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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 17 March 2020 ([A/74/753-S/2020/210](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. The President, Ashraf Ghani, and the former Chief Executive and presidential candidate, Abdullah, concluded an agreement on 17 May, overcoming nearly three months of political impasse and paving the way for government formation. Preparations for a peace process continued, with the establishment of a negotiating team representing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and with confidence-building through prisoner releases, but attacks persisted as the Taliban rejected calls for a ceasefire. The number of reported armed clashes returned to established trends following the one-week nationwide reduction in violence in February. Based on the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the United States of America and the Taliban 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, the United States announced steps to start reducing the number of United States forces from 13,000 to 8,600 by 13 July. The spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) added to serious concerns for the humanitarian situation in view of continued conflict-related displacement, population returns, poverty and food



insecurity. Planning continued for the 2020 ministerial pledging conference on Afghanistan.

A. Political developments

4. On 9 March, Mr. Ghani was sworn in as President for a second term. In his inauguration speech, he reiterated his commitment to national cohesion, the formation of an inclusive government, and fostering peace and economic growth. Calling the election results fraudulent and illegal, Mr. Abdullah held his own inauguration ceremony on the same day. On 11 March, Mr. Ghani dissolved the Office of the Chief Executive by decree. Negotiations between Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah on the formation of a government continued for over two months, with disagreements on power-sharing arrangements.

5. Afghan political leaders sought to mediate a resolution to the political impasse, as civil society activists, elders and community leaders urged both sides to uphold national rather than personal interests in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and intra-Afghan negotiations. The Secretary of State of the United States, Mike Pompeo, visited Kabul on 23 March to encourage the leaders to resolve the political crisis and move forward with peace efforts. Upon his departure, the United States issued a statement expressing regret at the failure of the two leaders to agree on an inclusive government and announcing a \$1 billion funding cut in 2020, with a possible further \$1 billion reduction in 2021 should the political impasse remain unresolved. In response, Mr. Ghani reassured the Afghan people that the reduction of assistance would not affect key sectors or people's lives and suggested that the United States might revisit its decision. The prolonged impasse generated national and international reactions. On 1 May, the European Union and Norway reiterated the need to end political divisions, emphasizing that a lack of progress might affect the availability of future funding for security and development.

6. Following his inauguration, Mr. Ghani announced a number of key appointments, including Haneef Atmar as acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal as acting Minister of Finance, Ahmad Zia Saraj as acting Director General of the National Directorate for Security, Shakir Kargar as Chief of Staff in the Office of the President, Fazl Fazli as Head of the Administrative Affairs Office of the President, and Mohammad Yousuf Ghazanfar as the President's Special Representative on Economic Development, Trade and Poverty Reduction Affairs. He also appointed five provincial governors. On 4 April, the former President, Hamid Karzai, Abdul Rab Rasool SayAAF, and the former First Vice-Presidents, Yonus Qanooni and Karim Khalili, publicly urged Mr. Ghani to suspend appointments until a political settlement was reached with Mr. Abdullah. On 13 May, Mr. Ghani appointed two State ministers, namely, Zia ul Haq Amarkhel as State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs and Ghulam BahaUddin Jailani as State Minister for Natural Disaster Management.

7. On 26 March, the State Ministry of Peace announced the formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan negotiating team. Led by the former Director General of the National Directorate for Security, Masoom Stanekzai, the 21-member team comprises representatives from various political and social constituencies and includes four women. The formation of the team was welcomed by many Afghan political leaders, including Mr. Abdullah, as well as by international and regional stakeholders, although the Taliban has questioned whether the team is truly representative.

8. The State Ministry of Peace and the negotiating team began preparations for negotiations. In mid-April, the team formed four committees on thematic issues and began meeting with constituencies and interest groups. On 13 April, representatives of the two bodies met with 11 women members of parliament to discuss the

preservation of rights and values and the effective participation of women in the peace process. On 20 and 21 April, the State Minister of Peace, Abdul Salam Rahimi, met with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, members of the negotiating team and a group representing war victims, whom he pledged to involve in the peace process. On 26 April, Mr. Rahimi held the second meeting of the Senior Coordination Committee for Peace Affairs to coordinate a whole-of-government approach to the peace process.

9. Further to the appeal of the Secretary-General for a global ceasefire in support of the battle against COVID-19, numerous Afghan actors and international stakeholders called for a ceasefire in Afghanistan to enable a humanitarian response to the pandemic. On 23 April, on the eve of Ramadan, Mr. Ghani appealed to the Taliban to agree to a humanitarian ceasefire. On 24 April, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) issued a statement emphasizing that the level of violence by the Taliban was not acceptable and calling on the Taliban to enter into negotiations with the Government without delay and for both sides to accelerate the release of prisoners and detainees and declare a humanitarian ceasefire. Also on 24 April, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation renewed its appeal for all parties to work together for an urgent and lasting ceasefire during the month of Ramadan. Many women activists and grass-roots organizations, along with Afghan religious scholars, called for Afghan political leaders and the parties to the conflict to set aside their differences and work together to address the pandemic and anticipated food shortages. On 26 April, the Taliban issued a statement rejecting calls for a ceasefire or humanitarian pause, claiming that the United States and the Government of Afghanistan were not committed to their obligations under the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan of 29 February, in particular the release of 5,000 prisoners, and reiterating that no discussion of a ceasefire would be considered until the start of intra-Afghan negotiations.

