, while 814 were withdrawn by survivors, 17 were closed owing to a lack of evidence and 733 are in process.

45. At the inaugural meeting of the support committee of the Sexual Harassment Complaints Commission of the Ministry of the Interior, held on 21 December, the Ministry reported no sexual harassment complaints since 21 March, compared with four cases from 21 March 2018 to 20 March 2019. On 12 February, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission released a report on the harassment of women in the security and defence sector. Of the 2,272 female staff of the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police and National Directorate for Security surveyed, 84.5 per cent reported feeling safe at work, while 6.6 per cent reported experiencing harassment and 6.2 per cent reported leaving their jobs owing to harassment by colleagues.

46. On 15 January, the President issued a decree aimed at reforming the penitentiary system. According to the decree, the General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Centres will be detached from the Ministry of the Interior and become an independent civilian department. All lock-ups, detention facilities and prisons currently under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Justice and the National Directorate for Security will be placed under the Directorate, which has the mandate to define the responsibilities of places of detention.

47. Media workers and human rights defenders continue to be affected by intimidation and violence. During the reporting period, three journalists (including one woman) received threats from anti-government elements, while another was

injured in an explosion in Helmand Province. In 2019, the Government and Media Joint Committee reported 116 cases of violence against journalists and media workers, including 10 killed and 21 injured, indicating a 41 per cent decrease compared with 2018. The Committee's regulation for the protection of journalists and media workers was endorsed on 10 February by the Cabinet. Still to be published in the official gazette, the regulation was welcomed by advocacy groups.

48. On 18 February, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission released a report confirming credible evidence of sexual abuse in schools and other locations in Logar Province. Five human rights defenders involved in researching the practice of bacha bazi in the province left Afghanistan because of serious threats received from both government and non-government actors. Investigations by the Office of the Attorney General into the allegations of bacha bazi reportedly led to the arrest of 8 of the 18 suspects and a request to the International Criminal Police Organization for the arrest of three other suspects who had fled the country. Seven other suspects remain at large.

49. UNAMA organized nine events in eight provinces on 10 December to mark International Human Rights Day. The events brought together the media, human rights defenders and government counterparts to promote the universality of human rights. They were attended by 576 participants, of which 199 were women. In January, UNAMA facilitated a three-day workshop for commissioners of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, with a view to discussing opportunities for their engagement on issues related to peace, human rights and transitional justice, including victims' perspectives on the current public discourse.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

50. UNAMA continued to coordinate with the Government and donors, including potential hosts, in preparation for the 2020 ministerial pledging conference on Afghanistan. The conference is to determine donor funding for the final four years of the Transformation Decade (2015–2024), aimed at establishing Afghan self-reliance. At the most recent pledging conference, held in Brussels in 2016, donors committed \$15.2 billion. On 17 December, the third quarterly report on the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework was published following extensive consultations with donors. On 7 January, the Ministry of Finance agreed to work on an annual Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework report that encapsulates progress on all 24 indicators covering, inter alia, political, development and anti-corruption thematic areas.

51. The World Bank, in its report on development in Afghanistan issued on 22 January, noted that the country's economy grew by an estimated 2.9 per cent in 2019, driven mainly by strong agricultural growth following recovery from drought and the impact of political uncertainty dampening private confidence and investment. It noted the need for the Government to accelerate improvements in business environment and anti-corruption reforms to boost investor confidence. As growth is expected to be modest in 2020, Afghanistan will remain heavily dependent on aid.

52. The Government continued to implement governance reforms. On 19 January, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission launched its strategic plan for 2020–2025 for an efficient and impartial civil service that advances economic development goals. As at 11 February, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance has given briefings to local authorities in 28 of the 34 provinces on the law on local councils, in which future council elections are defined and local council oversight of subnational administrations is facilitated.

53. The output of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre remained low, consistent with the previous reporting period. From 1 December to 16 February, the Centre's primary court adjudicated three cases and its appeal court adjudicated seven cases. This brought the total number of cases adjudicated by the Centre since its inception in 2016 to 68, with 260 defendants at the primary court resulting in 208 convictions and 50 acquittals. Since its establishment, the appeal court has adjudicated 59 cases with 193 defendants, convicting 174 and acquitting 19 others. On 15 January, the appeal court affirmed the convictions of seven former commissioners of the Independent Election Commission and three former commissioners of the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission, who had been found guilty of altering vote counts during the 2018 parliamentary elections. The commissioners had appealed the conviction by arguing that it had been politically motivated.

