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The situation in Afghanistan

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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 [2460 \(2019\)](#), in which the Secretary-General was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.
2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of his previous report, dated 14 June 2019 ([A/73/902-S/2019/493](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. During the reporting period, campaigning started for the presidential elections scheduled for 28 September, as preparations for the vote continued. The United States of America continued to hold talks with the Taliban, and an intra-Afghan peace conference was convened in Qatar, with a view to reaching a negotiated settlement of the conflict. High-level engagements between the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan were carried out in a positive atmosphere. The security situation remained volatile, with heightened levels of conflict, in particular in the southern, eastern and south-eastern regions. Civilian casualties decreased in the first half of 2019 but remained at high levels. At a meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, representatives of the Government of Afghanistan, key donors and the United Nations discussed achievements under the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework, as well as challenges in the Government's ongoing reform efforts, in particular the slowing of progress on countering corruption. The humanitarian situation remained serious.

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A. Political developments

4. The Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission continued preparations for the presidential election scheduled for 28 September. In parallel, some political figures, including the former President, Hamid Karzai, and some presidential candidates argued that reaching a peace agreement with the Taliban should take priority over elections.

5. Between 8 and 29 June, the Independent Election Commission updated voter registration across the country, resulting in the registration of 573,721 new voters, of whom around 36 per cent were women. In addition, a full voter registration process was conducted in Ghazni Province, where political tensions and insecurity had prevented the holding of parliamentary elections in 2018. The decision by the Commission, on 27 June, to extend the registration period in the province by one week, along with security challenges in retrieving the registration materials, resulted in a delay in finalizing the list of voters. On 25 July, the Commission announced a preliminary figure of 9.6 million registrants in total.

6. In response to the demands of political parties and some presidential candidates, the Commission continued preparations for the introduction of biometric voter verification and the electronic transmission of results on election day. The Government signed a contract with Dermalog, a technology vendor, for the delivery of software and additional electronic equipment.

7. Following the assessment by security agencies of a total of 5,388 polling centres in July, the Ministry of Defence hosted a review exercise of the electoral security plan, with the participation of the Ministry of the Interior, the Independent Election Commission and other State entities, as well as the Resolute Support Mission of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Security arrangements for the campaign period were also implemented, including protection measures for candidates. On 28 July, in Kabul, unknown assailants carried out a complex attack on the office of Amrullah Saleh, the running mate of the President, Ashraf Ghani, for the position of First Vice-President. A total of 21 civilians were killed and 50 were injured in the attack.

8. Preparations for electoral observation and electoral disputes resolution also continued. On 30 July, the President approved the appointment of 112 provincial electoral complaints commissioners nominated by the central Electoral Complaints Commission, 34 of whom were recommended by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, as required by the Election Law. The new provincial commissioners took an oath of office on 3 August. As at 15 August, the Electoral Complaints Commission had received 18 complaints regarding the electoral campaign in five provinces, mostly related to the alleged misuse of security resources for election purposes. In addition, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission made available its local and provincial offices for voters and candidates to file complaints regarding political rights violations during the campaign period or the election, and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, a non-governmental organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., began training Afghan civil society organizations in electoral observation and announced its intention to train candidates' agents for the election. However, the number of registered election observers remained low in most provinces.

9. An election budget of \$149 million was finalized, with the Government committing \$90 million in funding and the remaining \$59 million funded through donors' pledges to the United Nations Electoral Support Project operated by the United Nations Development Programme. On 1 August, the electoral management

bodies and the United Nations signed a revised project document, reflecting adjustments to the 2019 election process and budget.

10. Throughout the reporting period, concerns persisted about the use of State resources for electoral purposes. On 25 June, the Council of Presidential Candidates, representing eight presidential tickets, staged a demonstration in the Ghazi stadium in Kabul, calling upon the President to resign from office and allow a caretaker government to administer the elections. Following the start of the campaign period, the Council continued to raise concerns about alleged interference by the President in the electoral process. On 29 July, a presidential candidate, Shahab Hakimi, told the media that the Council was still discussing its stance on the election, with some candidates threatening to boycott it if their concerns were not addressed. Separately, on 13 July, three presidential candidates – Abdullah Abdullah, the Chief Executive, Hanif Atmar, the former national security adviser, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the founder of Hizb-i Islami – announced that they had formed a coalition to lobby for additional transparency mechanisms to prevent the misuse of State resources in the elections. On 30 July, amid ongoing public debate, the head of the Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan, Mohammad Naim Ayubzada, told the media that a large number of public officials were participating in election campaigns using government resources, and warned that such practices could lead to a loss of trust in the elections. In response to formal complaints, on 1 August, the Electoral Complaints Commission issued a written warning to both the President and the Chief Executive for violating electoral campaign regulations, including by using State facilities and financial resources for campaign purposes. In its warning, the Commission cited the use of government vehicles and State equipment in campaign activities, as well as the participation of high-ranking government officials at electoral gatherings.

