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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 2210 (2015), in which I 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 significant humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my previous report of 1 September 2015 ([A/70/359-S/2015/684](#)) and my letter of 15 September 2015 to the President of the Security Council ([S/2015/713](#)). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events related to Afghanistan.

II. Relevant developments

3. Security developments combined with slow economic growth, growing political pressures and expressions of public discontent underlined the challenges faced by the Government of Afghanistan. The temporary seizure by the Taliban of Kunduz City, the first provincial capital lost to the insurgency since 2001, marked the increased intensity of the conflict, whose impact on civilians has remained a major source of concern. The decision by international security partners to extend their commitments was welcomed by the Government. While the majority of the initial recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission were approved by the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, the electoral architecture and the dates for the elections remain to be determined. The Government of Afghanistan and donors began implementation under the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework. While the Government reported some progress towards meeting revenue benchmarks, and the restructuring of key revenue collecting agencies, the overall economic picture



remained complex. Concerns among citizens over their future contributed to an upswing in emigration.

A. Political developments

4. The taking of Kunduz City by the Taliban over the period from 28 September to 13 October 2015 and the deterioration of security across the north constituted a major setback for the Government. It has since sought to reassure the population as a whole by establishing accountability and redress. In the period from 1 to 16 October, President Ghani dismissed the governor of Kunduz Province, appointed a fact-finding delegation on the fall of its capital and visited the city to assess the situation. On 26 October, the delegation briefed the President on its findings and on 29 October it submitted its report to the National Security Council, although the findings were not released publicly. Members of the National Assembly, however, have continued to be vocal in their criticism of the Government's handling of the Kunduz crisis and the security situation in the country. On 2 November, the lower house tabled a vote of no confidence in the Minister of the Interior, which did not pass. The public pressures faced by the Government were highlighted by demonstrations on 11 November in which protestors, aggrieved at the killing of seven civilians in Zabul Province and joined by other disenfranchised members of society, marched through Kabul to the presidential palace, calling for improved security and justice.

5. The military setback in Kunduz City and attacks elsewhere in the country emboldened critics of the Government and saw the emergence of nascent opposition groupings. Supporters of the former President, Hamid Karzai, former government officials and a number of former mujahideen leaders, meeting in various configurations, made demands for a greater role in policymaking, key appointments or for an overhaul of the Government. This included calls by some for convening a loya jirga, with reference to the constitutional loya jirga foreseen in the 21 September 2014 agreement establishing the National Unity Government, or a jirga in other formats. Similar calls were made by some members of the National Assembly as well. While President Ghani and his advisers frequently engaged those parties, on a group or individual basis, the efforts at outreach and dialogue were, in certain cases, interpreted by some as representing co-optation rather than consensus-building.

6. The political and security developments resulted in a series of presidential appointments to vacant government and security positions. President Ghani made eight appointments to fill vacant governorships, including in the northern provinces of Baghlan, Badakhshan, Faryab, Sar-e Pul and Takhar. Three out of 34 governorships in the country remained positions filled by persons serving in an acting capacity. In addition, the President appointed eight Afghan National Police regional commanders, four new provincial heads of the National Directorate of Security and five new provincial chiefs of police. The President also promoted Ahmed Zia Massoud, his Special Representative for Reforms and Good Governance, to a rank equivalent to that of vice-president. However, the position of Minister of Defence continued to be one filled by a person serving in an acting capacity, and that of attorney general remained vacant.

7. The electoral reform process continued. On 6 September, President Ghani issued a decree in which he approved 7 of the 10 initial recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission, including those on voter registration, polling centre

allocation, eligibility requirements for the Board of Commissioners and the appointment process for election commissioners. The recommendation that the quota of seats reserved for women be restored to 25 per cent for the provincial and district council elections was approved, reversing changes in 2013 that had reduced the quotas to 20 per cent and zero, respectively. The President referred three recommendations back to the Commission for further elaboration. These covered the electoral system for all future elections, prospects for smaller constituencies and establishment of a transparency committee to provide oversight of the electoral bodies. The Commission is expected to provide the final recommendations by 21 December 2015. However, the implications of the decision of two of its members not to participate in discussions after the submission of the first set of recommendations, as a result of disagreements over the recommendations on the type of the electoral system, have yet to be determined. For its part, the United Nations, as a non-voting member of the Special Electoral Reform Commission, has continued to support the reform process through technical assistance and advice.