54. Limited progress was made in improving the cooperation of law enforcement authorities in corruption-related prosecutions. The reform of the Major Crimes Task Force was not finished, leaving the Anti-Corruption and Justice Centre without a functioning police component. On 24 December, the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of the Interior established the Arrest Warrants Joint Committee to improve the execution of outstanding arrest warrants. Of the 255 outstanding arrest warrants and summonses related to serious corruption cases, only 94 have been processed to date.

55. The 2017 National Anti-Corruption Strategy expired on 31 December 2019 without a successor document, leaving Afghanistan without a framework document for addressing corruption. While the High Council on Governance, Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption increased the frequency of meetings and was convened three times during the reporting period, with Mr. Ghani in the chair, it did not prepare grounds for a new strategy. After presentation in October 2019, the 2020 interim draft anti-corruption reform acceleration plan was shelved by the High Council without adoption. In January 2020, Mr. Ghani tasked a technical committee composed of representatives from the Ministry of Finance, the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of the Ombudsperson and a civil society representative, Integrity Watch Afghanistan, with assessing the impact of the expired strategy.

56. On 16 and 17 December, the Supreme Court organized the first subnational follow-up conference on the 2018 Penal Code. Participants gathered lessons learned from the implementation of the Code. From 14 to 31 December, UNAMA provided mentoring to strengthen the capacity of the Office of the Attorney General's international crimes department to investigate cases of serious conflict-related human rights violations. The department is investigating some 20 cases, none of which have resulted in an indictment at present.

V. Humanitarian assistance

57. Some 9.4 million people are estimated to need humanitarian and protection assistance in 2020, up from 6.3 million in 2019. This increase is due to ongoing conflict and an expansion of the scope of needs analysis to include acute humanitarian needs driven by protracted crises and the lack of recovery, beyond immediate shocks. Between 11 November and 18 February, more than 42,000 persons were newly displaced by conflict, increasing the total number who had fled their homes since the start of 2019 to more than 463,000. More than half of those (58 per cent) were children. An estimated 4 million persons have been displaced since 2012, living with limited access to basic services, often in informal settlements, and with little desire or opportunity to return to their homes.

58. The conflict continued to generate high levels of demand for trauma services. From 11 November to 18 February, more than 18,500 people were treated for conflict-related traumatic injuries, a 16 per cent increase compared with the same period in the previous year. One in three trauma cases involved a woman or a child. Nearly 390,000 pregnant or lactating women and children benefited from essential health services and health education in 2019. From 11 November to 18 February, health partners provided medical assistance to over 52,000 persons, 62 per cent of whom were women and girls. Over 129,000 women and girls had access to reproductive health services, around 6,400 of whom received sanitary items to meet their basic dignity needs. In addition, 6,367 survivors of gender-based violence had access to gender-based violence prevention and response services in 26 of the 34 provinces.

59. Across Afghanistan, 25 provinces are above the emergency threshold for acute malnutrition, with over 3 million women and children projected to be acutely malnourished in 2020. Millions are still struggling to recover after the drought in 2018 and 2019. Until the end of March 2020, 14.3 million people are projected to experience crisis and emergency levels of food insecurity. During 2019, nutrition cluster partners treated more than 230,000 children with severe acute malnutrition. In formerly drought-affected areas, 16,500 persons were provided with food between 1 November and 31 January, while one member of each family participated in asset creation activities, and 28,000 displaced persons in Qala-e Naw, Badghis Province, received cash transfers.

60. A debt crisis has emerged among those affected by the drought in the west in 2018 and 2019, with figures showing that it will now take an average of 16 years for internally displaced persons returning to Badghis Province, one of the provinces hit hardest by the drought, to repay what they had borrowed during the time when they were displaced. Between December 2019 and March 2020, the United Nations expects to reach 718,851 persons (102,693 households) in 16 provinces with wheat production packages (seeds, fertilizer and training) in time for the wheat-planting season. An additional 10,500 persons (1,500 households) are being provided with home gardening packages. Moreover, the United Nations is also planning cash-for-work activities between January and March 2020 for 14,000 persons (2,000 households) in Daykundi, Farah and Kunar Provinces.

61. Despite security and access challenges, in the final quarter of 2019 humanitarian organizations were able to reach 395 of the 401 districts (98 per cent) with assistance. To help the most vulnerable families to get through the winter, the United Nations and partners distributed 41,000 tonnes of food and \$3.3 million in cash to 1.89 million persons during the reporting period. Of the 95,000 households requiring specialized winterization assistance (mostly assistance with heating), partners had reached 43,898 persons by 31 January. Negotiating humanitarian access has been especially arduous, with the increased levy demands from anti-government elements.