11. On 19 July, the Election Support Group, chaired by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and comprising key electoral donors, issued a statement in which it noted public concerns about maintaining a level playing field among all candidates and stakeholders. The Group welcomed the stated commitment of the President and the Chief Executive to a credible election and called upon both leaders to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the Election Law and the code of conduct and to guarantee the autonomy of the electoral management bodies. On 21 July, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance issued two orders, postponing subnational recruitment to mid- and senior-level posts until after the presidential election and ordering officials to refrain from interfering in electoral affairs. Subsequently, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission issued a press statement on 27 July, reminding civil servants of their obligations under their code of conduct and calling upon them to refrain from campaigning during work hours or using government resources either for or against candidates. On the same date, the electoral management bodies issued a press statement calling upon all stakeholders, especially candidates and supporters, to abide by the law, including the procedures and regulations governing the campaign.

12. The official presidential election campaign period got off to a slow start on 28 July. On the same day, the President and the Chief Executive officially launched their election campaigns, each holding large rallies in Kabul. These were followed by the campaign launches of other presidential candidates, including Enayatullah Hafiz, also on 28 July, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar on 1 August, Rahmatullah Nabil, the former Director of the National Directorate for Security, on 3 August and Sayed Noorullah Jalili on 4 August. Other candidates postponed their official campaign launches, citing the lack of a level playing field and uncertainty over the impact of the peace process on the elections as the main reasons for the delays. On 6 August, one presidential candidate, Zalmay Rassoul, withdrew his candidacy and announced his support for the President's ticket. On 8 August, amid reports of internal tensions among

candidates on his presidential ticket, Hanif Atmar announced the suspension of his campaign, citing interference in the electoral process by the President and arguing that election-related political instability could imperil the peace process.

13. Momentum towards a political settlement to end the conflict accelerated, bolstered by domestic and international efforts. Following a visit to Kabul by the United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, on 25 June, the United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, held talks with the Taliban in Doha from 29 June to 9 July, with a two-day pause for the intra-Afghan peace conference. Hosted jointly by Qatar and Germany, the conference was attended by representatives of the Government of Afghanistan, in their individual capacities, political parties, civil society and the Taliban, with the consent of all parties. Participants produced a two-page resolution that contained a call for all parties to meet the demands of the Afghan people by obtaining peace through inclusive negotiations. They also called for the release of prisoners, the protection of public infrastructure and the reduction of civilian casualties, and stated that post-war Afghanistan would have an Islamic legal system, assure women's rights in political, social, economic, educational and cultural affairs as part of the Islamic framework of Islamic values and ensure equality for all ethnic groups. Mr. Khalilzad and the Taliban resumed meetings in Doha on 3 August and the talks were concluded on 11 August.

14. Efforts to build an international consensus in support of the Afghan peace process continued. On 10 and 11 July, the third trilateral consultation on the Afghan peace process was held in Beijing, attended by the Special Envoy of China, Deng Xijun, the Representative of the President of the Russian Federation, Zamir Kabulov, and Mr. Khalilzad. The consultation took place in an expanded format, including the participation of Pakistan. In a statement, the four countries welcomed the intra-Afghan meetings held in Doha and Moscow, urged the reduction of violence and called for an immediate start to intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban, the Government and other Afghans.

15. The Government reconfigured its institutional arrangements in support of the peace process. On 29 June, the President announced the appointment of his former Chief of Staff, Salam Rahimi, as State Minister for Peace Affairs. On 27 July, the President issued a decree dissolving the secretariat of the High Peace Council, and on 31 July, the Government announced the formation of a 15-member negotiating team to represent the country in future talks with the Taliban. The names of the team members were not announced.

16. On 20 and 21 July 2019, the Deputy Secretary-General, together with the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and the Executive Directors of the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), made a visit to Afghanistan that was focused on women, peace and security. The senior officials recognized the significant progress made over the past 18 years regarding women's rights and emphasized the need for the meaningful participation of women in political and public life, including in the peace process and elections. They further stressed the importance of an inclusive peace process and of addressing discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity and regional differences. The delegation also held a meeting with a diverse group of women in Kabul, hosted by the First Lady, Rula Ghani, and travelled to Bamyan Province to meet a variety of community representatives, including women who undertake the work of mine removal.

17. In her meetings with the President and the Chief Executive, the Deputy Secretary-General emphasized the importance of an inclusive peace process, rebuilding trust and addressing discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity and regional differences.

18. Under its good offices mandate, UNAMA continued its engagement with representatives of the Taliban on issues related to the peace process, the protection of civilians and humanitarian access. My Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA met with representatives of the movement in Doha on 28 July to discuss progress towards intra-Afghan negotiations, highlighting, in particular, the importance of the participation of women in the peace process, as well as the need to build confidence by reducing violence and implementing other measures to protect civilians. On 2 and 3 July, UNAMA hosted a meeting in Bishkek, including the participation of scholars, civil society and former officials from countries in the region. Discussions at the meeting, which was also attended by representatives of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, focused on the role of countries in the region in the peace process in Afghanistan and possible regional support for the country after peace has been established. Participants highlighted the importance of a regional consensus on peace and called upon the United Nations to play a central role in any future peace process.

