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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 the previous report, dated 28 February 2019 ([A/73/777-S/2019/193](#)).

II. Relevant developments

3. Developments in the peace and electoral processes continued to dominate the political environment. The electoral management bodies finalized the results of the October 2018 parliamentary elections after months of delay, and a new parliament was inaugurated for the first time since 2011. New commissioners were appointed to the Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission, and both Commissions began preparations for the 2019 presidential election, the date of which was postponed to 28 September. The Government held a large consultative meeting aimed at forging a national consensus on peace, and a planned intra-Afghan dialogue, intended to include both Government and Taliban representatives, was postponed following disputes over participants. The Government accelerated its anti-corruption efforts and took steps with regard to justice sector reforms. The security situation remained volatile, as both the Government and the Taliban announced new offensive operations. The overall number of civilian casualties decreased significantly, driven mainly by a drop in suicide attacks, while civilian casualties from aerial and search operations and non-suicide improvised explosive devices continued to rise. The humanitarian situation remained serious, with



continuing high levels of displacement caused by both conflict and natural disasters, alongside major returnee flows from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

A. Political developments

4. The political environment remained fluid, as developments accelerated in both the peace and electoral processes. Following the dismissal of all former electoral commissioners in February, on 3 March, following consultation with presidential candidates, political parties and civil society organizations, the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, appointed seven new Commissioners to the Independent Election Commission and five to the Electoral Complaints Commission, as well as new heads of secretariats for both Commissions. On 5 March, the Independent Election Commission elected Hawa Alam Nuristani and the Electoral Complaints Commission elected Zuhra Bayan Shinwari as their respective chairs, marking the first time women headed both electoral bodies. On 24 April, Mr. Ghani signed a decree appointing two non-voting international commissioners to each Commission, as envisaged under the February amendments to the Election Law. On 6 May, the Office of the Attorney General announced that it had petitioned the Supreme Court regarding the criminal cases against the former election commissioners and other electoral officials.

5. Meanwhile, the electoral management bodies continued technical preparations for the presidential election. On 23 April, the Electoral Complaints Commission announced that it had completed the vetting process for the presidential elections, with no complaints received against any of the 18 candidates on the preliminary list. The Independent Election Commission published the list of final candidates on 25 April.

6. Controversy over the use of electoral technology continued through much of the reporting period, causing further delays in electoral preparations. Consistent with the amended Election Law, the Independent Election Commission dedicated significant time to exploring the use of technology. In support of those efforts, the UNAMA donor-supported Election Support Group facilitated the visit of a senior technology expert to advise on possible options that would allow for enhanced use of technology and timely elections. The assessment, shared with the Commission on 24 April, concluded that 18 to 24 months would be required for the proper implementation of biometric voter registration, and outlined three options for consideration. On 25 April, the Commission decided to undertake full biometric voter registration of all voters. After further consultations with political parties, presidential candidates and civil society, and in the light of the compressed timeline, the Commission decided on 13 May that it would instead pursue a paper-based voter registration “top-up” exercise with biometric voter verification and electronic results transmission for the 2019 elections. On 18 May, Commissioner Aurangzeb announced that the start of the top-up voter registration process, planned to last 15 days at 458 voter registration centres, had been postponed from 16 May to 8 June.

7. The reconstitution of the electoral management bodies, the new provisions in the amended Election Law and the delays in finalizing the parliamentary election results led to the further postponement of presidential elections. On 20 March, the Independent Election Commission announced that the date for the presidential and provincial council elections, and for the postponed parliamentary election in Ghazni Province, would be postponed from 20 July to 28 September. District council elections, initially slated to take place alongside the October 2018 parliamentary elections and later deferred, were not mentioned. The announcement triggered mixed reactions from presidential candidates and the political opposition, some of whom revisited calls for the establishment of an interim administration. While some civil

society organizations welcomed the additional time for electoral preparations, presidential candidates and political parties criticized the lack of consultation over the new date. Subsequently, on 29 May, the Commission decided to hold only the presidential election on 28 September, and postponed elections for provincial councils and Ghazni Province's parliamentary seats to a later date.

8. On 18 April, a group of 11 presidential candidates, including former National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar and former Director of the National Directorate for Security Rahmatullah Nabil, announced the formation of the Council of Presidential Candidates and their intention to explore interim government arrangements as at 22 May, which they perceived as the expiry of the constitutional term of the presidency. In response to a request for a ruling by the Office of the President, the High Council of the Supreme Court issued a judgment on 21 April ruling that the extension of the terms of the President and Vice-Presidents until the election of a new President was in accordance with the Constitution, citing the 2009 precedent and the need for stability and national unity. The decision was criticized by the Council of Presidential Candidates and other opposition figures, including the former Governor of Balkh, Atta Mohammed Noor, who described the ruling as illegal and politically motivated. At a 20 May press conference and in statements by its members, the Council warned of possible future civil disobedience if its proposals were not considered. As at 23 May, no demonstration had been reported.

9. Mr. Ghani made a series of senior security appointments during the reporting period, including two deputy ministers for defence, provincial chiefs of police in 17 provinces and three new deputies in the Office of the National Security Council. While the President stated that those appointments aimed at advancing his reform agenda, opposition figures expressed concerns about the perceived politicization of the security sector ahead of the presidential elections.