8. On 6 September, President Ghani issued two legislative decrees amending the Election Law as well as the Law on Structures, Duties and Authorities of the Independent Election Commission and Independent Election Complaints Commission, in order to implement the recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission. In mid-September, the Government also inaugurated a process for the formation of a seven-member selection committee responsible for the nomination of a new Independent Election Commission and a new Independent Electoral Complaints Commission. Tasked by President Ghani to prepare the electoral calendar, while taking into account the recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission, the Independent Election Commission has not yet announced dates for parliamentary and district council elections.

9. Since the 7 July 2015 talks in Murree facilitated by Pakistan, the subsequent announcement of the death of Mullah Omar and the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, the prospects for a peace process have remained static. Rifts and tensions emerged in the Taliban, notwithstanding speculation that military gains would enable the Taliban's new head, Mullah Mansoor, to consolidate leadership. On 19 September, a Taliban faction opposed to the leadership of Mullah Mansoor issued a statement claiming that his attempts to restore the cohesion of the Taliban had failed. In early November, a faction opposing Mullah Mansoor appointed an alternate leader, Mullah Mohammed Rasool Akhund, an announcement reportedly followed by clashes in Zabul Province. There were further tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly after the capture of Kunduz City by the Taliban. A number of Afghan political leaders alleged that the inaction of Pakistan had enabled the Taliban's military operation. The allegation was rejected by Pakistan. On 9 October, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, publicly criticized the Taliban over the seizure of Kunduz City and set out an agenda for peace negotiations. During his visit to Washington, D.C., from 21 to 23 October, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, affirmed his continuing readiness to facilitate talks between the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan, but noted the existing discordance with the simultaneous demands that the group be neutralized. In consultation with the Government of Afghanistan, my Special Representative for Afghanistan continued to engage with all parties, including regional neighbours, in an attempt to facilitate an improvement in relations which would be conducive to a peace process.

10. It was against this backdrop that a local initiative to foster stability, with support from national actors, was concluded. On 7 September, a local ceasefire agreement covering Dand-e-Ghori in Pul-i-Khumri district, Baghlan Province, was signed by the Minister for Tribal and Border Affairs, the Baghlan Provincial Governor and tribal elders. Reported as being the first ceasefire agreement with the official endorsement of the Government of Afghanistan, it stipulated that neither the Afghan security forces nor the Taliban would carry out military operations in the area. The ceasefire witnessed an immediate reduction in violent clashes. However, some stakeholders questioned the arrangement, including the Taliban's commitment to sustaining the ceasefire as opposed to using it to strengthen its broader position in the area, and registered concern over any diminished government control over the district.

11. On 12 October in Kabul, approximately 500 representatives of government religious councils, independent clerics and religious scholars participated in the Ulema National Conference in Support of Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, which was facilitated by the High Peace Council, with support and assistance from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Participants adopted a resolution, which was endorsed by President Ghani, backing government efforts to bring together all sides to the conflict to achieve peace. UNAMA continued to support inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue in the Provinces of Kandahar, Paktya, and Paktika, with the related events covering such issues as the role of youth, tribal leaders and religious scholars in support of peace and reconciliation.

B. Security

12. The overall level of security incidents increased and intensified during the period, as compared with the same period in 2014. The temporary seizure by the Taliban of Kunduz City, as well as 16 district centres, primarily across the north and mainly from August through the end of October, underscored the challenges faced by the Government and security forces in maintaining stability across the country. In the wake of these developments, and further to the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Ministers of Defence, held at North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) headquarters in Brussels on 8 October 2015, international security partners pledged to revise planned troop commitments under the bilateral security agreement between the United States of America and Afghanistan and the Status of Forces Agreement for the NATO Resolute Support Mission. Those pledges were welcomed by the Government of Afghanistan. As a consequence of the increased risks posed by the conflict, particularly in urban areas, civilian actors, including the United Nations, necessarily curtailed programme activities and temporarily relocated staff from Kunduz, Baghlan, Badakhshan and Faryab Provinces.

13. Following discussions during the course of 2015 with the Government of Afghanistan, the United States revised its decision to withdraw all but 1,000 of its military personnel by the end of 2016. On 15 October, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, committed to maintaining the current United States troop level at 9,800 through most of 2016 and to retain 5,500 troops into 2017, with a continuing mission to train Afghan forces and support counter-terrorism operations. On the same day, President Ghani welcomed the decision by the United States as a means of strengthening the partnership of the two countries. With regard to the Resolute Support Mission, other NATO members, including Italy, Turkey and the United

Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, pledged to maintain — or, in the case of Germany, increase — their current troop levels.