10. On 17 May, Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah signed an agreement ending the political impasse. The agreement specifies a 50 per cent share in the Government for Mr. Abdullah, including appointments to ministries and provincial governors; the creation of a High Council of Government and a High Council for Peace and National Reconciliation; intended electoral reforms; and the promotion of the former Vice-President, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, to the position of Marshal, with the associated authorities as Deputy Commander-in-Chief. The High Council of Government is to consist of political leaders and national figures and will focus on creating political consensus and providing advice to the President on national issues. The High Council for Peace and National Reconciliation, which will be under the leadership of Mr. Abdullah, establishes the architecture for the management of the peace process. A delegation consisting of six political elders is to be established for the monitoring of the agreement and the mediation of disputes. On 18 and 19 May, the President made two further appointments, namely, Hasina Safi as acting Minister of Women's Affairs and Noorulhaq Ulumi as Special Representative for Good Governance Affairs.

11. The agreement of 17 May was welcomed by many national and international partners, including the European Union, NATO and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Others pointed to shortcomings. The former Minister for Foreign Affairs and leader of Jamiat-I Islami, Salahuddin Rabbani, and the leader of Hizb-i Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, maintained their position that the presidential election results should be annulled. The Taliban rejected the agreement as a repetition of past failed experiences.

12. In accordance with the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan and the Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America, on 9 March the United States announced the start of its conditions-based reduction of forces to 8,600 over 135 days. Also based on the Agreement and the Joint

Declaration, efforts began to implement the confidence-building measure of prisoner releases. On 11 March, Mr. Ghani signed a decree for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners in two phases. The first 1,500 prisoners would be released based on age, health and remaining sentence. The remaining 3,500 Taliban prisoners would be released on the condition that progress was made in intra-Afghan negotiations and that there were further reductions in Taliban violence. All releases required guarantees that the prisoners would not return to combat. The Taliban spokesperson described the decree as “not satisfactory” and repeated the demand that 5,000 prisoners be released before the beginning of negotiations.

13. On 15 and 16 March, the United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Commander of NATO and United States forces in Afghanistan, General Austin Miller, met with Taliban representatives in Doha to pave the way for virtual technical talks on prisoner releases among representatives of the Taliban and the Government, which were subsequently held on 22, 25 and 29 March. On 23 March, the Secretary of State of the United States, Mr. Pompeo, met the Head of the Taliban Political Commission, Mullah Baradar, in Qatar and discussed plans to accelerate the release of detainees and reduce the levels of violence.

14. With the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross, a three-member Taliban technical team arrived in Kabul on 31 March to discuss prisoner releases and verification, the first publicly acknowledged face-to-face meeting between the Government and the Taliban. Despite disagreements related to eligibility criteria, which resulted in the Taliban recalling its technical team on 7 April, the Government released 100 prisoners on 8 April and the Taliban released 20 detainees on 12 April. On 13 April, General Miller and Mr. Khalilzad held talks with the Taliban in Doha to encourage a reduction in violence and further releases of detainees. Mr. Khalilzad met with the Taliban in Doha again on 6 and 7 May to encourage a reduction in violence and a humanitarian pause to address the COVID-19 pandemic. As at 7 May, the Government had reported the release of a total of 1,000 Taliban prisoners, while the Taliban had reported the release of a total of 276 detainees.

15. On 11 May, the Government announced the suspension of prisoner releases, citing concerns that detainees released by the Taliban to date included civilians who had been abducted after the Agreement of 29 February, and pending the release by the Taliban of a total of 200 detainees from the Afghan security forces. Mr. Khalilzad met again with the Taliban in Doha on 18 and 19 May. On 20 May, he met with Mr. Ghani, the Chairman of the High Council for Peace and National Reconciliation, Mr. Abdullah, the head of the negotiating team, Mr. Stanekzai, and the State Minister of Peace, Mr. Rahimi, in Kabul to discuss the steps to reach intra-Afghan negotiations.

16. UNAMA continued to engage with national, regional and international stakeholders in support of a reduction in violence, a ceasefire and intra-Afghan negotiations. On 9 April, special envoys and representatives on Afghanistan and UNAMA held a virtual meeting to take stock of the peace process and encourage confidence-building measures. Local peace initiatives by UNAMA continued. UNAMA worked with subnational authorities and communities in over 25 provinces, where calls for a humanitarian pause, peace and COVID-19 prevention were broadcast on local radio. A women’s shura council in Sarobi district, Kabul, established and supported through a local peace initiative by UNAMA, redirected its work to support COVID-19 prevention efforts. Similarly, women and youth groups in Kabul used social media channels to broadcast COVID-19 prevention messages alongside peace messaging and engaged with local authorities and members of the United Nations country team to support the distribution of aid to vulnerable families.