10. In parallel, the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission continued finalizing the October 2018 parliamentary elections, following contentious counting processes in many provinces. After consultations with stakeholders, the Electoral Complaints Commission invalidated all recounts for Kabul Province on 25 April and began a review of original results forms. Final results were released on 14 May, with four changes to the preliminary list. With that announcement, the final certified results of the Wolesi Jirga elections were released for all 35 participating electoral constituencies, more than six months after the elections. Several unsuccessful candidates and supporters protested the results, and some called for the establishment of a special court to adjudicate the matter. On 26 April, the new Parliament was inaugurated with representatives from all constituencies except Kabul and Ghazni provinces. Kabul Province representatives were sworn in on 15 May.

11. Against that backdrop, domestic and international actors continued their efforts towards a negotiated peace settlement. On 7 April, the Government announced the formation of a leadership council for peace and reconciliation, comprising 37 people, to create a politically inclusive advisory team for negotiations with the Taliban, and the creation of a negotiating team of 22 people. Both entities included opposition politicians and female representatives. On 29 April, the Government convened a consultative loya jirga on peace in Kabul. Bringing together more than 3,000 delegates from across the country, including some ex officio representatives such as parliamentarians and members of provincial councils, the five-day jirga ("assembly") was aimed at developing the parameters for talks with the Taliban. Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, as well as major opposition politicians, including presidential candidates, boycotted the event, claiming that it was intended to bolster President Ghani's re-election campaign. Amid tight security arrangements, the event was conducted without any security incidents. The jirga released a communiqué calling

for, among other things, a ceasefire, talks without preconditions, a Taliban office to be opened in Afghanistan, a responsible withdrawal of international forces, the formation of an inclusive negotiating team, continued support from the international community and the preservation of human rights, particularly women's rights. In his closing speech, Mr. Ghani repeated that he was willing to call for a ceasefire if the Taliban reciprocated, and offered to release 175 Taliban prisoners as a confidence-building measure. After calling for a boycott of the event on 28 April, the Taliban rejected the jirga outcome and the call for a ceasefire in a statement on 3 May.

12. Afghan women made progress in their efforts to achieve meaningful participation in the peace process. Following a six-month consultation with 15,000 Afghan women across 34 provinces, on 28 February, the Office of the First Lady, with support from the High Peace Council, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghan Women's Network and other civil society organizations, convened a national conference of Afghan women for peace. At the conference, Afghan women submitted a 15-point declaration to President Ghani, who undertook to have its provisions considered at the consultative loya jirga and peace talks. Women comprised around 30 per cent of participants at the consultative loya jirga, chaired 13 of its 50 committees and were elected as two of the five deputy heads of the assembly.

13. In mid-April, domestic and international stakeholders attempted to organize an intra-Afghan dialogue in Doha with Afghanistan-based politicians and civil society actors, Government officials participating in their private capacity and the Taliban. However, preparations for the meeting unravelled amid disputes over the list of participants. On 18 April, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, which was to host the conference, announced that the talks had been postponed. In subsequent separate public statements, the Afghan Government and the Taliban justified the decision, referring to disagreement on their respective conditions for the talks. Nonetheless, on 28 May, a delegation of 24 Afghan political figures, including former President Karzai, alongside 14 Taliban representatives, attended a meeting in Moscow marking 100 years of diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and the Russian Federation. The Taliban delegation was led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who had been appointed as the Head of the Taliban Political Commission and a Deputy Leader of the movement in January 2019. After meeting again on 29 May, the two sides issued a joint statement reporting progress on some issues but acknowledging the need for further discussions.

14. The United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, held talks with the Taliban in Doha from 25 February to 12 March, and again from 1 to 9 May. The talks continued to focus on the withdrawal of international troops and on guarantees that Afghanistan would not become a base for transnational terrorism. Trilateral consultations were held by Chinese Special Envoy Deng Xijun, Russian Presidential Representative Zamir Kabulov and Mr. Khalilzad in Washington, D.C., on 21 and 22 March, and in Moscow on 25 April. Following the latter meeting, a joint statement was issued stating support for an inclusive Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process. On 26 March, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, visited Kabul, where she reiterated the readiness of the European Union to support the Afghan peace process. Peace efforts were discussed at a meeting in London on 23 April between Mr. Khalilzad and representatives of France, Germany, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the European Union.

15. Under its good offices mandate, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continued to engage with the Taliban Political Commission on issues related to the peace process, protection of civilians and humanitarian access. My Special Representative met with Mullah Baradar and other members of the

Taliban negotiating team on 25 April to discuss progress towards intra-Afghan dialogue, as well as protection of civilians and humanitarian issues. At the local level, UNAMA continued working with communities and subnational government authorities in support of local peace and conflict resolution efforts and implementing local peace initiatives through its field offices. In Nangarhar Province, UNAMA facilitated a peace jirga between two tribes in Sherzad District that concluded with the adoption of a resolution regulating water distribution. For the first time, women played an active role in the jirga itself.