62. A total of 116,525 undocumented persons and refugee returnees arrived in Afghanistan between 16 November and 18 February. That included 2,258 undocumented returnees from Pakistan and 104,476 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 8,904 assisted and deported returnees from other countries. During the same period, 519 refugee returnees came from Pakistan, 333 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 35 from other countries. In 2019, there was a decrease in the number of undocumented returnees and registered refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan compared with 2018, while there was an increase in those returning from Turkey (6,720 during the reporting period, with a total of 25,000 during 2019). During my visit to Pakistan from 16 to 19 February, I attended an event on the theme “International conference on 40 years of hosting Afghanistan refugees in Pakistan: a new partnership for solidarity”, held in Islamabad, which was organized jointly by

the Government of Pakistan and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

63. On 24 February, the Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan confirmed the country's first patient with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Herat Province, where the local government declared a state of emergency. Additional suspected cases were reported in several provinces in the western region. On 26 February, Mr. Ghani ordered the Ministry of Finance to allocate \$15 million to the Ministry of Public Health to fund COVID-19 prevention efforts, as well as an additional \$10 million as a reserve. The Ministry is working closely with the World Health Organization and other stakeholders to expand in-country preparedness and containment capacity and to strengthen detection and surveillance capacities at points of entry into Afghanistan to prevent the spread of the outbreak.

64. A total of 29 confirmed cases of polio had been reported in 2019, namely 9 in Uruzgan, 5 in Helmand, 6 in Kandahar, 1 in Paktika, 1 in Burmal, 1 in Kunar, 1 in Nangarhar, 1 in Herat, 2 in Farah, 1 in Badghis and 1 in Baghlan. Of these, 25 cases originated in inaccessible areas where house-to-house immunization campaigns have been banned by the Taliban since May 2019.

65. Explosive remnants of war and anti-personnel mines caused 134 child casualties from November to January, killing 49 children and injuring 85. Bamyan was the only province to be declared free of landmine contamination following the work of the only mixed-gender demining team in Afghanistan. During the same period, the United Nations and partners cleared 7.43 km² of land contaminated by high-impact explosives, benefiting 366,830 people. Approximately 127,714 people returning from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran received mine risk education provided by the United Nations and its partners.

66. Widespread insecurity, mine contamination and difficult terrain continued to present challenges for humanitarian access and the safety and security of aid workers. From 16 November to 18 February, 12 aid workers were killed, 17 injured and 8 abducted. In total for 2019, aid workers reported 439 access-related incidents, the highest number recorded by the United Nations. Of these, over 136 access-related incidents undermined the delivery of health services by targeting health personnel, assets and facilities.

67. A total of \$465.3 million in humanitarian funding, or 76 per cent of the total funding required, was received in 2019. This made possible a humanitarian response that reached 6 million persons with life-saving assistance across the country. A total of \$733 million is sought for the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan to reach 7.1 million persons with multisectoral life-saving assistance. According to the Financial Tracking Service, it was 1 per cent funded as at 19 February.

VI. Counter-narcotics

68. From 1 December to 31 January, law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 556 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 404 kg of heroin, 2,656 kg of opium, 336,736 kg of hashish and cannabis, 144 kg of methamphetamine, 1,100 methamphetamine tablets, 24 kg of ephedrine/pseudoephedrine and 1,031 litres of acetic anhydride. The seizures led to the arrest of 882 suspects and the confiscation of 117 vehicles and 37 weapons. One officer of the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police was killed during the operations.

69. According to preliminary analysis, the volume of methamphetamine seizures increased from 182 kg in 2018 to 1,251 kg in 2019, highlighting an emerging threat. During the reporting period, the Drug Demand Reduction Department of the Ministry

of Public Health opened five drug treatment centres with support from the United Nations. The centres provide services for the prevention and treatment of drug use disorders for children and their families.

70. On 13 February, the Office of the Attorney General reported that the Chief and the Director of Investigation of the Kabul Counter-Narcotics Police were sentenced to over 17 years and 7 and half years of prison, respectively, for collusion with drug smugglers. Two other counter-narcotics officials received sentences of one and a half year on similar charges.

VII. Mission support

71. As at 31 December, vacancy rates at UNAMA were 7 per cent for international staff, 4 per cent for National Professional Officers and 3 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, 42 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 11 per cent for National Professional Officers and 8 per cent for national staff. Between 1 October and 30 December, UNAMA conducted 99 road and 18 air missions, as well as 983 reverse outreach missions during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

72. There have been major developments during the reporting period aimed at achieving a lasting political settlement in Afghanistan. Against the background of 40 years of conflict, poverty and forced displacement, the present historic opportunity for peace must be seized, in accordance with the demands and expectations of the Afghan people for a better future. All Afghan leaders and members of the international community have to do everything possible so that prospects for peace are realized.