14. From 1 August to 31 October 2015, 6,601 incidents were recorded by the United Nations in the monitoring of security-related developments related to the work, mobility and safety of civilian actors, with the potential to affect the delivery of mandated activities and programmes. The number of incidents represented a 19 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2014, when 5,516 incidents were recorded. The majority of these incidents (62 per cent) were reported in the southern, south-eastern and eastern regions. While the proportion of security incidents in those three regions has remained at a constant level in recent years, there was a notable intensification of insecurity in the north and north-east, including through the temporary seizure by the Taliban of Kunduz City, and an increase in incidents recorded in those regions, with Sari Pul, Faryab, Jawzjan, Kunduz and Takhar Provinces being the most volatile.

15. In the reporting period, the Taliban, in addition to capturing Kunduz City, seized 16 district centres, primarily in the north (in Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Kunduz, Sari Pul, and Takhar Provinces) but also in the west (in Farah Province) and the south (in Hillmand and Kandahar Provinces). Afghan National Security Forces were able to regain control of Kunduz City, as well as of 13 district centres, by 31 October. Afghan security forces, with international military support, including critical air assets, pushed back efforts by the Taliban to seize the capitals of Ghazni, Farah and Faryab Provinces in September and October, and continued efforts which intensified towards the end of the period in Hillmand. According to current assessments, control of approximately 25 per cent of districts remains contested throughout the country. The fall of Kunduz City provided the Taliban with significant material gains and had propaganda value. The development highlighted critical deficiencies in the capabilities of the Afghan security forces, including in the areas of logistics and planning, intelligence and air support, and also the need in some cases to strengthen the working relationships between security institutions and civilian authorities, which were reported to have been strained in Kunduz prior to the fall of the city. A number of prominent Afghan political figures proposed the establishment of pro-government militia groups, or so-called local defence forces, to support the Afghan security forces. They were anecdotally reported to be present in a number of Provinces.

16. In addition to the conflict between the Afghan security forces and anti-government elements, the period saw continued reporting of violence among the latter in Nangarhar, Zabul and Ghazni Provinces, among others. The presence of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-affiliated groups remained a concern, particularly in Nangarhar Province, where their presence is the most significant relative to the country as a whole. Unconfirmed reports indicate clashes between ISIL affiliates and the Taliban in the Province, and significantly increased clearance operations targeting the affiliates by the Afghan security forces, with international military support. On 20 October, an ISIL affiliate group claimed responsibility for an attack against a Shia mosque in Kabul. The involvement of the group in this and other attacks remains unconfirmed. In Zabul Province, the killing of seven Shia civilians during intra-insurgent clashes prompted renewed concerns regarding the introduction of sectarian overtone into the conflict.

17. During the reporting period, armed clashes and incidents involving improvised explosive devices continued to account for the bulk of security incidents (68 per cent

of the total). A 20 per cent increase in armed clashes was recorded as compared with the same period in 2014. In order to assert their influence over the civilian population, anti-government elements continued to conduct targeted killings and abductions. From 1 August to 31 October, 447 incidents involving assassinations and abductions were recorded, representing a 12 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2014, when 399 incidents were recorded. During the reporting period, 22 suicide attacks were recorded throughout the country, with 10 reported in Kabul Province. In addition, the Taliban and anti-government elements continued to target penal institutions around the country. Following attacks on provincial prisons in Ghazni and Kunduz, on 14 and 28 September, respectively, reportedly over 1,000 prisoners, including those detained for alleged national security offences, were set at large. It was reported that, in the course of these incidents, 4 corrections personnel were killed in Ghazni, while 26 are unaccounted for in Kunduz.

18. A total of 43 security incidents involved the United Nations either directly or indirectly. Most of the incidents were directed towards United Nations national staff members. The most serious incident was the murder of a United Nations staff member, which occurred in Kandahar on 12 October. Owing to the prevailing insecurity and threat levels, on 28 September the United Nations relocated its staff members from Kunduz City. Subsequently, during the Taliban's occupation of the city, the United Nations compounds suffered extensive damage and looting. During the period from 30 September to 9 October, the United Nations relocated staff from Baghlan, Badakhshan and Faryab Provinces as a precautionary measure and temporarily suspended operations in these locations. By 8 and 10 November, operations had resumed in Badakhshan and Baghlan, respectively. The resumption of operations in Faryab remains under review, while those in Kunduz remain limited owing to the damage sustained by the United Nations facilities. While escorting United Nations road missions, National Directorate of Security personnel were targeted in seven attacks. A total of four Directorate personnel were injured in two attacks on road missions in Jalalabad City, on 10 September and 20 October. However, no United Nations personnel were injured in those incidents. Responsibility for the attack on 10 September was claimed by an ISIL-affiliated group, but the claim has not been substantiated.