B. Security

16. The security situation remained volatile, with a consistently high number of security incidents. Between 8 February and 9 May 2019, the United Nations recorded a total of 5,249 security-related incidents, a 7 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2018. The southern region saw the highest number of incidents, followed by the eastern and western regions; together those regions accounted for 71 per cent of all incidents. On 12 April, the Taliban announced the start of its annual spring offensive, Operation Al-Fath, with the stated focus of ending foreign occupation and “establishing an Islamic system”. Reported security incidents countrywide increased in the days after the Taliban’s announcement.

17. Established trends remain unchanged, with 3,207 armed clashes dominating the security incident profile, representing 61 per cent of all incidents. That represents a 10 per cent decrease in armed clashes compared with the same period in 2018, possibly attributable to the harsh winter. Incidents relating to the use of improvised explosive devices remained the second highest category of incidents but decreased slightly by 3 per cent. Suicide attacks decreased by 72 per cent, reflecting ongoing interdiction efforts and increased security measures by Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, particularly in the cities of Kabul and Jalalabad. Afghan and international military air forces maintained a high tempo of air strikes, with 305 recorded during the period, a 12 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018.

18. On 2 April, the Government approved the Ministry of Defence’s Operation Khalid. Security forces’ operations focused on the southern region; Nangarhar in the east; Farah in the west; Kunduz, Takhar and Baghlan in the north-east; Ghazni in the south-east; and Balkh in the north. Improving security along major roads remained a challenge. Air strikes continue to underpin Afghan and international military efforts. Air strikes in Helmand and Ghazni provinces made up 56 per cent of the total number during the period.

19. Following the start of Operation Al-Fath by the Taliban, the most active conflict areas countrywide were in Helmand, Farah and Ghazni provinces. The Taliban succeeded in temporarily capturing at least three district administrative centres, Arghanj Khwah in Badakhshan, Ab-e Kamari in Badghis and Shamulzayi in Zabul. A Taliban offensive in Bala Murghab District, Badghis Province, resulted in four weeks of fighting and the reported killing of 62 and the capture of 56 Afghan National Defence and Security Forces elements. Although there were no significant threats to provincial capitals, on 21 March a joint Afghan and international military operation in the outskirts of the city of Kunduz resulted in intense clashes and the deaths of 2 international and 10 Afghan soldiers.

20. The number of high-profile attacks substantially decreased, with 8 suicide attacks reported during the period compared with 26 during the same period last year. Two occurred in the city of Kabul, compared with 10 during the same period last year: a complex attack on 20 April against the Ministry of Communications and

Information Technology, claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP); and a complex attack on 8 May against an international non-governmental organization, Counterpart International, claimed by the Taliban. The drop was accompanied by greater targeting of Afghan security facilities as opposed to civilian targets. In Washer District, Helmand Province, on 1 March, a Taliban suicide attacker detonated an explosive device inside Camp Shorabak, and was followed by 27 attackers who breached the camp's defences. The ensuing armed clashes lasted 37 hours before Afghan security forces secured the base. Subsequently, the Taliban issued a statement claiming that the base had been used to launch night raids against civilians. In Sherzad District, Nangarhar Province, on 12 April, the Taliban launched a large-scale complex attack against the district administration centre.

21. ISIL-KP remained resilient, despite Afghan and international military forces maintaining a high tempo of operations against its strongholds in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. Despite significant territorial losses in late 2018, ISIL-KP has launched several offensives against Taliban-held areas in both provinces since January 2019, with some battlefield gains reported in Kunar Province. During the reporting period, 113 incidents were attributed to ISIL-KP, compared with 145 during the same period last year. In addition, ISIL-KP claimed two suicide attacks during the reporting period compared with nine during the same period last year, one against a construction company located near Jalalabad Airport on 6 March, and the aforementioned attack in Kabul on 20 April.

22. There were 11 incidents involving United Nations personnel during the reporting period, including 4 incidents of intimidation and 4 criminal-related incidents, but no armed clashes.

C. Regional cooperation

23. Regional engagement intensified with regard to Afghan peace and development efforts. On 21 February, President Ghani met with the President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, in Turkmenistan to discuss bilateral relations, regional connectivity projects and the role of the region in the peace process. On 17 and 18 March, Mr. Ghani visited the United Arab Emirates to discuss trade and investments, development and humanitarian assistance and peace initiatives. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Salahuddin Rabbani, visited Indonesia on 15 March to discuss the implementation of agreements between the two countries and peace efforts. Indonesian officials reiterated their readiness to host direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. On 30 April, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Retno Marsudi, met with the Taliban in Doha in a further effort to encourage direct talks.

24. Afghanistan and Pakistan continued to engage on bilateral issues and Afghan peace efforts, although relations between the two countries were somewhat tense. On 25 March, Pakistani media reported comments by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, suggesting that the Afghan Government was a "hurdle" in the peace process and that establishing an interim administration would help advance peace efforts. The Government of Afghanistan recalled its Ambassador to Pakistan over the remarks. On 25 April, in a statement on Afghanistan, the Prime Minister condemned the violent offensives, asserted that Pakistan had committed its diplomatic and security capital to the success of the Afghan peace process and pledged that Pakistan would no longer be party to any internal conflict in Afghanistan. On 5 May, during a telephone call between the two leaders, President Ghani accepted an invitation from the Prime Minister to visit Pakistan.