17. Coordination discussions by UNAMA with donors and partner organizations mobilized support and technical assistance for the peace process and negotiating

teams, as well as the State Ministry of Peace. In April and May, UNAMA continued advising the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission on options for engagement on issues related to peace, human rights and transitional justice, including how to bring victims' perspectives into the peace process and public discourse. Donors and peace practitioners also coordinated support for women's participation in the peace process. On 10 March, the Permanent Missions of Afghanistan and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations, as co-chairs of the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan, co-hosted, together with the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, a discussion at Headquarters entitled "A critical moment for Afghan women: the intra-Afghan peace process".

B. Security

18. The security situation remained volatile and unpredictable. With the nationwide reduction in violence during the last week of February, reports of direct armed engagements dropped to the lowest level of any seven-day period over the past 10 years, with a total of 41 armed attacks. Taliban attacks resumed the day after the signing of the Agreement of 29 February. In view of the Taliban attacks, the acting Minister of Defence announced an "active defence posture" on 19 March. The day after high-profile attacks on 12 May targeting a hospital in Kabul and a funeral in Nangarhar, Mr. Ghani announced that the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces would return to an "offensive posture", with a resumption of operations against the Taliban.

19. Between 7 February and 14 May, UNAMA recorded 5,543 security-related incidents, a 2 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2019. The highest number of incidents occurred in the southern region, followed by the northern and eastern regions, with those three regions accounting for 59 per cent of all incidents.

20. Established trends remained unchanged, with 3,422 armed clashes accounting for the majority of all incidents (62 per cent) during the reporting period, representing a similar number of armed clashes compared with the same period in 2019. Anti-government elements initiated 95 per cent of direct armed engagements following the violence reduction period. The use of improvised explosive devices remained the second most common type of incident, with a 22 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2019. The 180 air strikes by Afghan and international military air forces during the reporting period represented a 47 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2019, reflecting reduced international military air operations. The number of air strikes conducted by the Afghan Air Force showed an overall increase.

21. Neither pro-government forces nor anti-government elements achieved any significant territorial gains during the reporting period. On 2 March, the Taliban announced that it was resuming its military operations; however, the group has not yet declared its annual spring offensive. The highest amount of conflict activity occurred in Kandahar, Helmand, Wardak and Balkh provinces. On 28 March, the Taliban retook control of Yamgan district in Badakhshan Province (north-eastern region), which had been recaptured by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces on 9 September 2019. On 10 April, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces recaptured Khamyab district in Jowzjan Province (northern region), which had been under Taliban control for approximately two years.

22. High-profile attacks by anti-government elements continued, with 10 suicide attacks recorded during the reporting period, compared with 8 in the previous period. Six of the attacks targeted Afghan National Defence and Security Forces installations, a hospital, a funeral and a place of worship. There was no claim of responsibility for the

attack of 12 May on the hospital in Kabul, in which at least 24 people were killed, including 19 women and 3 children, and many more were wounded, including a newborn baby. A health-care worker was among those killed. The Taliban denied involvement.

23. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) remained under sustained pressure from the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and the Taliban, particularly in eastern Afghanistan. During the reporting period, 18 incidents were attributed to ISIL-K, compared with 122 over the same time period in 2019. After a six-month period of no attacks in Kabul attributed to ISIL-K, the group claimed an attack by indirect fire targeting the inauguration of Mr. Ghani on 9 March. The group claimed two other indirect fire attacks on Bagram airfield on 21 March and 9 April, and an armed attack during a commemoration of the life of Afghan leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, on 6 March in Kabul, in which 32 civilians were killed. High-profile suicide attacks targeting a Sikh temple in Kabul on 25 March and a funeral in Nangarhar Province on 12 May were also claimed by ISIL-K. The first attack reportedly resulted in at least 25 civilians being killed and many more wounded, while the second resulted in 19 people being killed and at least 60 more wounded. On 6 May, the National Directorate for Security reported the arrest of eight individuals in raids on two locations. The individuals were described as belonging to a joint ISIL-KP and Haqqani Network cell and are accused of carrying out several of the attacks. An additional five militants were killed in the raids. On 11 May, the Government reported that raids by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces in Kabul had led to the capture of three leaders of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant for South Asia and the Far East.

24. There were 17 incidents involving United Nations personnel during the reporting period, including 12 incidents of intimidation, 4 criminal-related incidents and 1 abduction.

C. Regional cooperation

25. Regional engagement by Afghanistan was constrained owing to travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and focused on assistance and cooperation among regional countries to respond to the pandemic. The restrictions also limited planned multilateral engagements, including within the framework of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan. The Afghan authorities made efforts to keep the borders open for the continued delivery of food, medicine and other essential items. Many regional partners, including China, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, provided humanitarian assistance to the Government of Afghanistan in support of its COVID-19 response. After closing their borders because of the pandemic, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan agreed to open them periodically at the request of the Government of Afghanistan to facilitate the repatriation of Afghan nationals from their territories. Neighbouring countries have maintained the flow of commercial cargo throughout the reporting report.