19. UNAMA continued to work with communities and subnational government authorities in support of local conflict resolution and reconciliation. So far in 2019, UNAMA has begun to implement seven new local peace initiative projects, while continuing to implement another eight projects, most of which are aimed at strengthening local conflict resolution mechanisms and supporting sustainable local-level peacebuilding. In a project in Kunar Province, UNAMA facilitated consultations between two tribes that culminated in a peace jirga, in which both parties and other subnational government and community stakeholders, one quarter of whom were women, successfully resolved a decades-long land dispute. The agreement was widely covered by local media, prompting community elders in other provinces to seek the support of UNAMA in resolving local conflicts.

B. Security

20. The security situation remained volatile, with a high number of security incidents. Between 10 May and 8 August, UNAMA recorded a total of 5,856 security-related incidents, a 1 per cent increase compared with the same period the previous year. The highest number of incidents occurred in the southern region, followed by the eastern and the south-eastern regions, with these three regions accounting for 63 per cent of all incidents. Established trends remain unchanged; 3,294 armed clashes accounted for 56 per cent of all incidents, despite a 7 per cent decrease in armed clashes compared with the same period in 2018. Incidents relating to the use of improvised explosive devices remained the second highest category of incidents, recording a 17 per cent increase. Suicide attacks decreased by 44 per cent. Afghan and international military air forces continued to carry out a high number of air strikes, 506 strikes recorded during the period, a 57 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018.

21. Fighting continued at consistently high levels during the reporting period. An exception was recorded over the days covering the Eid al-Fitr holiday, on which the levels of fighting declined markedly, in line with historical trends, as both pro-government forces and anti-government elements reduced their offensive operations. Conversely, there was no change in the pace of fighting throughout the holy month of Ramadan, as anti-government elements carried out several suicide attacks and both parties publicly stated their intention to maintain their operational momentum. Afghan and international military efforts relied heavily on air strikes to defend major urban centres against anti-government elements, air strikes in Helmand and Ghazni Provinces comprising 47 per cent of the total number during the reporting period. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces also dedicated significant

resources to improving security along major roads across Afghanistan, in particular in Ghazni, Zabul, Balkh and Jowzjan Provinces.

22. Neither pro-government forces nor anti-government elements achieved significant territorial gains during the reporting period. The most active area of conflict was Kandahar Province, followed by Helmand and Nangarhar Provinces. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces recaptured three district administrative centres, Deh Yak and Khwajah Omari Districts in Ghazni Province and Bal Chiragh District in Faryab Province. The Taliban captured Qush Tepah District in Jowzjan Province and Kiran wa Munjan District in Badakhshan Province, and temporarily overran three districts, Shamulzai District in Zabul Province, Ma'ruf District in Kandahar Province and Dilah District in Paktika Province. Although there were no significant threats to government control of provincial capitals, high levels of Taliban activity were reported near the provincial capitals of Farah, Kunduz and Ghazni.

23. High-profile attacks by anti-government elements continued, 22 suicide attacks being reported during the period compared with 39 in the same period in 2018 and 8 in the previous reporting period. Ten attacks were reported in the city of Kabul, including three complex attacks, one on 1 July, targeting an Afghan National Defence and Security Forces logistics compound, one on 28 July, targeting the compound of the Afghanistan Green Trend party of Mr. Saleh, and one on 7 August, targeting the police headquarters in the sixth police district of Kabul. Other significant suicide attacks occurred on 30 May, against the Afghan National Police district headquarters in Shahidi Hassas district of Uruzgan Province, and on 18 July, against the provincial police headquarters in the city of Kandahar. The Taliban claimed responsibility for both attacks.

24. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) remained resilient. Afghan and international military forces maintained a high pace of operations against the group's strongholds in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces, resulting in some degradation of ISIL-KP leadership structures, but the movement continues to compete with the Taliban in the eastern region and has retained an operational capability in the city of Kabul. During the reporting period, 183 incidents were attributed to ISIL-KP, compared with 93 in the same period in 2018. ISIL-KP claimed 6 suicide attacks during the reporting period, compared with 15 in the same period in 2018, as well as 2 in Kabul Province and 4 in Nangarhar Province. All the suicide attacks were conducted using a single attacker wearing a body-borne improvised explosive device.

25. There were eight incidents involving United Nations personnel during the reporting period, including three incidents of intimidation, two criminal-related incidents and one armed clash: there were no incidents of abduction.

C. Regional cooperation

26. Bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan showed signs of improvement. On 10 June, the two countries conducted the first technical-level review session of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity. On 27 and 28 June, the President visited Pakistan, where he met the Prime Minister, Imran Khan, and the Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi. During the visit, he expressed hope that the two countries could move from conflict to cooperation. The Office of the Prime Minister of Pakistan released a statement in which it was noted that the two sides had agreed to open a new chapter of friendship and cooperation. Meanwhile, Pakistan pledged to continue support for talks between the United States and the Taliban.