25. Cooperation continued to develop between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, whose engagement on peace-related efforts increased during the reporting period. On 6 March, the National Security Adviser of Afghanistan, Hamdullah Mohib, visited Tashkent, where the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, briefed Mr. Mohib on his recent engagements with the Taliban and other relevant interlocutors. On 31 March, President Ghani met in Kabul with Mr. Kamilov, who voiced the readiness of Uzbekistan to host peace talks. Bilateral Afghan-Uzbek relations were strengthened through visits between authorities in the border provinces of Balkh (Afghanistan) and Surxondaryo (Uzbekistan), aimed at fostering cross-border trade and investments.

26. Engagement also continued through multilateral forums. The first Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process meeting of ambassadors of 2019 took place in the city of Kabul on 27 February. Participants reviewed ongoing activities as part of a stocktaking exercise of confidence-building measures under the Process, and welcomed the offer of Uzbekistan to host the eighth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan in November 2019. For the first time since its inception, a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Afghanistan Contact Group (held in Bishkek on 19 April), was co-chaired by Afghanistan. Participants discussed cooperation with Afghanistan as well as progress on the Afghan peace process and reviewed the Contact Group's draft road map for further action.

III. Human rights

27. On 24 April, UNAMA released its report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict for the first quarter of 2019.¹ The Mission documented 1,773 civilian casualties (581 deaths and 1,192 injured) from 1 January to 31 March 2019, a 23 per cent reduction compared with the same period in 2018. The reduction was mainly driven by a 76 per cent reduction in civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks. UNAMA attributed 54 per cent of civilian casualties to anti-government elements (39 per cent to the Taliban, 12 per cent to ISIL-KP and 3 per cent to undetermined groups). Some 34 per cent were attributed to pro-government forces (17 per cent to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, 13 per cent to international military forces, 2 per cent to pro-government militias and 2 per cent to multiple pro-government forces), and 12 per cent were the result of unattributed crossfire during ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces and other incidents. The majority of civilian casualties were attributed to anti-government elements; however, pro-government forces were responsible for more civilian deaths than anti-government elements during the first quarter of 2019.

28. Ground engagements caused 616 civilian casualties (134 deaths and 482 injured), comprising 35 per cent of all casualties. The use of suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices resulted in 500 civilian casualties (76 deaths and 424 injured), accounting for 28 per cent of all civilian casualties. Civilian casualties from non-suicide improvised explosive devices increased by 21 per cent. UNAMA documented 228 civilian casualties (145 deaths and 83 injured) from aerial operations, comprising 13 per cent of all civilian casualties, and 102 civilian casualties (72 deaths and 30 injured) from search operations, accounting for 6 per cent of all civilian casualties. UNAMA documented 582 child casualties (150 deaths and 432 injured). On 8 May, in a complex attack against the non-governmental organization Counterpart International premises in Kabul, 8 civilians were killed and 27 were injured. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

¹ See <https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.

29. Between 1 January and 31 March, the country task force on monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 18 incidents targeting schools and related personnel (14 incidents against education facilities and 4 against education-related personnel), compared with 69 incidents during the previous reporting period, during which the Taliban targeted schools used as polling centres for the October 2018 parliamentary elections. The task force attributed 12 incidents to anti-government elements (11 to the Taliban and 1 to ISIL-KP), 5 to pro-government forces (2 to the Afghan National Army, 1 to international military forces, 1 jointly to the Afghan National Army and international military forces, and 1 jointly to the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police and a pro-government militia group) and 1 incident jointly to the Afghan National Army and the Taliban.

30. The country task force verified two incidents of abduction of children involving 4 boys (one by the Taliban involving 3 boys and one by the Afghan National Police involving 1 boy), compared with five incidents in the previous reporting period involving 11 boys. The task force also verified two incidents of recruitment and use of children involving four boys (one incident by the Taliban involving three boys, and one by the Afghan National Police involving one boy). Moreover, the task force verified two incidents of sexual violence against boys by pro-government forces (both by the Afghan National Police, involving two boys). On 5 May, the Government of Afghanistan launched the Law on Protection of Child Rights, following the passage of a bill into law through a presidential decree signed on 5 March.

31. UNAMA verified 26 incidents affecting health-care and related personnel (16 incidents against health-care facilities and 10 incidents against health-care personnel), compared with 12 such incidents verified in the previous reporting period. The task force attributed 18 incidents to anti-government elements (17 to the Taliban and 1 to an undetermined armed group), including 6 incidents resulting in the closure of 88 medical facilities and the abduction of three medical personnel by the Taliban, and 7 incidents to pro-government forces (2 to the Afghan National Army, 1 each to the Afghan local police, the National Directorate for Security and international military forces, and 2 to undetermined pro-government forces). One incident was attributed jointly to pro-government forces and armed opposition groups.

32. On 12 April, the Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court unanimously rejected the request to proceed with an investigation for alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes in Afghanistan submitted by the Prosecutor on 20 November 2017. The judges decided that an investigation into the situation in Afghanistan at the present stage would not serve the interests of justice.