C. Regional cooperation

19. Emphasis continued to be placed on constructive engagement for regional security and economic advancement. During the Sixth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, held in Kabul on 3 and 4 September, President Ghani and the Chief Executive of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah, focused on the potential areas for growth, investment and development support, and underlined the need for regional cooperation against terrorism. In his remarks at the high-level event on Afghanistan held in New York on 26 September, the Chief Executive highlighted Afghanistan's priorities for peace, economic development and regional cooperation. The United States of America and China, which co-chaired the event, pledged to support increased regional cooperation. Afghanistan also participated in an extraordinary session of the Council of Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization, held in New York on 2 October, which included discussions on the recently agreed Sustainable Development Goals.

20. Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran have focused their efforts on economic and development cooperation. The first expert meeting on the Islamic Republic of Iran-India-Afghanistan Agreement on Transit and International Transportation Cooperation was held in Tehran on 22 September, with a view to expanding trilateral ties. The official visits of Afghanistan's Minister of Urban Development and Minister of Mines and Petroleum to the Islamic Republic of Iran in October concentrated on investment and infrastructure issues.

21. The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, co-chaired by Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2015, continued to demonstrate momentum. Regional technical groups met to advance confidence-building measures concerning: communicable diseases in Tehran on 25 and 26 August; disaster management in Islamabad on 8 September; trade, commerce and investment opportunities in New Delhi on 1 October and 19 November; and education in Tehran on 23 November. On 27 September, senior officials met in New York to discuss preparations for the ministerial meeting in Islamabad on 9 December.

22. The potential spread of instability beyond Afghanistan remained a concern for countries in Central Asia and the Russian Federation. On 6 October, the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, in a meeting with the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, called for increased efforts within the Collective Security Treaty Organization to ensure border security. On 13 October, my Special Representative met with Mr. Rahmon in Dushanbe to discuss the regional threat of terrorism.

23. The Vice-President of China, Li Yuanchao, visited Kabul on 3 November to meet with President Ghani and the Chief Executive, Mr. Abdullah. China pledged assistance for infrastructure projects connecting Afghanistan to its neighbours, reiterated its commitment to the peace process between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban and expressed its readiness to support Afghanistan's counter-terrorism and defence capabilities.

24. From 16 to 19 November, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Hekmat Karzai, visited India for discussions with government officials on ways to enhance cooperation on regional security, particularly on countering terrorism, and economic ties.

25. During President Ghani's visit to Kazakhstan on 20 November, he discussed with the President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and senior officials means for strengthening trade, regional security and counter-terrorism efforts. The countries concluded a number of agreements and memorandums, including on agricultural trade and the combating of natural disasters.

26. Afghanistan and Pakistan held the tenth meeting of the Joint Economic Commission in Islamabad on 23 November. Led by the Ministers of Finance of Pakistan, Ishaq Dar, and Afghanistan, Eklil Ahmad Hakimi, delegations discussed trade agreements and regional economic and energy connectivity infrastructure.

27. On 16 November, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and Pakistan issued statements concerning an incident of alleged cross-border shelling between Paktika Province in Afghanistan and South Waziristan in Pakistan.

III. Human rights

28. Between 1 August and 31 October, UNAMA documented 3,693 civilian casualties (1,138 persons killed and 2,555 injured), reflecting an increase of 26 per cent compared with the figure for the same period in 2014. During the reporting period, 54 per cent of civilian casualties were attributed to anti-government elements, 17 per cent to pro-government forces (12 per cent to the Afghan National Security Forces, 1 per cent to pro-government militia and 4 per cent to international military forces) and 27 per cent to unattributed crossfire between pro-government forces and anti-government elements. Two per cent of civilian casualties, resulting mainly from exposure to explosive remnants of war, could not be attributed. Ground engagements continued to be the leading cause of civilian casualties, accounting for 1,671 (454 persons killed and 1,217 injured), followed by suicide attacks and exposure to improvised explosive devices. The civilian population, including human rights defenders, continued to be targeted by anti-government elements, as evidenced by a number of significant incidents. These included an attack in Paktika Province on 27 September, where improvised explosive devices were used to target a volleyball game in which 17 civilians were killed and 60 injured, and an attack in Jalalabad City on 26 October in which two staff members of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission were killed and six were injured. On 12 October, an unknown gunman shot and killed a UNAMA staff member, Toorpaki Ulfat, in Kandahar city. The motivation behind her murder remains unknown.