27. Afghanistan continued its engagement with countries in the region through multilateral forums. On 13 and 14 June, the President attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek, at which he emphasized the need for a regional consensus on peace and proposed several mechanisms to strengthen regional cooperation on issues of mutual interest. On 25 June, a meeting of senior officials of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process was held in Ankara. The meeting was focused on the implementation of the confidence-building measures under the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process framework. On 22 July, an Afghan delegation participated in the joint regional conference on counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics under the same framework. Participants emphasized the need for a regional strategy to counter the illegal drug trade as part of counter-terrorism efforts. On 6 August, the ambassadors of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Kabul issued a joint declaration affirming their support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process, emphasizing that peace and stability in Afghanistan meant peace and stability in the entire region.

28. As a sign of expanding economic relations among neighbouring countries, representatives of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan met on 17 June in the city of Herat to discuss trade and connectivity. Two memorandums of understanding were signed between the railway administrations of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan on the Toraghundi-Herat railway project. On 1 July, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulla Aripov, met the Chief Executive of Afghanistan in Balkh Province. The delegations agreed on the construction of the Surkhan-Pul-e Khumri electricity line between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. The first meeting of the Afghan-Uzbek Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Cooperation met in Tashkent on 17 July.

III. Human rights

29. On 30 July, UNAMA released its 2019 midyear update on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The Mission documented 3,812 civilian casualties (1,366 dead and 2,446 injured) in the first six months of 2019, a 27 per cent decrease compared with the same period the previous year. The overall reduction of civilian casualties was driven by a decrease in such casualties from suicide attacks by anti-government elements and ground engagements, while civilian casualties from aerial and search operations conducted by pro-government forces continued to rise. Continuing the trend of the first quarter of 2019, the majority of civilian casualties were attributed to anti-government elements, while pro-government forces were responsible for more civilian deaths than anti-government elements. UNAMA attributed 52 per cent of civilian casualties to anti-government elements (33 per cent to the Taliban, 11 per cent to ISIL-KP and 3 per cent to undetermined anti-government elements), more than half of which were documented as deliberately targeting civilians. Some 37 per cent of civilian casualties were attributed to pro-government forces (18 per cent to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, 12 per cent to international military forces, 2 per cent to pro-government armed groups and the remainder to multiple or undetermined pro-government forces). The remaining civilian casualties were from incidents attributed to both anti-government elements and pro-government forces, including crossfire.

30. UNAMA documented 16 per cent fewer civilian casualties from ground engagements in comparison with the first six months of 2018. However, ground engagements remained the leading cause of civilian casualties for the first half of 2019, causing one third of all civilian casualties. The use of improvised explosive devices in suicide and non-suicide attacks accounted for 28 per cent of all civilian casualties, with a 79 per cent decrease in civilian casualties from suicide attacks using

improvised explosive devices. Civilian casualties from aerial operations increased by 39 per cent compared with the same period in 2018, comprising 14 per cent of all civilian casualties, while civilian casualties from search operations increased by 79 per cent, accounting for 6 per cent of all civilian casualties. Women and children continue to be severely affected by conflict-related violence, representing 42 per cent of the overall total of civilian casualties.

31. From 1 April to 30 June, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified seven incidents in which schools and related personnel were targeted. This represents a large decrease compared with the 18 incidents verified during the previous quarter. Five incidents were attributed to the Taliban, one to ISIL-KP and one to the Afghan National Army. There were three attacks deliberately targeting schools, an indiscriminate attack damaging two schools, incidental damage to one school and two incidents involving threats against teachers and students.

32. The task force verified 12 incidents against hospitals and protected personnel, compared with 26 in the previous quarter. Eight incidents were attributed to the Taliban and one each to the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police, international military forces and an undetermined armed opposition group. There were three cases of intentional killing of or injury to health-care personnel, three abductions, one indiscriminate attack, three cases of incidental damage and two threats. In total, 31 health-care facilities and 20 health-care personnel were affected.

33. The task force verified eight incidents of the recruitment and use of children involving 19 boys, compared with two incidents involving 4 boys in the previous quarter. The six incidents attributed to the Taliban involved 17 boys, who had a combat role. One incident attributed to the Afghan National Police involved the recruitment and use of a boy. Another boy was recruited for sexual purposes by Afghan local police and pro-government militia commanders. The task force verified two incidents of abduction by the Taliban involving two boys, one of whom was killed and one released, compared with two incidents involving four boys in the previous quarter. Moreover, the task force verified two incidents of sexual violence involving two girls raped by the Taliban and a boy used for sexual purposes (*bacha bazi*) by both pro-government militia and Afghan local police commanders, compared with two incidents involving two boys in the previous quarter.

34. The Government continued to advance the promotion and protection of women's rights. On 25 June, the Legislative Committee of the Ministry of Women's Affairs began to review the draft regulation on emergency funds for victims of violence against women, aimed at ensuring the allocation of such funds in the regular national budget, including the establishment of a transparent fund management mechanism. The review of the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women is being carried out by a technical committee led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. With the assistance of the justice sector support programme for Afghanistan, which is supported by the Government of the United States, the Ministry of Women's Affairs prepared an assessment of the implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security for 2007–2017 and presented it to the Cabinet.