26. Between April and early May, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mohammad Javad Zarif, held a series of telephone conversations with Mr. Ghani, the acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Atmar, the National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, and Mr. Abdullah to discuss the political impasse, intra-Afghan negotiations and bilateral cooperation on the response to COVID-19. Mr. Zarif also held consultations with senior officials of regional countries to discuss issues pertaining to the situation in Afghanistan. On 19 and 20 April, the Special Envoy of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Afghanistan, Ebrahim Taherian, met Afghan officials in Kabul to discuss the importance of protecting the political structures and institutions set out in the Constitution of Afghanistan, as well as talks with the Taliban and national reconciliation.

27. On 16 April, the United Nations convened a meeting of the permanent representatives of Afghanistan, China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United States and Uzbekistan to the United Nations to discuss regional efforts to support peace in Afghanistan. The participants expressed solidarity with Afghanistan in its quest for peace, security and prosperity, and echoed the call of the Secretary-General for a comprehensive ceasefire, particularly in the light of the urgent need to combat the spread of COVID-19.

28. On 20 April, Mr. Atmar held a telephone conversation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, to discuss the prospects of strengthening bilateral cooperation with regard to the Afghan peace process, the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity and the fight against COVID-19. They agreed to revitalize the Action Plan, as their bilateral engagement framework, and to strengthen economic cooperation.

29. On 27 April, Mr. Atmar spoke with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Wang Yi, and thanked him for the provision of medical support in the fight against COVID-19. They also discussed economic cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative, joint counter-terrorism efforts, the peace process and the role that China could play at the regional level.

30. On 28 April, the national railway company of Uzbekistan launched a regular freight train service from Tashkent to Hairatan, Afghanistan. Operating three times a week, the train service allows for reduced delivery times and connectivity with the wider region.

31. On 4 May, Mr. Ghani participated in a virtual summit of the Non-Aligned Movement Contact Group on COVID-19, hosted by Azerbaijan. In his statement, Mr. Ghani outlined his Government's vision to reallocate resources to focus on public awareness, relief, recovery, regional connectivity and global partnerships. He urged the States members of the Non-Aligned Movement to call on the Taliban to cease violence and engage in the political process.

32. On 13 May, the ministers for foreign affairs of the States members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held a meeting via videoconference during which they emphasized the importance of promoting international cooperation in response to COVID-19 and reaffirmed their readiness to further promote the efforts of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to help reach a political settlement in Afghanistan.

33. On 15 May, Mr. Atmar held a telephone conversation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Mukhtar Tileuberdi. Mr. Atmar expressed his Government's interest in strengthening cooperation in the transit, transport and energy sectors, as well as continuing the educational programme hosted by Kazakhstan for Afghan citizens. Mr. Tileuberdi informed Mr. Atmar of his Government's decision to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

34. On 18 May, the special representatives for Afghanistan of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and the Russian Federation held a virtual meeting on the current situation in Afghanistan and the peace and reconciliation process. In a statement, they welcomed the agreement between the political leaders of Afghanistan and expressed hope that it would expedite the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. Voicing support for an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" peace and reconciliation process, they underlined that inclusive intra-Afghan negotiations were the only way to realize Afghan national reconciliation, and called on all Afghan groups and parties to launch the negotiations as soon as possible. The four special representatives cited the need for the withdrawal of foreign troops "in an orderly and responsible way", voiced support for the release of prisoners and detainees, and expressed hope for the implementation of Security Council resolution [2513 \(2020\)](#). They also voiced support

for the Secretary-General's initiative for a ceasefire and called for the simultaneous declaration of a comprehensive ceasefire throughout Afghanistan. They called for action against terrorism, reaffirmed their support to Afghanistan in overcoming the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and underscored that the reintegration and repatriation of Afghan refugees should be part of any peace and reconciliation process.

III. Human rights

35. The conflict in Afghanistan continues to be one of the deadliest in the world for civilians. On 27 April, UNAMA released its first quarterly report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. From 1 January to 31 March 2020, the Mission documented 1,293 civilian casualties (533 killed and 760 injured), representing a decrease of 29 per cent in comparison with the same period in 2019. Ground engagements were the leading cause of civilian casualties during the quarter (30 per cent), followed by targeted killings (26 per cent) and non-suicide improvised explosive devices (18 per cent). In March, after the agreed week-long period of reduction in violence between pro-government forces and the Taliban, UNAMA documented an acceleration in violence and a subsequent increase in civilian casualties and harm caused.

36. Anti-government elements were responsible for 55 per cent of documented civilian casualties, of which 39 per cent were attributed to the Taliban, 13 per cent to ISIL-K and 3 per cent to undetermined anti-government elements. During the first quarter of 2020, the number of civilian deaths attributed to anti-government elements, in particular the Taliban, increased by 22 per cent in comparison with the first quarter of 2019, mainly owing to an increase in targeted killings and summary executions. Pro-government forces caused 32 per cent of civilian casualties, of which 21 per cent were attributed to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, 8 per cent to international military forces and 3 per cent to pro-government armed groups and multiple or undetermined pro-government forces.