29. The Taliban attack on Kunduz City sparked more than two weeks of intense urban fighting through 13 October, when the Taliban formally announced its withdrawal from the city. UNAMA recorded a preliminary figure of 848 civilian casualties (289 persons killed and 559 injured) from incidents in the city and surrounding districts. The vast majority of civilian casualties reportedly resulted from ground fighting between Taliban fighters and Afghan security forces, although UNAMA received reports of civilian casualties from targeted or deliberate killings, parallel justice-related punishment and aerial operations. This included a preliminary figure of 67 civilian casualties (30 persons killed and 37 injured) resulting from a United States air strike on a hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières on 3 October, currently the subject of separate investigations by the Government of Afghanistan, the Government of the United States and NATO.

30. I strongly condemned the air strike which resulted in the death and injury of medical workers and patients at that hospital, recalling that medical facilities are explicitly protected under international humanitarian law. In my statement, I called for a thorough and impartial investigation into the attack in order to ensure accountability. On 25 November, the Commander of the United States Forces-Afghanistan released a summary of the results of the United States investigation, stating that the air strike on the hospital “was the direct result of avoidable human error, compounded by process and equipment failures” and that “appropriate administrative and disciplinary action” would be taken.

31. On 28 September, the Taliban commenced house-to-house searches in Kunduz using pre-prepared lists of human rights defenders, in particular women’s rights activists, persons working for non-governmental organizations, journalists, UNAMA staff members, government employees and other civilians. The systematic search created an environment of fear and resulted in the mass displacement of those individuals from the city.

32. Fear of violence perpetrated by armed men or opportunistic criminals, fuelled by initial reports of abductions of women and systematic searches targeting women's rights defenders, was a key factor in the mass displacement of women from Kunduz City. Following extensive media coverage of these issues, the Taliban issued a statement in which it declared that several Afghan media outlets and their staff were military targets owing to their engagement in reporting. The overall security situation in the north and north-east led to the forced temporary suspension of services aimed at protecting vulnerable women, including shelters, in several adjacent Provinces.

33. The breakdown of the rule of law in Kunduz enabled the creation of an environment in which arbitrary killings, violence and criminality occurred with impunity. UNAMA continues to investigate allegations of serious human rights abuses during this period, allegedly committed by parties to the conflict.

34. Conflict-related violence in the country continued to have a devastating impact on the lives of children. Between 1 August and 31 October, the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting verified 303 incidents in which at least 159 children were killed and 505 were injured. While these figures represent an overall 10 per cent decrease in child casualties compared with the prior reporting period, children continued to account for close to one fourth of all civilian casualties. Ground engagements between the parties to the conflict remained the leading cause of child casualties, accounting for 365, followed by exposure to improvised explosive devices, which resulted in 136 such casualties. Complex and suicide attacks, accounting for 82 child casualties, surpassed exposure to explosive remnants of war as the third leading cause of child casualties, as compared with the previous quarter. Air strikes, indirect fire and executions resulted in a total of 81 child casualties. Overall, 352 child casualties (53 per cent) were attributed to anti-government elements and 174 (26 per cent) to pro-government forces. Owing to the nature of certain types of attack, such as those involving crossfire and explosive remnants of war, 136 casualties could not be attributed to any specific party to the conflict. While the number of incidents of attacks against schools and educational personnel decreased significantly, from 41 to 22, the Taliban offensive in Kunduz City led to the closure of all 497 schools, barring the access to education of more than 330,000 children. In addition to damaging 21 schools, the Taliban used 4 for military purposes. Afghan security forces used one school as well. The Country Task Force attributed a number of incidents in the Nangarhar Province to alleged ISIL affiliates, including the forced closure of six schools, one incident of abduction of educational personnel and one incident involving the threatening and intimidation of educational personnel, with negative effects on access to education and availability of teachers, who were reported to have left the affected areas.

35. During the period, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission-led advocacy committee on *bacha bāzī*, a practice involving the sexual abuse of young boys, submitted to the Ministry of Justice a draft law on criminalization of the practice. Following extensive media commentary in September on alleged abuses committed by the Afghan security forces, the President, on 23 September, ordered the establishment of a body comprising the Office of the Attorney General, the Ministry of the Interior and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission to investigate, monitor and establish an oversight mechanism designed to prevent the sexual abuse of children and to prosecute the perpetrators.