33. On 17 April, UNAMA and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a joint public report on the treatment of conflict-related detainees and the elimination of torture, covering the period from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018.² Of the 618 conflict-related detainees interviewed, nearly 32 per cent gave credible accounts of having experienced torture and other forms of inhuman or degrading treatment while in the custody of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. Although UNAMA has documented a reduction in the number of cases of torture since 2016, it notes its ongoing concerns about the use of torture and ill-treatment of conflict-related detainees, mostly in detention facilities run by the National Directorate for Security and the Afghan National Police. The report also documented violations and challenges in implementing key procedural safeguards, such as access to lawyers, and a continued lack of accountability for perpetrators.

² See www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/AF/PreventingTortureReportApril2019.pdf.

34. The Government took further steps with regard to the promotion and protection of women's rights. On 4 March, the Cabinet's Gender Committee signed a memorandum of understanding with relevant ministries regarding the implementation of the policy on women's inheritance and property ownership and approved, in principle, two policies: one on the protection of women in war and emergency situations and one on increasing women's participation in elections. On 7 April, the Ministry of Justice presented a draft Family Law to the Cabinet's Legislative Committee. On 17 April, the Prevention of Violence and Public Awareness Working Group, which includes Government, United Nations and civil society organizations, endorsed the proposal of the Ministry of Women's Affairs for women's protection centres.

35. Between 4 and 14 March, UNAMA organized eight events to celebrate International Women's Day. The events, including round table and panel discussions, raised awareness of women and girls' rights issues such as access to education and sports and the elimination of crimes of violence against women and girls, including underage and forced marriage, sexual assault and the custom of *ba'ad*, wherein girls are bartered to resolve interfamily disputes. On 14 March, the United Nations marked International Women's Day in Kabul with a "One United Nations" public event that highlighted Afghan women role models in various professional sectors.

36. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission held public hearings across 33 provinces in March and April as part of its National Inquiry on the Role of Women in Peace and Security in Afghanistan. UNAMA attended hearings in Kabul, Bamyan, Herat, Helmand and Kandahar provinces, where it advocated for the promotion of human and women's rights in peace and security efforts. Participants stated that human rights values were non-negotiable, that women must be present at all stages of the peace process and that peace should not undermine justice for the victims of the conflict.

37. Journalists and media workers continued to face conflict-related violence. During the reporting period, UNAMA documented three incidents that resulted in the killing of one journalist, the injuring of another and threats against a female journalist by anti-government elements. Furthermore, five journalists and human rights defenders, including one woman, were beaten, arrested or threatened, four of those by pro-government forces and officials. UNAMA also organized nine events (totalling 399 participants, including 94 women) on the role of journalists and human rights defenders, informal justice and human rights, peacebuilding and women's role in the peace process, and mainstreaming human rights principles.

IV. Coordination of development assistance

38. The Government and key development partners continued efforts to implement the commitments made at the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan, held in November 2018. Consultations on the socioeconomic requirements for peace, in line with paragraph 15 of the Joint Communiqué that resulted from the Conference, continued in Kabul, and on 13 April, at an event held in the margins of the World Bank's annual Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C., participants, including the Minister for Finance of Afghanistan, expressed support for the initiative and called for broader consultations to help guide coherent and realistic development planning in alignment with the Government's development agenda.

39. The Government took further steps towards the implementation of its subnational governance policy entitled "Citizen-centred governance: a road map for subnational reform". On 19 February, President Ghani issued a presidential order on district governance aimed at improving delegation of authority and paving the way

for a more equitable allocation of resources to district administrations. On 5 March, Mr. Ghani approved a law on local councils through a legislative decree. The law clarifies the roles and responsibilities of provincial, district and village councils, and aims to facilitate local council oversight and promote public participation in the design and implementation of local government development programmes.

40. The Government continued to make progress in public administration reforms. On 4 February, the Cabinet approved a revised policy to increase the number of women in the Civil Service, which set new targets for 2019. On 2 April, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission released its annual report for 2018, which discussed significant achievements, including reduction in recruitment time of civil servants from around 180 days in 2017 to 45 days in 2018, and the implementation of a human resource management information system, launched on 17 February 2019. The system aims to register an estimated 424,000 civil servants in a centralized electronic employee database, including biometrically, to improve human resource planning and reduce the occurrence of “ghost” employees.

41. Implementation of the Access to Information Law also continued. On 28 April, the Access to Information Commission began following up on the November 2018 Geneva Ministerial Conference commitments with the Council of Ministers, the High Council for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption, the National Procurement Authority and the Civil Society Working Committee. The Commission provided technical guidance to government entities with regard to creating information banks and developed regulations on access to information and the processing of public complaints.

42. On 20 May, UNAMA published its third annual anti-corruption report, entitled “Afghanistan’s fight against corruption: groundwork for peace and prosperity”.³ The report documented the gradual implementation of reform steps, including legislative changes such as the establishment of a dedicated Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, the adoption of a law protecting whistle-blowers and a revision of the Access to Information Law. It highlighted the need to further improve the institutional set-up of anti-corruption bodies and recommended safeguards to ensure the independence of the envisaged Anti-Corruption Commission. Progress was noted with regard to enforcing compliance with the registration of assets of public officials and the continuation of reform measures in the civil service and judiciary and the Office of the Attorney General. The report commended the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre for its ability to effectively apply the better-defined corruption offences in the 2017 Penal Code, but highlighted that the ability of Afghanistan to execute arrest warrants remained weak, which resulted in more than 20 per cent of defendants before the Centre being tried in absentia and their sentences going unenforced. The report also described the Attorney General’s ongoing efforts to address corruption allegations in the 2018 electoral process.