35. The Government also took steps to combat impunity for sexual abuse and harassment. On 11 July, a case of alleged sexual harassment of Afghan female footballers was referred to the courts in accordance with the provisions of the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. A former president of the Afghanistan Football Federation and five other individuals were charged with rape, sexual harassment, abuse of jurisdiction and concealment of the crime; all suspects remain at large. On 17 July, at a four-day national conference on coordination among entities involved in the elimination of violence against women, the Attorney-General

announced the establishment of a special department to fight harassment against women in the workplace. On 25 July, the President issued a presidential order establishing a special secretariat within the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission to investigate recent allegations of harassment of women in government institutions.

36. The national report on the third cycle of the universal periodic review of Afghanistan ([A/HRC/WG.6/32/AFG/1](#)) was considered by the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council in January 2019. In its outcome report ([A/HRC/41/5](#)), the Working Group made 258 recommendations. At the forty-first session of the Human Rights Council in July, the Government of Afghanistan accepted 235 of those recommendations, noted 22 others and partially accepted 1. The recommendations that were noted concern the establishment of a moratorium on the death penalty or its abolition and the accession to human rights treaties and other treaties to which Afghanistan is not a State party.

37. On 17 July, the President appointed nine new commissioners to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, four of whom are women, including the Chairperson, Shaharзад Akbar. Sima Samar, who had been the Chairperson since the Commission was established in 2002, was appointed Special Envoy of the President and State Minister for Human Rights and International Relations. In a statement issued on 19 July, the Civil Society Joint Working Group criticized the selection process of the new commissioners for lack of compliance with the principles relating to the status of national institutions (Paris Principles).

38. Journalists and media workers continued to face conflict-related violence. During the reporting period, UNAMA documented five incidents that resulted in the injury of two journalists, both male, and threats against three others, including one woman, as well as threats against a radio station and a television station. In addition, four civil society activists, including three women, were threatened because of their human rights work. All of the incidents were attributed to the Taliban. On 24 June, the Taliban published a statement in which it warned media outlets to stop airing anti-jihad propaganda paid for by the Government or they would be considered military targets. During the twenty-sixth meeting of the Government and Media Joint Committee, chaired by the Second Vice-President, Sarwar Danish, the Government encouraged journalists and media organizations to continue normal operations and promised increased security measures. During the reporting period, UNAMA organized eight events, with 528 participants, including 150 women, on the promotion of human rights, conflict prevention, access to information and freedom of expression.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

39. On 22 July, the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations jointly convened the twenty-second meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, jointly chaired by the acting Minister of Finance, Mohammad Humayun Qayumi, and my Special Representative. The meeting was divided into three sessions. In the first session, on the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework, discussions were focused on progress against anti-corruption indicators and other accountability benchmarks. Donors noted some progress on reforms, including merit-based civil service recruitment and the establishment of the Access to Information Commission, but called for increased efforts to combat impunity for corruption by high-level officials and enhanced reporting against anti-corruption benchmarks. The Government reported that it had formally met one goal of the Framework by updating its 2017 anti-corruption strategy in late 2018. However, the time frame for the strategy

only covers the period up until December 2019, and the mechanism to devise a follow-up strategy remains to be activated. Delays in the implementation of the Anti-Corruption Law, notably in the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Commission, have also slowed down overall anti-corruption reforms.

40. At the second session, on growth, development and peace, the Government presented its plans for economic accelerators, focusing on agriculture, urban planning and electricity infrastructure. Donors highlighted the need to reduce the country's dependency on aid and to combat the illicit economy. The third session, on sectoral coordination, was focused on the education and health sectors, with an emphasis on improving aid coordination. At the conclusion of the meeting, the international community and the Government agreed to conduct a joint assessment in order to develop more robust reporting mechanisms for the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework.

41. The Government continued to implement its subnational governance policy. On 10 June, the President established the High Council of District Governors under his leadership to ensure that districts take on increased responsibilities for local development. By 24 July, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance had introduced the Law on Local Councils, approved on 5 March 2019, for subnational authorities and civil society in five provinces, raising awareness and providing guidance on the implementation of the Law. On 28 July, the Directorate signed a memorandum of understanding with civil society organizations, aimed at fostering increased cooperation on subnational governance and development.

42. Progress was also made towards civil service reform. On 20 June, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission reported the successful completion of merit-based recruitment for 11,500 teaching positions and 6,500 entry-level civil servant positions in the capital and provinces since its launch in 2018. In addition, a total of 55 district governors and provincial heads of line departments have passed the new two-week leadership programme of the Afghanistan Civil Service Institute, introduced on 22 June, which is aimed at training senior-level civil servants working at the subnational level.

43. The output of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre took a downward turn during the reporting period. In June and July, its primary court heard two cases, one each month, involving six defendants, which resulted in the acquittal of one defendant and the conviction of five. The court also issued judicial rulings accepting jurisdiction to hear two cases arising from the 2018 parliamentary elections. The Centre's appeal court adjudicated one case, the appeal by a former Deputy Minister against a conviction and a sentence of three years' imprisonment by the primary court. The safety of justice sector officials remained a concern. On 6 July, one of the Centre's prosecutors was shot dead while on his way to work. An administrative staff member who was travelling with the prosecutor was also shot but survived the attack. Of the list of 127 arrest warrants and 128 summonses, 71 warrants (22 outside Afghanistan) and 82 summonses (5 outside Afghanistan) remained to be executed, while only one person on the list was convicted and two were acquitted in a final verdict. As of August 2019, the Centre has tried a total of 59 cases involving 229 defendants since its establishment in 2016, convicting 183 and acquitting 44.