36. Following the formal launch in June of the National Action Plan for Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the Government undertook continuous roll-outs of the Plan in Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat, launched an online resource to support the Plan and conducted 11 global open day events across the country, all with support from the United Nations. At the open day events, participants underlined the need to ensure women's meaningful participation in political and peace processes. During the reporting period, there were a notable number of incidents of violence against women. This included the stoning to death of a 21-year-old woman accused of adultery by a mullah affiliated with the Taliban, on 25 October in Ghor Province. President Ghani condemned the stoning and established a presidential commission to investigate the incident.

37. On 2 September, the President issued a legislative decree on detention which appears to contravene provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.¹ (The Covenant has been ratified by Afghanistan.) The decree includes, inter alia, the following provisions: extended detention times for terrorism and national security-related crimes; a requirement that detention, investigations and trials be conducted in separate special facilities; and "measures" allowing the Supreme Court to detain individuals if "reliable information" has been presented demonstrating that an individual would "probably commit" crimes in the future. Furthermore, the detention period was extended from 3 to 10 days and, for prosecution without judicial review, from 15 to 60 days. Concerns surrounding these measures have been raised by human rights defenders. The National Assembly has yet to review the legislation.

38. On 28 September, in line with the National Action Plan on the Elimination of Torture, the Chief Executive, in a speech delivered at the seventieth session of the General Assembly, reiterated the commitment to signing the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.² In parallel with the ratification process, the Afghan Government continued with efforts to prepare a draft anti-torture law.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and coordination of development assistance

39. During the period, the World Bank revised its 2015 economic growth projections downward, from 2.5 to 1.9 per cent, reflecting the lingering impact on economic confidence of the 2014 security transition and protracted electoral period. According to the World Bank's biannual Afghanistan Development Update, issued in October, real growth of gross domestic product (GDP) is projected to increase to 3.1 per cent and to 3.9 per cent in 2016 and 2017, respectively, conditioned on improvements in the security environment and strong reform momentum. The importance of predictability and improved transparency in the continued implementation of economic and fiscal reforms for building investor confidence and stimulating economic growth was emphasized as well. On 17 November, President Ghani announced the preliminary details of a stimulus package aimed at boosting economic growth and employment.

¹ See General Assembly resolution 2200 (XXI), annex.

² United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 2375, No. 24841.

40. In September, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) completed the first progress review of the staff-monitored programme, and reported generally favourable progress on structural reform benchmarks. This included the new revenue measures enacted by presidential decree during the parliamentary recess in August, although constitutional objections to the use of the decree mechanism for revenue measures were subsequently raised in the National Assembly. The Government took steps to address these concerns by preparing relevant legislative proposals. On 10 November, the Ministry of Finance reported that the Government had met the revised targets agreed with IMF in mid-2015. Current-year revenue stands at 17 per cent above the figures for 2014, but 6 per cent below the original budgeted figure. The risk of a fiscal gap has been reduced by improved revenue performance and controlled spending.

41. The Government and development partners began monitoring the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework adopted at the meeting of senior officials on 5 September. In addition to long-term commitments, the Framework features priority reforms to be undertaken in the next 18 months. On 2 November, the Ministry of Finance circulated the first progress report on its mutual accountability commitments, indicating that 5 out of 39 deliverables had been achieved. These included a restructuring by the Government of its approach to development planning, involving a consolidation of national development programmes through a reduction in their number from 22 to 12, as overseen by six interministerial development commissions. In October, technical discussions began on assessing the availability of donor resources to support the Government's priorities. The development planning reforms and priority commitments under the Framework will guide preparations for the October 2016 ministerial development conference, which is to be co-chaired by the Government of Afghanistan and the European Union. Sustained development assistance will remain critical throughout the 2015-2024 Transformation Decade, as the Government attempts to reinvigorate the economy and expand its revenue base to meet its development goals.

42. During her visit to Kabul from 13 to 15 November, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Helen Clark, met with President Ghani and the Chief Executive. During her meetings, she underlined the commitment of the United Nations to the Government's requests for support for the further capacity development of Afghan institutions; achievement of national priorities, including the Sustainable Development Goals; and, in that context, delivering as one United Nations.