43. In the second quarter of 2019, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre significantly increased its output (following a decline in the second half of 2018). By 20 May, the Centre’s Primary Court had issued judgments in 57 cases involving 223 accused, its Appeals Court had decided 52 cases involving 173 accused, and the Supreme Court had issued 36 judgments involving 117 accused in appeals against the Centre’s decisions. However, the Centre’s activities remained constrained by the inability of law enforcement organs to execute arrest warrants and summonses. Of the list of 127 arrest warrants and summonses pending execution prior to 28 November 2018, only 17 warrants and 44 summonses had been executed as of the time of writing. Of the

³ See https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_fight_against_corruption_groundwork_for_peace_and_prosperity-20_may_2019-english.pdf.

17 executed arrest warrants, 11 suspects turned themselves in voluntarily and 6 warrants were executed by force. In total, only 1 person on the list of 127 has been tried and is serving his sentence. On 19 March, the Centre reported that another 82 summonses and 46 warrants had been issued, bringing the total number of unexecuted orders to 194. Separately, a former Minister, whom the Centre's Primary Court had tried and convicted in absentia twice for crimes committed when he was Deputy Minister, was arrested on 8 April and incarcerated pending appeal. Also notable was the first-ever trial and conviction, albeit in absentia, of two sitting members of the National Assembly and several former deputy ministers in May.

44. Justice reforms continued to advance slowly. The Ministry of Justice could not finalize its reforms of the Department of Legal Services (*Huquq*) and the Department of Government Cases (*Qaza-e-Dawlat*) as required by the country's anti-corruption strategy, nor did it conclude efforts to develop a law codifying the complementarity between the formal and the informal justice sectors during the reporting period. From 22 April to 4 May, UNAMA provided the Attorney General with an expert assessment on strengthening the capacity of its international crimes directorate, to improve implementation of the 2018 Penal Code. Subsequently, on 6 March, the Supreme Court issued a circular directing judges to outline the basis and reasoning for their sentencing decisions in an evidence-based manner, following the Mission's recommendations on the basis of a countrywide survey on the implementation of the improved sentencing regime under the new Penal Code.

V. Humanitarian assistance and refugees

45. Levels of displacement remained high as a result of the conflict, the ongoing impact of the 2018 drought and natural disasters. That was compounded by chronic poverty and a lack of basic services and livelihood opportunities. Between 1 January and 16 May, 110,000 people were newly displaced by the conflict. More than half (58 per cent) were children under the age of 18. Conflict-related displacements in 2019 decreased by 28 per cent compared with the same period in 2018, but many displaced families had no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin.

46. Clashes between the Taliban and ISIL-KP displaced 24,900 people from Chapa Darra District, Kunar Province, in March. Those left behind (believed to be half of the local population) were reportedly barred from leaving the area, violating their freedom of movement; unconfirmed reports indicate that militants occupied the homes of those who fled. That was followed by the displacement of at least 9,016 people from Khogyani and Sherzad districts in Nangarhar Province, also due to intra-insurgent clashes. Verification of internally displaced persons in those areas is under way and the number may increase as a result. The Government and humanitarian organizations have provided initial assistance, including food, cash, basic relief items and services to displaced persons in both locations, but those displaced are unlikely to return to their places of origin unless security conditions improve.

47. Displaced persons living in temporary settlements continued to face difficult conditions. In Herat Province, there was a 321 per cent increase in cases of acute watery diarrhoea between 1 February and 15 April, compared with the same period last year, along with 98 cases of measles reported among those living in displacement sites. In response, the Government and humanitarian partners scaled up disease surveillance and response activities and vaccination campaigns.

48. Between 21 January and 30 April 2019, 140,381 undocumented persons and refugee returnees arrived in Afghanistan, including 7,372 undocumented returnees from Pakistan, 127,510 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 3,850 from European

States and Turkey (of whom 460 returned voluntarily while 3,390 were deported). During the same period, 1,154 registered refugees returned from Pakistan, 461 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 34 from other countries. The number of registered refugees returning to Afghanistan was 64 per cent lower than during the same period in 2018 (which was 4,214 from Pakistan, 322 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 61 from other countries). Between 1 January and 30 April 2019, 149,894 undocumented Afghans returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran, a 34 per cent decrease compared with the same time period in 2018 (227,890). On 30 March 2019, the Government of Pakistan extended its Afghan Citizen Cards programme for some 327,000 Afghan nationals residing in Pakistan until 30 April 2019. Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to the return of 50,000 card holders during 2019. In February, the Government of Pakistan began issuing new cards after a one-year hiatus, issuing more than 150,000 new cards for a new total of 470,000.

49. From 15 February to 31 March, 46,457 trauma cases received treatment, a 23 per cent increase over the same period in 2018. The need for trauma care was particularly high in Nangarhar, Kandahar, and Helmand provinces, where clashes have taken a heavy toll and access to care has been reduced. During the reporting period, 15 partners from the health cluster provided consultations to 54,253 people, 59 per cent of whom were women and girls.