73. After a prolonged and contested electoral process, the democratic transfer of power has provided an opportunity for advancing the nation's interests. I salute the courage and determination of the Afghan women and men who participated in the polling as voters, candidates, campaign and electoral workers, and observers. I trust that the new Government will embody the expectations of the population and demonstrate the strength of Afghanistan in its diversity. The country faces serious security, economic and development challenges, which will require urgent attention in order to ensure progress.

74. In the past 11 years alone, civilian casualties have surpassed 100,000. This calculation fails, however, to capture the human suffering and the loss of opportunities that have affected generations of Afghan men and women. I am particularly concerned by the high levels of civilian casualties caused by deliberate attacks on civilians through the use of improvised explosive devices, as well as the effects of aerial and search operations. The United Nations continues to engage with all parties, including with respect to ensuring that humanitarian and human rights obligations are understood and met, in order to help to alleviate the impact of the armed conflict on civilians.

75. Scenes of Afghans finding respite in the more secure environment resulting from the reduction in violence are highly encouraging. Afghans from diverse religious, tribal and civil society groups strongly desire peace. It is my hope that the nationwide reduction in violence will be sustained, for the benefit of all Afghans. I encourage continued efforts by all parties to create an enabling environment for a comprehensive peace process.

76. Ultimately, peace in Afghanistan has to be made by and between Afghans. It is my hope that the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan and the Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, both signed on 29 February, will build momentum towards intra-Afghan negotiations at the earliest possible date. Direct talks are essential in order to pave the way towards a lasting political settlement and a permanent ceasefire and to advance sustainable development across the country.

77. To be durable, any settlement has to uphold the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all citizens and safeguard the gains made with regard to the human rights of women. Peace has to be based on broad consensus, and the political and social diversity of Afghanistan has to be represented in the peace process to lay the groundwork for community acceptance of an eventual settlement. I encourage the formation of an inclusive negotiating team.

78. I reiterate the importance of an inclusive Afghan-led peace process with the meaningful participation of women, young people and minorities. The United Nations stands ready to support such an inclusive peace process.

79. The constructive role of countries in the region will be vital in ensuring the success of any intra-Afghan negotiations, as well as the stability and economic development of Afghanistan and the broader neighbourhood. Regional trade, assistance from non-traditional donors and greater connectivity are in the mutual interest and will be critical to the increased self-sufficiency of Afghanistan. The country's relationship with Pakistan, in particular, will be central. I welcome signs that the administrations in Islamabad and Kabul are utilizing opportunities and exploring the means to reshape engagement. I am further encouraged by the continued forward momentum of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, with the Istanbul Declaration reflecting unanimous support by regional stakeholders for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led reconciliation process.

80. I am encouraged by measures taken by the Government to protect and promote women's rights. It is critical to create the space for women to actively participate in all levels of decision-making to solidify gains made and enhance women's rights. Legislative protections have to be fully implemented, especially in rural and remote areas. The continued prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence and discriminatory practices is of concern. I call upon the Government of Afghanistan to strengthen prevention and protection mechanisms, to provide victims with adequate support and to bring perpetrators to justice.

81. Space for freedom of expression remains restricted, as media workers and human rights defenders continue to be the targets of intimidation and violence. Perpetrators of such unacceptable attacks have to be brought to justice. I welcome the endorsement of the regulation for the protection of journalists and media workers and call upon the Government of Afghanistan to establish an effective protection mechanism for human rights defenders and to implement measures to ensure their safety.

82. The economic situation in Afghanistan remains of grave concern. I welcome progress made in the implementation of the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework, adopted in 2018. This has to be upheld. Even with continued progress in reforms, including enhanced revenue performance, it is predicted that the Government will continue to run significant budget deficits for the foreseeable future. The impact of revenue shortfalls risks limiting investment in programmes for long-term development and poverty reduction. Sustained donor commitment will be required to allow the Government's reform proposals to become firmly embedded and thereby restore higher levels of economic growth and increase self-sustainability. The pledging conference to be held later in 2020 is crucial in assisting the Government of

Afghanistan in realising its objectives of economic and social self-reliance in the final four years of the Transformation Decade.

83. Years of conflict and recurrent natural disasters have left an acutely vulnerable population with few economic resources, an eroded capacity to cope with the unfolding crisis and little hope of recovery if the current conditions persist. Hunger and malnutrition remain at dangerously high levels despite the passing of the drought, with 14.28 million persons expected to be in crisis or emergency food insecurity in early 2020. I am grateful to international donors for their generous response to alleviate the suffering of Afghan people to date and urge them to continue to provide adequate resources to allow humanitarian organizations to mobilize a response that matches the scale of the needs in the country.

84. I thank all the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfilling our commitments in support of the Government and people of Afghanistan.