43. The Government continued to advance anti-corruption measures as a core commitment of its reform agenda, notwithstanding some setbacks during the reporting period. On 6 September, President Ghani issued a decree revoking the human resources-related responsibilities of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, owing to concerns over nepotism. In the decree, authority was granted to line ministries to select senior staff, for final approval by the President. As regards the promotion of transparency and accountability, nearly 90 per cent of high-ranking State officials have registered their assets with the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption, pursuant to the provisions of the Constitution and the Law on Overseeing the Implementation of the Anti-Administrative Corruption Strategy. However, as of 29 October, factual verification by the High Office of the declarations was still pending. On 21 October, the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee released a vulnerability-to-corruption-assessment of the national electronic identification card project, in which significant concerns were

highlighted regarding practices related to recruitment of personnel and procurement. As requested by President Ghani, the assessment was conducted in response to the concerns raised by members of the National Assembly and civil society. UNAMA, with donor representatives, continued to facilitate the efforts of the Transparency and Accountability Working Group in order to help support the Government in implementing anti-corruption measures.

44. During the period, the Government was compelled to backtrack on its stated intention to establish an independent anti-corruption commission with prosecutorial powers, as the Constitution allows only the Office of the Attorney General to formally investigate and prosecute criminal cases. The post of Attorney General remains vacant. The Government's commitment to anti-corruption measures was the subject of public debate following the ceremony held on 4 November to mark the signing of a real estate deal between the Ministry of Urban Development and an individual sentenced on corruption charges related to the Kabul Bank scandal. The memorandum of understanding on the proposed deal was subsequently declared null and void, and a presidential legal adviser was suspended for his alleged role in facilitating the agreement. A commission appointed to investigate the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the deal began work in the third week of November. The outcomes of the investigation are expected to be the focus of significant attention in Afghanistan and the international community.

V. Humanitarian assistance

45. The overall humanitarian situation remained precarious throughout the country, particularly in the north-east, owing to the combination of an intensifying conflict and the earthquake of 26 October. The increased number of incidents underscored the continued challenges faced by relief operations. In recognition of the importance of addressing humanitarian challenges, a presidential decree was issued by which the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority was upgraded to the status of a Ministry, with Wais Barmak appointed as State Minister for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Affairs.

46. The escalation of fighting in and around Kunduz City, particularly after its capture by the Taliban, resulted in the displacement of at least 17,000 families from Kunduz Province. Health facilities and schools were closed; water, electrical and communication services were disrupted in Kunduz City; and security threats forced the evacuation of the majority of humanitarian actors, including the United Nations. On 5 October, my Special Representative briefed the Cabinet, at the request of President Ghani, on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Kunduz. A United Nations proposal for the implementation of a humanitarian pause, to allow the Organization to deliver food and medicine to the civilian population in Kunduz, was shared with the President but put aside in the wake of events associated with the recapture of the city.

47. By late October, reports indicated that 90 per cent of the internally displaced persons had spontaneously returned to Kunduz. According to the multisectoral rapid assessment launched on 31 October, an estimated 90,000 people had been affected by the emergency and nearly 7,000 families had lost their source of income owing to the fighting. In response to the conflict in the north, the United Nations and its

partners have to date distributed more than 5,000 hygiene kits and 6,600 non-food item kits; and a one-month ration was allocated for approximately 12,000 families.

48. The effect of the conflict on the population in the north, north-east, and east was exacerbated by an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.5, which struck north-eastern Afghanistan on 26 October. The earthquake affected at least 16 of the country's Provinces and left more than 135,000 people in need of humanitarian assistance. Verified reports derived from joint assessments as of 17 November indicated that the earthquake had killed 115 people and injured 522 and damaged 12,259 homes and destroyed 7,299. The number of fatalities and injuries was highest in Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces, although the most extensive property damage occurred closer to the epicentre, in Badakhshan Province.

49. The Government of Afghanistan, which is leading earthquake assessment and response efforts, released \$770,000 in funding; and an emergency reserve of \$3 million from the United Nations Common Humanitarian Fund was activated. This funding includes support for meeting urgent needs within affected communities before the onset of winter, when snow will limit access to affected areas, which is already difficult owing to the mountainous topography and insecurity. More than two dozen humanitarian actors have responded to needs related to shelter, food and non-food items. As of 17 November, nearly 95,000 people had received assistance, including the provision of non-food items to more than 77,000 people and food to more than 87,500 people. Stocks available inside Afghanistan are expected to be sufficient for the response, with the exception of emergency shelter assistance.