50. Precipitation in the country was high yet erratic during the reporting period. The impact of the drought is still widely felt: the main planting season was compromised by the drought because seed was unavailable. The main harvest, expected in May and June, is likely to result in serious shortfalls of staple crops, the precise extent of which will be measured in the coming weeks. As at 31 March, the humanitarian community had reached 4.3 million people with lifesaving assistance as part of the drought response which started in late 2018. The majority of those reached (3.9 million) were in drought-affected rural areas. Despite some families leaving informal sites in Badghis Province to return to their villages, a considerable number of people are expected to remain displaced in the coming months, due to conflict in their places of origin or because they missed the opportunity to plant crops. The United Nations and humanitarian partners will soon curtail their assistance to the drought-induced displaced persons near the cities of Herat and Qala-e Naw, and focus relief efforts on areas of origin. Seasonal floods caused by heavy rainfall affected 265,355 people in 17 provinces, destroying or damaging more than 35,000 houses in March and April. Farah, Kandahar and Badghis were the most affected provinces. The majority of those affected received emergency humanitarian assistance, although some access challenges were reported in Helmand and Farah provinces. Annual seasonal floods, while largely predictable, cause major financial and infrastructure damages in addition to humanitarian needs.

51. Six cases of polio have been recorded so far in 2019, all in the southern region, where polio vaccination campaigns have faced challenges related to access and a ban on house-to-house vaccination has remained in place since April 2018. In April 2019, those bans were extended to all polio eradication activities, at the risk of compromising the gains made in polio eradication. Notably, since May 2018, five out of six confirmed cases have been reported in areas with compromised access. A nationwide immunization campaign started in April 2019, targeting 9.9 million children across 29 provinces, and approximately 450,000 children remain inaccessible due to the aforementioned bans, largely in the southern, eastern and central regions of Afghanistan.

52. During the reporting period, the United Nations and partners remobilized female deminers in Bamyan, in an effort to declare Bamyan the first province to be “landmine free”. From February to April 2019, the United Nations and its partners cleared 1.3 km² of contaminated land considered to be highly impacted by explosive hazards,

benefiting 14 communities. Responding to the protection concerns of returnees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, 149,445 people received United Nations-funded risk education across the country during the reporting period.

53. In March, responding to the threats posed by explosive hazards due to intra-insurgency fighting, the United Nations and partners provided explosive hazard risk education sessions to more than 2,000 displaced persons as part of the internally displaced persons response in Chapa Darra District in Kunar Province. In March, the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination of Afghanistan drafted national standards for the clearance of abandoned improvised mines, the first international humanitarian standard of its kind.

54. Constraints on humanitarian access continued, with a total of 134 access-related incidents affecting the United Nations and humanitarian partners between 28 January and 22 April, including the killing of 5 aid workers, while an additional 15 aid workers were injured and another 15 were abducted. The trend towards deliberate attacks on health facilities and health workers and the forced closure of health facilities continued: almost 50 per cent of access constraints affected health facilities, services or personnel.

55. The 2019 component of the 2018–2021 humanitarian response plan identifies 6.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. The plan aims to reach up to 4.5 million people and calls for a budget of \$611.8 million. According to the Financial Tracking Service, \$126.3 million in humanitarian funding had been received as at 23 May 2019, or 20.6 per cent of the total funding required for the humanitarian response in 2019.

VI. Counter-narcotics

56. The Government, supported by international partners, continued its counter-narcotics operations. From 15 February to 15 May, law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 1,130 counter-narcotic operations, leading to the seizure of 1,236 kg of heroin, 946 kg of morphine, 4,533 kg of opium, 73,948 kg of hashish, 351 kg of methamphetamine, 27,419 tablets of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), 62,454 kg of solid precursor chemicals, 10,726 litres of liquid precursor chemicals and 127 kg of poppy seeds. In total, 11 heroin manufacturing laboratories were dismantled. The operations led to the arrest of 1,338 suspects and the related seizure of 170 vehicles, 224 weapons and 5 radios. Two officers of the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police were killed and 38 wounded while carrying out operations.

57. From 15 to 17 April, officers of the Afghan Counter-Narcotics Police Mobile Detection Team trained counterparts in Uzbekistan on risk analysis, search techniques and drug identification. Supported by the United Nations, the training was the first of its kind delivered by the Team outside Afghanistan. The Afghan Government also continued its efforts to mainstream women's economic empowerment in alternative livelihood sectors. Ten women-led small and medium enterprises participated in a jobs and fair exhibition held to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March in Kabul, where over 80 companies and organizations exhibited alternative development products.