44. The Afghan economy continues to face significant challenges. On 21 July, the World Bank released its half-yearly Afghanistan Development Update, in which it reported an annual growth rate of 1.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018, down from 2.7 per cent in 2017. The Bank attributed the decline to decreased agricultural output as a result of the drought in 2017 and 2018, as well as the deterioration of business confidence as a result of ongoing conflict, heightened political volatility owing to the elections and uncertainty over the peace process. The

Bank reported that poverty was estimated to have increased in 2018, driven by declining per capita incomes, in particular in rural areas. The Bank also noted that fiscal management remained strong, with an overall fiscal surplus of 0.7 per cent in 2018 and an improved budget execution rate of 92 per cent, compared with 83 per cent in 2017.

V. Humanitarian assistance

45. The protracted conflict continues to cause extreme levels of physical and psychological harm and high levels of displacement, further compounded by political instability, drought, sudden-onset natural disasters, food insecurity and poverty. These factors have resulted in significant numbers of people on the move. Between 16 April and 29 July, 48,000 people were displaced, amounting to a total of an additional 206,000 internally displaced persons since the beginning of 2019, more than half of whom (58 per cent) were children under the age of 18. Conflict-related displacements in 2019 have increased by 2 per cent compared with the same period in 2018, and many displaced families have no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin. Internally displaced persons living in temporary settlements continued to face difficult conditions, including a lack of basic essential services beyond the initial provision of humanitarian assistance.

46. Owing to fighting between pro-government forces and anti-government elements, 28,982 individuals were displaced from Baharak, Namak Ab and Iskamish districts in Takhar Province to the provincial capital, Taluqan. The Government and humanitarian agencies provided affected households with essential emergency assistance, including shelter and emergency relief items.

47. The humanitarian drought response to displaced people ended in June, with 5.2 million people having been provided with food assistance, agricultural inputs and other forms of humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, approximately 100,000 people who were displaced to urban centres in Herat and Badghis in 2018 as a result of drought are now living in protracted displacement. Early-season floods from January to May affected thousands of families. The Government and humanitarian partners provided emergency assistance to more than 265,300 people affected by the floods.

48. The most recent nutrition survey in Afghanistan showed that 22 of the 34 provinces are above the emergency level threshold for acute malnutrition at the time of reporting. Since 16 May, the United Nations and partners have dispatched 362 tons of specialized nutritious food to health centres across the country to support 99,000 children under 5 years of age and 46,700 pregnant and breastfeeding women suffering from severely acute malnutrition.

49. Through the summer months, the ongoing agricultural harvest is expected to improve the nutritional situation, although chronic food insecurity issues will persist in many parts of the country. Average or above-average precipitation, better pasture conditions and improved wheat production in 2019 are expected to have a positive impact on food security for many households. Recent assessments have shown a 40 per cent increase in production compared with the same period in 2018, as well as a slight increase in livestock sale prices. However, the impact of crop pests, diseases, post-harvest losses and recent floods is still unknown.

50. While the return of undocumented Afghans from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan has decreased by more than one third compared with 2018, the number of Afghans returning from Turkey has increased. Between 16 April and 20 July 2019, 268,076 undocumented persons and refugee returnees arrived in Afghanistan, including 109,543 undocumented returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran (of

whom 45,995 returned spontaneously and 63,548 were deported), 4,737 from Pakistan (of whom 4,123 returned spontaneously and 614 were deported) and 1,524 from European States and Turkey (of whom 372 returned voluntarily and 1,152 were deported, including 893 people who were deported from Turkey). During the same period, 4,081 registered refugees returned to the country, mostly from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. The number of registered refugees returning to Afghanistan was 58 per cent lower than in the same period in 2018. In Pakistan, the distribution of Afghan Citizen Cards to undocumented Afghans is continuing. As at 4 July, 546,511 Afghans had received cards out of a total of 879,000 undocumented Afghans who registered to receive them. Holders of such cards are allowed to stay in Pakistan until 31 October 2019; a further extension is still under discussion.

51. The conflict continued to generate high demand for trauma services. From 16 May to 16 August, 24,232 trauma cases received treatment, a 12 per cent increase over the same period in 2018. The need for trauma care was particularly high in Nangarhar, Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Ghazni Provinces, where clashes have taken a heavy toll and access to health care has been reduced. During the reporting period, 15 partners from the health cluster provided consultations to 48,923 people, 61 per cent of whom were women and girls.

52. A total of 12 confirmed cases of polio were reported during the first half of 2019, 2 in Kandahar, 5 in Helmand, 4 in Uruzgan and 1 in Kunar. Access issues owing to a Taliban-imposed ban on all polio vaccination activities in the southern region remain the primary reason for sustained polio transmission in the country, and, notably, 11 of the 12 reported polio cases are from areas affected by the ban. In the light of the ban, a contingency plan to sustain population immunity was implemented, including site-to-site vaccination, the establishment of firewalls around inaccessible areas by permanent transit teams, the inclusion of polio vaccination during measles vaccination campaigns and a focus on strengthening routine immunization in inaccessible areas. Complementary vaccination activities, such as permanent transit teams and the vaccination of cross-border travellers, continue to reach more than 1 million children each month.