37. The armed conflict in Afghanistan remains the deadliest conflict in the world for children. The country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 417 child casualties (152 killed and 265 maimed) during the first quarter of 2020. Pro-government forces were responsible for more child casualties than anti-government elements and over twice as many child deaths. During the quarter, the task force verified the recruitment and use of four boys for combat roles by the Taliban, and UNAMA continued to receive credible allegations of sexual violence against children, including by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. The task force recorded 18 conflict-related incidents affecting health-care facilities and workers, 17 of which were attributed to the Taliban and 1 to the Afghan National Army. The task force verified eight incidents of attacks against schools and protected personnel, of which four were attributed to the Taliban, two to the Afghan National Army, one to ISIL-K and one to an undetermined armed opposition group. Those incidents included two attacks deliberately targeting schools and teachers, five attacks causing incidental harm to schools and education personnel, and a threat against an educational facility. The task force also verified three incidents of denial of humanitarian access, two of which were attributed to the Taliban and one to the Afghan National Police.

38. On 26 March, the President issued a special decree on pardons, the suspension of investigations into those in detention and a delay in the enforcement of sentences, to prevent the spread of COVID-19. On 27 April, on the occasion of Mujahideen Victory Day, the President issued another decree ordering all remaining prisoners to be released, except those convicted of crimes disqualified for pardon under the

Criminal Procedure Code, who would nevertheless be given a significant reduction in sentence. Crimes covered by the law on the elimination of violence against women were exempt from pardon. As at 14 May, approximately 9,700 detainees and prisoners had been released under the two presidential decrees. Given that the estimated number of prisoners and detainees as at 26 March, when the first decree was issued, was 41,000, the impact of the releases to ease overcrowding in prisons and contribute to preventing the spread of COVID-19 remains limited. The number of female prisoners released appears to be low. In addition, the lack of support for female prisoners after release, including for those who may not be able to return to their families, presents another challenge. Between 19 and 24 April, the United Nations provided technical advice and support to the Ministry of Women's Affairs to enable it to provide humanitarian assistance to women released from prison throughout Afghanistan. The United Nations, along with other humanitarian partners and civil society organizations, is working to locate safe houses and provide transitional safety nets for women upon their release from correctional services.

39. On 23 March, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission released its annual report on violence against women and girls. In 2019, the Commission registered 4,693 cases of violence against women and girls, an increase of 8.4 per cent compared with 2018. Over 97 per cent of incidents occurred at home. The justice system has slowed proceedings throughout the country owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, investigations and prosecutions of crimes under the law on the elimination of violence against women are continuing. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, reports to the justice sector and other actors of violence against women and girls have reportedly decreased in many parts of the country, suggesting increased challenges in accessing formal justice and places of safety due to movement restrictions. However, there are indications that violence against women has in fact increased.

40. Over the past months, UNAMA has reinforced its cooperation with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in several areas, including the provision of technical assistance on peace, human rights and transitional justice, as well as coordination and advice on the protection of human rights in the COVID-19 response. Thematic coordination between UNAMA and the Commission has been reinforced through regular meetings at both leadership and working levels.

41. Media workers and human rights defenders continued to face intimidation and violence. During the reporting period, five human rights defenders were killed in Kabul and three other provinces, allegedly by anti-government elements, although there was no claim of responsibility. Three other human rights defenders were kidnapped and subjected to ill treatment by the Taliban in Paktika. In Zabul, the Taliban kidnapped a journalist, who was released after two days following the intervention of community elders. On 9 May, security forces reportedly killed five people who were participating in a protest over the distribution of humanitarian aid by the Government in the capital of Ghor Province. A journalist who had raised concerns about the mismanagement of funds allocated to the COVID-19 response was arrested (and later released) by security forces in Kunar, and another journalist was reportedly threatened by local authorities in another province for raising concerns about the same issue.

42. On 5 March, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Court (ICC) authorized the ICC Prosecutor to commence an investigation in relation to alleged crimes committed on the territory of Afghanistan (since May 2003), as well as other alleged crimes linked to the armed conflict in Afghanistan but committed on the territory of other ICC States parties (since July 2002). That judgment amended the decision of Pre-Trial Chamber II of 12 April 2019. On 15 April, the Prosecutor informed the judges of Pre-Trial Chamber II that the Government of Afghanistan had, on 26 March, requested the Prosecutor to defer to the domestic investigations of

Afghanistan pursuant to article 18(2) of the Rome Statute. The Government provided the Prosecutor with a non-exhaustive summary outline of national investigations and proceedings being undertaken and asked for the possibility to provide further information and materials supporting the deferral request by 12 June 2020.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

43. High-level meetings with the Government of Afghanistan and Member States continued in preparation for the 2020 ministerial pledging conference on Afghanistan, co-organized by the Governments of Afghanistan and Finland, with facilitation by UNAMA. Mindful of the implications of COVID-19, donors reached an agreement to continue the technical preparations. Donors also agreed to accelerate the identification of key development priorities to support the Government's revised Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, expected to be presented by the end of July. After consultations with the Ministry of Finance, UNAMA prepared a concept note for the future Mutual Accountability Framework in order to facilitate discussions with development partners. Finland appointed a special envoy, Janne Taalas, to engage the donor community and Governments in planning for the conference.

