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The overall poor security situation and the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan continued to limit progress on human rights in Afghanistan between July and December 2016. Despite some challenges, no major population centres fell to the Taliban in 2016 and overall there was a more effective use of Afghan forces against the insurgency. However there was also increased allied support particularly from US air assets. A number of sectarian attacks and a further increase in civilian casualties related to the insurgency underline that there is still much to do to advance human rights on the ground. The international community confirmed their continued support to Afghanistan at the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July and the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan in October.

On 5 October, the European Union and the government of Afghanistan co-hosted the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan. 75 countries and 26 international organisations and agencies participated. The Afghan government presented an ambitious reform agenda and the international community pledged “their collective commitment to deepen and strengthen their cooperation to achieve Afghanistan’s self-reliance in the transformation decade (2015-2024)”. In total, US \$15.2 billion in financial support was pledged. In advance of the conference, the International Development Secretary of State, Priti Patel, announced that the UK would renew our commitment to ongoing development support to Afghanistan with a package of long-term support worth £750 million over the next 4 years.

Participants at an event on women’s empowerment in Afghanistan at the Brussels Conference concluded that while many positive changes have occurred, further improvement remains essential. UK efforts remain focused on tackling violence against women, supporting women in security and police; improving education and women’s economic and political participation. The number of female judges as a percentage of the total has increased from 4.7% in 2008 to 9% in 2016; there have been more significant increases in the number of female lawyers (6.1% in 2008 to 23% in 2016), female prosecutors (6.4% in 2013 to 14% in 2016), and female police officers (180 in 2005 to an estimated 3,000 in 2016). During Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson’s first visit to the country, he witnessed the work Britain is doing to train Afghan security forces and tackle terrorism, as well as UK projects promoting education and women’s rights and noted that UK “development work means girls are defying extremists by going to school and university”.

Women still face huge challenges. As an illustration of this risk, five female airport workers were shot and killed in December, whilst travelling to the airport in Kandahar. It is understood that the

women had previously received death threats from those who disapproved of them working outside the home.

On 24 August, 7 students and 6 university employees were killed and dozens more injured, in an attack by gunmen on the American University in Kabul. The university is regarded as a symbol of cooperation between Afghanistan and the United States; hence it was seen as an anti-Western attack. No group claimed responsibility. Following the attack, the university released a statement reiterating its educational mission and that it 'had no intention of giving in to terror'.

Despite its struggles, to date Afghanistan had experienced little sectarian violence. However during the reporting period there have been a number of incidents targeting the Shia minority. In October, a suicide bomber killed 14 people at a mosque in Balkh and a further 18 were killed in a gun attack on worshippers at the Karte Shakhi shrine during Ashoura. On 20 November, a suicide attack on a Shia mosque in Kabul killed at least 27 people and injured a further 35. Minister for Asia and the Pacific, Alok Sharma, tweeted his condolences. ISIL claimed responsibility for all 3 attacks. Moreover, in July a demonstration by members of Afghanistan's largely Shia, Hazara minority was attacked by suicide bombers, killing over 60 people.

November also saw 2 high-profile attacks against international targets. The first on the US military base at Bagram Airfield killed 4 people and injured a further 14. The second targeted the German Consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, where a suicide truck killed at least 6 civilians and wounded 120. The Taliban claimed responsibility for both attacks.

The human rights team of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continues to document large numbers of civilian casualties. These continue disproportionately to affect women and children. Between 1 July and 30 September, the country task force on monitoring and reporting documented and verified 438 incidents that resulted in 919 child casualties (245 deaths and 674 injuries). The causes of these casualties were largely ground engagements, but also a result of improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war and aerial bombardments. 45 per cent of incidents were attributed to anti-government elements, but 33 per cent were attributed to pro-government forces, predominately the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

In November an Afghan women's right advocacy trainer was murdered while leading a programme for 'Women for Women International - Men's Engagement'. The programme aims to challenge traditional norms in Afghanistan and seeks to explore the benefits to families and communities of empowering women. It was an example of the risks that individuals in Afghanistan take to defend the rights of others.

There is a risk of a severe humanitarian crisis as the number of returnees to Afghanistan continues to increase rapidly. In September 2016, the UN launched a flash appeal to raise \$152 million to support the "1 million on the move" expected by the end of the year, mostly returning from Pakistan and Iran. The UK has contributed £15 million to the appeal, and over £45 million in humanitarian assistance for 2016-17.

President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah continue to be committed to electoral reform and holding parliamentary and provincial elections in 2017. But serious challenges remain, for example constituency delimitation, election budget and a voter registration system all need to be agreed before an election date can be announced. Nevertheless, there was some progress during this

period. On 22 November President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah swore in new commissioners for the Independent Elections Commission and the Independent Election Complaints Commission. Reports from international observers of the selection process described it as transparent and diligent. However, this view was not shared by all NGOs, with some criticising parts of the process.

In November a review of the second EU – Afghanistan Human Rights Dialogue took place in Kabul. It was an opportunity for an open discussion of the human rights situation in Afghanistan and to review the progress made by Afghanistan against the commitments made at the Dialogue in June. The UK welcomed a number of significant steps taken by the government of Afghanistan and reaffirmed our commitment, alongside colleagues from the EU, to support Afghanistan in delivering its human rights objectives.