53. From May to August 2019, the United Nations and its partners cleared 4.7 km² of land contaminated by high-impact explosives, benefiting 34 communities. Responding to the protection concerns of returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, approximately 114,729 people in Afghanistan received risk education funded by the United Nations during the reporting period.

54. The continued use of indiscriminate and unlawful victim-activated pressure-plate improvised explosive devices by anti-government elements caused 205 civilian casualties (58 deaths and 147 injured) in the first six months of 2019. More than half of those casualties occurred in the southern region of Afghanistan. Such devices continued to account for close to 50 per cent of mine action casualties in Afghanistan.

55. Widespread insecurity, mine contamination and difficult terrain continue to present challenges to humanitarian access and the safety of humanitarian personnel. From 1 January to 8 August, 24 aid workers were killed, 29 injured and 30 abducted, compared with 27 killed, 55 injured and 87 abducted in 2018. In total, there were 288 humanitarian incidents involving aid workers, assets and activities over the first seven months of 2019. In all of 2018, there were 382 such incidents. Deliberate attacks continued on health facilities and health workers, causing death and injury to staff and the forced closure of health facilities.

56. In the humanitarian response plan for 2018–2021, 6.3 million people were identified as being in need of humanitarian assistance in 2019, and requests were made for almost \$612 million to reach up to 4.5 million people during the year. According to the Financial Tracking Service, \$163.5 million in humanitarian funding

had been received as at 29 July 2019, or 26.7 per cent of the total funding required for the humanitarian response in 2019. Despite the funding shortfall, humanitarian partners had been able to reach 2.7 million people with assistance as at the end of March.

VI. Counter-narcotics

57. On 29 July, the United Nations released the second part of the 2018 Afghanistan Opium Survey, entitled “Challenges to sustainable development, peace and security”, in partnership with the National Statistics and Information Authority of Afghanistan. The report provides detailed information on the location and extent of opium poppy cultivation, potential opium production and the socioeconomic situation in rural areas. The sharp decreases in opium cultivation and production from the record highs of 2017 followed a sustained lack of rain and snow during the 2017/18 wet season, and the resultant drought badly affected the agricultural sector, with incomes reportedly falling by half in severely affected rural areas. A decrease in opium cultivation and production led to a 56 per cent decline in the funds derived at the farm gate from opium, from \$1.4 billion in 2017 to \$604 million in 2018. An estimated \$29 million was generated in illegal taxation of farm-gate revenues, of which approximately \$21 million was collected by anti-government elements, including the Taliban. It was also estimated in the report that the gross value of the opiate economy in Afghanistan was between \$1.2 and 2.2 billion, a decline of 27 per cent to 51 per cent compared with 2017, but still representing between 6 per cent and 11 per cent of GDP.

58. From 1 June to 30 July, law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 773 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 600 kg of heroin, 5,000 kg of morphine, 23,130 kg of opium, 4,040 kg of hashish, 300 kg of methamphetamine, 13,900 tablets of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, 111,500 kg of solid precursor chemicals, 75,250 litres of liquid precursor chemicals, 72,420 kg of poppy seeds and 3,580 kg of henbane. In total, 56 laboratories (55 heroin and 1 methamphetamine) were dismantled and four drug stockpiles were destroyed. The operations led to the arrest of 879 suspects and related seizures of 120 vehicles, 61 weapons and four radios. Seven officers of the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police were killed and eight were wounded while carrying out their law enforcement operations.

VII. Mission support

59. As at 15 July, vacancy rates at UNAMA were 6 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, 41 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 13 per cent for National Professional Officers and 8 per cent for national staff. During the reporting period, the Mission continued to implement its national United Nations Volunteer programme, aimed at establishing a pool of qualified female candidates for possible future recruitment to staff positions. A total of 30 women were recruited under the 2019 programme. Between 1 May and 1 July, UNAMA conducted 111 road and 14 air missions, as well as 579 reverse outreach missions, during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

60. Over the coming months, the citizens of Afghanistan will face profound choices, which could determine the future of the country for years to come. The winner of the presidential elections will take on the hefty responsibility of leading the country through the next phase of its journey towards stability and self-reliance and, above all, of pursuing a negotiated settlement to end the devastating conflict. To fulfil those responsibilities, the Government of Afghanistan must be viewed as accountable to and representative of the Afghan people.

61. Elections remain the most widely accepted means of conferring political legitimacy in Afghanistan. In order to ensure that the results are accepted by the population, the elections require the responsible participation of all stakeholders. They must be contested on a level playing field, without unduly favouring any candidate. The public commitment of Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah to contesting the elections fairly, and the steps taken by the Government to separate the functions of the State from the electoral contest, are welcome in that regard. At the same time, allegations of misuse of State resources and perceptions of interference in the work of the electoral management bodies are concerning. All stakeholders, including candidates and their supporters, must abide by the laws and regulations governing the electoral process, uphold the commitments made in the code of conduct for candidates and act in a manner that enhances trust in the process and its outcomes.