44. Following the presidential decree of 26 March, which mandated that the Attorney General suspend investigations and prosecutions for all but the most serious criminal cases as part of the COVID-19 response, the Supreme Court formed a working group on 9 May, with the support of UNAMA, to develop contingencies for the hearings that would continue, using videoconference technology. The United Nations continued to provide technical advisory support to the State Cases Department and the legal aid units under the Ministry of Justice for continued operations. Attacks against justice sector officials increased in April and May. In targeted attacks on 25 March and 2 May, the Supreme Court's administrative chief was killed and a senior prosecutor was injured.

45. On 22 March, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of 15 January 2020 of the appeal court of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, which convicted and sentenced nine former electoral commissioners. The six former commissioners from the Independent Election Commission and three former commissioners from the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission were sentenced to two and a half years in prison for the offence of altering vote counts in the 2018 parliamentary elections in Kunar Province. On 15 April, the Supreme Court released all nine former commissioners on bail, as part of the measures to decongest prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 26 March, a new head of the Major Crimes Task Force was appointed within the Ministry of the Interior and started to reform the component. In May, he presented a new consolidated list of 255 arrest warrants and summonses related to serious corruption cases (including the 127 identified prior to the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan of 2018), of which 169 had been executed as at 14 May.

46. On 4 March, the Cabinet adopted the regulation on the recovery of illicit assets and proceeds of corruption, which was issued pursuant to the anti-corruption law and is aimed at regulating the duties and authorities of justice and judicial institutions and other relevant organizations in the recovery of illicitly acquired assets, as well as in their effective and transparent management. On 5 March, a revised Supreme Audit Office law was adopted through a presidential legislative decree, which incorporates international standards and norms and is aimed at increasing the effectiveness of audits of the State budget.

47. Of the 63 deliverables contained in the 2019 Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework, 15 have been achieved, 30 are on track to being achieved and 18 are incomplete or off-track. The Independent Electoral Complaints Commission

addressed 95 per cent of the complaints registered, and a total of 1,127 cases of corruption registered by the Attorney General were referred for investigation, while 437 cases were referred to trial. Six reviews of the Extended Credit Facility were completed, and special drawing rights of \$44.4 million were disbursed to the Government. To improve the standard of living, a total of 3,657 communities completed at least one project related to energy, roads, irrigation, schools or drinking water. Some 60 per cent of the core reforms under the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund partnership programme and financing programme were implemented.

48. Afghanistan is among the 25 countries to benefit from the debt service relief approved on 13 April by the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust, which aims to help beneficiaries to cover their IMF debt obligations and hence redirect resources towards vital COVID-19 emergency medical and other relief efforts. On 29 April, the Executive Board approved the Government's request for emergency assistance of approximately \$220 million under the Rapid Credit Facility.

49. On 7 May, the Board of Executive Directors of the World Bank approved a \$400 million grant to help Afghanistan to sustain the pace of key economic and public finance reforms, and to support the country's management of risks and uncertainties compounded by the COVID-19 crisis.

V. Humanitarian assistance

50. Sustained conflict, natural disasters, chronic poverty, food insecurity and the added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic caused increasing suffering for people across Afghanistan.

51. As at 21 May, 8,676 Afghans had tested positive for COVID-19 and 193 had died. Since mid-March, the price for staple food commodities has surged by up to 20 per cent, raising concerns for socioeconomic effects. According to the World Bank, gross domestic product in Afghanistan is projected to decrease by 17 per cent in 2020.

52. On 27 March, the Government announced a lockdown, initially for Kabul and selected provinces. On 21 April, Mr. Ghani approved an emergency budget of \$88.5 million and provincial governors were allocated funds ranging from \$263,000 to \$5.26 million. On 23 April, Mr. Ghani presented the Government's plan to address the economic consequences of COVID-19, centred on health care, food security, public works and economic regional cooperation. Donors were asked to "re-programme existing commitments into relief, recovery and stimulus programmes" and engage regional partners "to shape regional response strategies". On 2 May, the nationwide lockdown was extended until 24 May.

53. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the United Nations country team and the humanitarian country team developed collaborative programmes, aligned with the Government's plan "Responding to the coronavirus: an invitation for discussion", as well as the United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19. The United Nations and the World Bank continued their close collaboration focused on technical support for socioeconomic recovery and procurement services to the Government for essential materials and supplies to fight the pandemic.

54. Health partners supported the Government in establishing isolation centres with a total capacity of 22,000 beds and, to date, 9 out of 15 planned testing laboratories countrywide. As at 20 May, more than 983,000 vulnerable people had received guidance in coronavirus-specific hygiene practices, as well as hygiene supplies. At the request of the Ministry of Public Health, the United Nations procured and delivered on 18 April a six-month supply of personal protective equipment and

infection prevention and control supplies to two hospitals in Kabul that provide services to more than 10,000 women every month.

55. The spread of COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on women and girls. Lockdown measures to stem the pandemic are very likely to have increased levels of domestic violence. The United Nations and its partners have mainstreamed activities to address gender-based violence and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and girls throughout all programmes. The joint European Union-United Nations Spotlight Initiative is being adapted to provide a quick impact intervention highlighting the risks of increased domestic violence as a result of COVID-19 and to share key messaging and information tools with front-line responders to raise awareness of sexual and gender-based violence. On 16 April, the United Nations provided an online platform for women's civil society organizations to discuss appropriate messaging, and for women in provinces, districts and rural communities to discuss local efforts to change behaviours to curb the spread of COVID-19 and to strengthen the role of women and girls in the fight against COVID-19.