VII. Mission support

58. As at 15 May, the Mission's vacancy rates were 8 per cent for international staff, 6 per cent for National Professional Officers and 4 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 very low, at 34 per cent for international staff, 40 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 12 per cent for National Professional Officers and 8 per cent for national staff. In an effort to improve the gender ratio among national staff, the Mission launched a National United Nations Volunteer programme aimed at establishing a pool of qualified female candidates for possible future recruitment to national staff positions. Between 1 January and 15 May, UNAMA conducted 239 road and 22 air missions, as well as 1,385 reverse outreach missions, during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

59. A year after the unprecedented 2018 Eid al-Fitr unilateral ceasefires, hopes that violence would abate have not yet been fulfilled. I deeply regret both the continued fighting despite ongoing talks between the United States of America and the Taliban, and the postponement of the intra-Afghan dialogue. Those setbacks constitute a reminder that progress towards peace is not a linear process, though the unacceptable toll in lives and the lost chances for future prosperity increase with each day. With a renewed sense of urgency, I call for the beginning of direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban and support ongoing efforts towards a dialogue inclusive of all national constituencies. The United Nations stands ready to assist with efforts towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

60. To be lasting, peace must be based on a broad consensus. Women must have full participation in the peace process, and the human rights of all must be guaranteed. The social gains of the past years must be preserved and built upon. Already, Afghans gathering in different forums have expressed their hopes for the results of an intra-Afghan dialogue. Those include a rapid reduction in violence; the preservation of civil, political and socioeconomic gains, including for women, minorities and other vulnerable groups; a guarantee of fundamental freedoms and equal protection under the law; and participation in national and local-level governance. Though sometimes arduous, the process of building national consensus requires sustained efforts to broaden participation and strengthen the groundwork for community acceptance of an eventual settlement.

61. The continued violence against journalists and media workers in Afghanistan remains alarming and compromises Afghans' rights to freedom of expression and to information that underpins an inclusive society. All parties to the conflict must respect national and international standards for the protection of journalists, media workers and human rights defenders, and take measures to promote civil society spaces. I welcome the continued efforts by the Government to promote and protect women's rights and women's participation in the peace process, and the development of a second phase of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.

62. At the 2018 Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan, there was a strong message that peace, State-building and reform-driven development are mutually reinforcing and indispensable. Those elements are crucial to achieving the levels of growth that can generate opportunities for the growing population of the country and reinforce a potential peace settlement. The active engagement of the Government of Afghanistan with regional partners and its commitment to regional connectivity as a foundation for economic growth is highly encouraging. I call on all neighbours of Afghanistan to seize those opportunities for cooperation and do their part to build a prosperous and peaceful future.

63. I welcome the finalization of the results from the long-delayed 2018 legislative elections and the inauguration of a new parliament for the first time since 2011. However, the last-minute introduction of untested biometric technology, a protracted

counting process and controversies over results caused serious damage to the credibility of the electoral management bodies and eroded public confidence in the electoral process. Given the importance of credible elections for the legitimacy of the political system, it is my expectation that Afghan electoral stakeholders, including the Government, political leaders and parties and observer groups, as well as the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission, will integrate the lessons learned from the parliamentary vote into preparations for the upcoming presidential election scheduled for 28 September.

64. Delivering inclusive and credible elections will be a formidable challenge. Electoral timelines are extremely tight; meeting them will require realistic and timely decision-making as well as unity of purpose to address the manifold technical and security challenges. In parallel, all stakeholders must work cohesively to rebuild trust in the electoral process. Afghan citizens have already expressed their commitment to the democratic exercise of their political rights, having put their lives at risk to vote in past elections. At this critical juncture, I emphasize once again that elections are a shared responsibility of all stakeholders. Leaders from the Government and the opposition, political parties and candidates are urged to contribute to an enabling environment for electoral preparations, campaigning and polling; to refrain from political interference with the decisions and operations of electoral management bodies; and to engage constructively on elections-related reform and implementation efforts.

65. Armed conflict continues to take a high toll on the lives of Afghan civilians. The continued targeting of civilians by anti-government elements, mainly through the use of improvised explosive devices, combined with the record number of civilian deaths attributed to air strikes and search operations by pro-government forces, underscores the violence confronting the people of Afghanistan, and particularly children. I urge all parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law and to take immediate measures to prevent civilian casualties, including during the forthcoming voter registration process and elections. There can be no justification for the recent Taliban attack against Counterpart International, an international non-governmental organization focused on democratization, civic engagement and support to civil society.

66. Restrictions to humanitarian access, the rise in attacks against health facilities and personnel and continued restrictions on polio vaccination campaigns have increased the vulnerability and suffering of those who are most in need. All parties to the conflict must respect their international obligations related to humanitarian access and the protection of health facilities and personnel.

67. I take note of the legislative and policy steps taken by the Government to address the issue of torture and ill-treatment of conflict-related detainees, and of the overall reduction in the percentage of conflict-related detainees reporting torture and/or ill-treatment in Government-run detention facilities. However, accountability measures fell short of relevant international standards, as nearly one in three detainees still provided credible accounts of having been subject to ill-treatment and torture, according to the latest report by UNAMA and OHCHR on the treatment of conflict-related detainees. Efforts must be increased to ensure the effective implementation of the policies to combat ill-treatment and torture.

68. Ensuring the integrity and accountability of government institutions is essential to their performance and legitimacy. The Government has taken important steps to advance its subnational governance, public administration and anti-corruption agenda, including by strengthening mechanisms for corruption prosecutions. It remains critical that the institutional set-up of anti-corruption bodies be consolidated and that the new Anti-Corruption Commission operate independently and with

adequate resources, in line with the requirements of article 6 of the United Nations Convention against Corruption. Strengthening the ability of the country's law enforcement entities to execute arrest warrants and summonses, and accelerating justice reforms, should be prioritized. Those actions are essential to meet widespread demands for more transparency as well as protection and equal treatment under the law.

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