62. I appeal to all national leaders and candidates to display leadership in discouraging fraud and to take firm action to prevent it. Those who attempt or commit fraud must be held to account. However, I call upon leaders to refrain from making spurious or sweeping allegations of fraud without sufficient evidence. I urge all actors to bring any allegations of fraud and irregularities to the appropriate institutions in accordance with established procedures, and I urge the Electoral Complaints Commission and the court system to carry out their mandates effectively.

63. The electoral preparations, in particular the completion of the top-up voter registration exercise, should allow more Afghans to vote in the presidential elections, many of them for the first time. The Government's unprecedented commitment of \$90 million to fund the elections marks the first instance since 2001 in which Afghan elections have been funded primarily from the national budget. Given the apparent awareness gap among voters and other stakeholders about the electoral process, I urge the electoral management bodies to further strengthen their public outreach.

64. The volatile security situation is highly concerning, including the direct threats to the election process by anti-government elements that may discourage many Afghans from voting. I call upon the Taliban and other armed groups to desist from threatening or targeting electoral staff, candidates or voters; to refrain from damaging electoral sites or disrupting electoral processes; and to allow the people of Afghanistan to exercise their political rights in safety and without fear of violence, intimidation or retaliation. Attacks directed at polling centres and civilians participating in the electoral process are violations of international law, and perpetrators must be held accountable.

65. The war in Afghanistan has been long and brutal, and the path to peace will be challenging. The continuation of talks between the United States and the Taliban, the intra-Afghan peace dialogue in Qatar and the strengthening of efforts to build a regional consensus on peace have given rise to cautious optimism that a formal peace process may soon begin. Such a process, however, will be sustainable only if it is inclusive, protective of the fundamental rights of all Afghans and grounded in a broad consensus. Once again, I call for direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, aimed at resolving the profound issues which can be decided only by

and between Afghans. The United Nations stands ready to support such a process in any way it can.

66. Afghan women have paid a high price during the conflict that has affected their country during the past four decades. Today, they are rising to reclaim their rightful place in all areas of society and are playing a central role in creating peaceful, inclusive communities, as recognized in the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Addressing the Council in July, the Deputy Secretary-General cited the strong call from Afghan women for peace, specifically peace that safeguards their hard-won rights and does not backtrack on what has been achieved. I reiterate her call that Afghan women must enjoy full and meaningful participation in all phases of the peace process and take part in decisions that will affect their future.

67. The economic development of Afghanistan must be underpinned by existing funding commitments from its international partners and by steady progress towards self-reliance by the Afghan State. Constructive discussions between the Government, key donors and the United Nations were held at the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board meeting in July, and the commitment to reformulating reporting mechanisms for the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework is welcome. As the Government has acknowledged, securing the economic future of Afghanistan will also require the incremental development of its private sector, improved investor confidence and enhanced trade and infrastructure connectivity with regional partners. Only by harnessing those factors will Afghanistan be able to provide employment opportunities for the hundreds of thousands of young Afghans who enter the labour force each year and create the conditions for sustainable prosperity.

68. Despite some progress, corruption remains a pernicious challenge in Afghanistan, diverting valuable resources from where they are needed most and eroding public confidence in State institutions. The slowing pace of anti-corruption reforms, in particular in the domains of asset declaration and verification and the prosecution of corrupt officials, is a source of concern. I encourage the Government to redouble its efforts in those areas, which are crucial in the ongoing drive to combat impunity for corruption offences and establish true equality before the law.

69. Civilian casualties decreased during the first half of 2019 compared with the same period in 2018. However, I remain concerned about the high level of harm that the conflict continues to inflict on civilians, including loss of life and injuries. Anti-government elements continue to deliberately target civilians, mainly through the use of suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices. I echo the calls of Afghans to bring the number of civilian casualties down to zero. All parties to the conflict must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law and take immediate measures to prevent civilian casualties.

70. The Government's acceptance of most of the recommendations made during its third cycle of the universal periodic review by the Human Rights Council in July, including those calling for the prompt investigation of allegations of arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, as well as the prosecution of perpetrators, is welcome. I encourage the Government to consider acceding to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and to establish a moratorium on the use of the death penalty with the aim of fully abolishing it, in accordance with relevant General Assembly resolutions. The treatment of security- and conflict-related detainees, including minors, requires additional renewed attention, especially in the fulfilment of procedural protections.

71. Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarian workers, who continue to face unacceptable risks as they carry out their invaluable work. The rise in attacks on aid workers so far in 2019, as well as

continuing high levels of attacks against health and educational facilities, are unacceptable. Such attacks represent a violation of international humanitarian law and can deprive vulnerable communities of access to essential humanitarian assistance. I call upon all parties to the conflict to refrain from attacking humanitarian workers and disrupting humanitarian programming, and to ensure the safe access of such workers to communities most in need. I also call upon donors to increase their funding of the humanitarian response plan, which remains alarmingly underfunded.

72. I thank the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfil our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan.