56. To address the impact of the pandemic on livelihoods, the United Nations is engaged in a campaign to reach over 300,000 people with livelihood support between April and June, with a focus on vulnerable populations, including landless and women-headed households and persons with disabilities. Around 24,500 nomadic herders are expected to receive animal feed, with additional outreach to 194,250 landless labourers, vulnerable herders and farming households.

57. Food insecurity remained at alarmingly high levels. In April and May, some 13.4 million people were either in crisis or at emergency levels of food insecurity (level 3 or 4 of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification), with the number of people at emergency levels increasing to 4.3 million. Over 3 million women and children are projected to be acutely malnourished in 2020, with an additional 160,000 people projected to be affected owing to COVID-19. From 15 February to 20 May, the United Nations and its partners provided 37,355 metric tons of food and \$2.16 million in cash to food-insecure people affected by conflict and natural disasters, treated over 72,000 children with severe acute malnutrition, and pre-positioned therapeutic treatment in priority provinces, adapting protocols to the COVID-19 situation. In the provinces, almost 100,000 children were reached monthly with community nutrition preventive services. Food security partners also collaborated with local authorities to enable farmers to harvest crops while minimizing the risk of exposure to COVID-19, thereby mitigating increasing food insecurity and nutritional deficiencies.

58. The number of undocumented returnees arriving in Afghanistan has surged. Between 15 February and 20 May, there were 241,499 undocumented returnees and 318 refugee returnees, bringing the total to 287,979 Afghan migrants and refugees since the start of the year. In March, there was a five-fold increase in the number of returnees compared with the same period in 2019. Most of those returnees came from the Islamic Republic of Iran, often from cities severely affected by COVID-19. The voluntary repatriation of refugees from Turkey has been on hold since 4 March owing to concerns about COVID-19 transmission.

59. Conflict and disasters continued to create humanitarian needs. Since the end of February, more than 12,000 people have been newly displaced. Between late 2019 and April 2020, the Government and humanitarian partners mobilized more than \$20 million and provided shelter, heating materials and clothing for 76,589 vulnerable households affected by winter conditions. Between 1 January and 28 April, the United Nations and its partners provided emergency shelter, household items and cash support to more than 20,000 people affected by floods.

60. A total of 11 confirmed cases of polio have been reported since the start of the year, mostly in areas controlled by non-State armed groups and where house-to-house

vaccination campaigns have been banned since May 2018. Due to physical distancing, health partners had to suspend two polio vaccination programmes that would have reached 9.9 million children.

61. Insecurity and mine contamination continued to challenge the humanitarian response. Since the start of the year, aid workers have reported 332 access-related incidents. Between 15 February and 20 May, 8 aid workers were killed, 8 were injured and 19 others were abducted. That is a decrease compared with the same period last year, when 9 aid workers were killed, 27 injured and 20 abducted.

62. More than double the number of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war were documented during the week-long reduction in violence in February compared with the average seven-day period in the first quarter of 2020, as people were able to travel to newly accessible areas. From February to March, the United Nations and its partners cleared 5.5 square kilometres of land contaminated by high-impact explosives, benefiting 28 communities. Approximately 156,356 people, most of them returnees, received risk education. Medical personnel, ambulances and vehicles have been offered for COVID-19 response in areas where humanitarian mine action is operational.

63. With international commercial flights suspended and some domestic flights disrupted, in April the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service established an international airbridge to Doha three times a week to facilitate the rotation of humanitarian personnel. To ensure that critical humanitarian operations are not disrupted, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service has continued providing domestic flights, including special helicopter services.

64. The humanitarian community supported the Government's COVID-19 response by conducting a rapid needs analysis and revising the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan. The estimated number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has increased from 9.4 million at the start of the year to 14 million. Humanitarian partners now seek \$1.1 billion to provide life-saving assistance to 11.1 million people.

VI. Counter-narcotics

65. From 15 March to 29 April, law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 217 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 294 kg of heroin, 470 kg of opium, 24,704 kg of hashish and cannabis, 111 kg of methamphetamine, 7 kg of morphine, 78 litres of acetic anhydride and 200 grams of methadone. These seizures led to the arrest of 251 suspects, including three members of the Afghan National Police and four Afghan National Army personnel, and the confiscation of 66 vehicles and 30 weapons. In line with the National Drug Action Plan, 355 hectares of opium poppy were eradicated in coordinated operations led by the Ministry of the Interior.

VII. Mission support

66. As at 31 March, vacancy rates at UNAMA were 9 per cent for international staff, 6 per cent for National Professional Officers and 2 per cent for national staff, compared with the approved rates of 8 per cent, 3 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively. The proportion of female staff remained low, at 37 per cent for international staff, 46 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 13 per cent for National Professional Officers and 9 per cent for national staff. Between 1 January and 31 March, UNAMA conducted 104 road and 14 air missions, as well as 800 reverse outreach missions during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

67. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNAMA adopted a range of measures to safeguard the safety and well-being of its staff in Afghanistan, while sustaining the delivery of critical programmes and activities throughout the country. To that end, the Mission implemented alternate work arrangements, resulting in significant reductions in the presence of international staff in the country and in the number of national staff reporting to work in UNAMA offices as at 11 May.

VIII. Observations

68. The agreement reached between Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah demonstrates much-needed resolve to overcome the political impasse in the interest of the country. It is my hope that the Government can build on the positive momentum born of compromise and move united towards future intra-Afghan negotiations, recognizing the historic opportunity for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

69. The disturbing increase in violence since March has continued to take the lives of civilians, among them women, children and newborns. Internal displacement, deprivation and insecurity further endanger the population. In view of the additional scourge of COVID-19, I reiterate my call for a ceasefire to enable an effective response.

70. The horrendous targeting of a maternity ward in a hospital and the attack on the Dharamshala Sikh temple in Kabul have underscored the urgency of ending the violence. Any attacks against civilians are unacceptable. Hospitals, medical facilities and personnel have special protection under international humanitarian law. Those who attack them must be held accountable.

71. Confidence-building efforts by the Government and the Taliban can contribute to greater trust and to establishing the basis for direct talks. I hope that the first publicly acknowledged face-to-face meeting between representatives of the Government and the Taliban on the topic of prisoner releases can further contacts, crucial for the realization of intra-Afghan negotiations. Direct talks are essential to paving the way towards a lasting political settlement and a permanent ceasefire and to advancing sustainable development throughout the country.

72. The best chance of a durable peace settlement rests on broad consensus, with the political and social diversity of Afghanistan represented in the peace process, so as to lay the groundwork for wide acceptance of an eventual settlement. That entails giving a voice to the concerns of Afghan citizens and ensuring that human rights and fundamental freedoms are safeguarded, including the gains made with regard to the human rights of women.

73. I call on all parties to ensure that women in Afghanistan can raise their voices safely and participate meaningfully in the peace process. The inclusion of four women in the 21-member negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan demonstrates some progress in that regard, and the growing domestic architecture for peace, including the Ministry of Peace Affairs and the High Council for Peace and National Reconciliation, provides further opportunities for the inclusion of women.

74. The spread of COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on women and could reverse the gains made with regard to their rights and freedoms. Lockdown measures to stem the pandemic are very likely to have increased levels of domestic violence, while access to justice and protection systems has decreased. Many women have lost their jobs as domestic labourers and handicraft workers and are at risk of losing their hard-won economic and social independence. Women, especially outside Kabul, have limited access to health-care services and are disproportionately affected by the country's weak health-care system. I call on the Government to put women and girls at the centre of the response to COVID-19. That starts with women as leaders, with

equal representation and decision-making power. Urgent steps are also needed to protect women and expand psychosocial support and services, including access to justice. To preserve and build on the gains made, I urge all stakeholders to ensure that COVID-19 does not divert funds and focus away from the implementation of the Afghanistan national action plan on women, peace and security, notably the meaningful participation of women in decision-making, peace and political processes.

75. Civil society actors, human rights defenders, journalists and media workers are crucial to the fabric of society and the health of the country's institutions. Through the public sharing of viewpoints, including peaceful protest, the fundamental rights and freedoms under the Constitution are reinforced and given new meaning. The checks on authority, accountability and transparency fostered by civil society and the media sector not only strengthen the commitments of the Government to the rule of law and countering corruption, but also serve the interests of Afghan society in future peace negotiations. I call for their continued protection, recognizing the crucial role of such entities as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the importance of the international treaties to which Afghanistan is party.

76. Overcrowding in places of detention undermines hygiene, health and human dignity and constitutes a significant obstacle to preventing the spread of COVID-19. I welcome the release by Afghanistan of large numbers of detainees and prisoners, including the older and infirm, women and children, and those sentenced for minor, non-violent offences. I believe that a swift and firm response aimed at ensuring healthy and safe custody and reducing overcrowding is essential to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 entering and spreading in places of detention.

77. The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains a source of deep concern, as fundamental coping mechanisms have come under additional strain owing to the spread of COVID-19. Limited access to water and sanitation means that millions have limited options to protect themselves from contracting the virus. During the season when food stores should be at their most plentiful, they are still insufficient to meet the needs of some 13.4 million people who face crisis and emergency levels of food insecurity. The number of persons who are severely food insecure in this post-harvest period of "plenty" calls for renewed international assistance, but also national leadership.

78. I am highly concerned about the economic prospects for Afghanistan and the effects of deprivation and underemployment on the health and welfare of the population. Economic inactivity, falling incomes and reduced consumption will push many of the 35 million people who are already living on less than \$2 a day to the fringes of survival. I call for continued international support for the Humanitarian Response Plan and robust engagement by all stakeholders in the preparations for the 2020 ministerial pledging conference on Afghanistan.

79. The constructive role of regional countries is vital to ensuring stability and economic development in Afghanistan and the broader neighbourhood. Regional trade, assistance and greater connectivity are in the mutual interest and remain critical to the increased self-sufficiency of Afghanistan. I welcome the continued engagement by the administrations in Kabul and Islamabad under the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity. I am further encouraged by the unanimous support of regional stakeholders for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process.

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