50. According to United Nations assessments completed in September, significant population displacements occurred in 2015 across the southern, central, western and eastern regions. Between January and September, some 235,000 individuals were displaced, excluding the 17,000 families temporarily displaced during the Kunduz crisis. This represents an increase of nearly 70 per cent as compared with the same period in 2014. Present estimates suggest that by the end of the year more than 45,000 families, or 300,000 individuals, may become displaced owing to conflict, potentially making 2015 the worst year for conflict-induced displacement in Afghanistan since 2002.

51. Clashes in Hillmand Province between Afghan security forces and anti-government elements intensified during the period, resulting in the displacement of approximately 2,054 families, with 959 subsequently assisted with non-food items, hygiene kits and cash assistance. In Nangarhar Province, reports indicate significant population displacements, due primarily to clashes between Afghan security forces and ISIL affiliates. Initial assessments undertaken by the United Nations and its partners indicate that at least 4,700 families require assistance. Apart from the displacement in the Provinces, Kabul City continues to attract significant numbers of displaced persons, with at least 3,000 families requiring assistance. Afghanistan continued to host approximately 227,000 refugees from Pakistan, who crossed into the south-east part of the country as a result of military operations in North Waziristan. The Government of Afghanistan, together with the United Nations and its partners, have continued to provide assistance to both the refugees and the host communities.

52. Since August, poliomyelitis eradication efforts have faced renewed access challenges throughout Afghanistan, particularly in the eastern and southern regions. The operations of anti-government elements have compromised the access of vaccination teams in many districts. Despite the lifting of an earlier ban in Kandahar

Province, other, smaller and geographically limited bans have been sporadically imposed, for varying reasons. A national immunization day campaign, which was held from 1 to 5 November, targeted about 8.9 million children. Despite these efforts, to date, a total of 16 cases of polio in Afghanistan have been confirmed in 2015. A further eight cases were reported during the reporting period in Nangarhar Province, including four in Achin district. Groups affiliated with ISIL prevented access to humanitarian activities, including vaccination campaigns in Achin district and in the Province's Kot and Dehbala districts.

53. Regional efforts to address the protracted refugee situation gained momentum during the period. During the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on 6 and 7 October, discussions at the segment concerning Afghan refugees focused on support for their phased and voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration, under the framework of the Solutions Strategy. Currently, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan host approximately 900,000 and 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees, respectively. The rate of return of Afghan refugees through the United Nations voluntary repatriation programme continued to be significantly higher than during 2014, with 55,843 individuals repatriating between 1 January and 24 October 2015, predominantly from Pakistan. Returnee monitoring feedback continued to raise concerns about the issue of return from Pakistan in difficult circumstances.

54. During the reporting period, members of Afghanistan's National Assembly discussed concerns over the continuing flow of Afghans out of the country, as reports indicated that approximately 146,000 out of the 800,000 asylum applications received by European Union member countries during the period from 1 January to 31 October 2015 were from Afghans.

55. Mine-action partners, coordinated by the United Nations, cleared 78 minefields and four battlefields in the third quarter of 2015. It is estimated that 4,341 minefields and battlefields remain, affecting 1,607 communities across 258 districts. In response to the use of explosive weapons in Kunduz after its capture by the Taliban, the United Nations coordinated the deployment of its mine-action partners to the city from 15 October onward to conduct emergency survey and clearance operations and provide mine risk education. Hundreds of items of unexploded ordnance were subsequently destroyed.

56. From 1 August to 31 October, 74 incidents involving attacks against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities, including the abduction of 42 aid workers, were registered with the United Nations global monitoring framework. The attacks claimed the lives of 21 humanitarian workers and injured 48. The aforementioned air strike on a Médecins Sans Frontières-run hospital in Kunduz City was the deadliest attack, killing 30 persons and injuring 37. Beyond the loss of lives, the destruction of the hospital has had a significant impact on access to surgical care, since the facility was the only one of its kind in north-eastern Afghanistan.

57. As of 31 October, the 2015 humanitarian strategic response plan is 59 per cent funded. Overall humanitarian funding reached \$359 million, of which \$245.5 million is designated for activities foreseen within the humanitarian strategic response plan and \$63 million for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. A United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund rapid response application for approximately \$7 million was submitted on 18 November. The funds would be used to support humanitarian actors responding to needs related to the earthquake in

Afghanistan and the conflict environment in the north-east, including emergency shelter solutions during the winter months.

VI. Counter-narcotics

58. The executive summary of the report entitled “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2015” was released on 13 October by the Afghanistan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The report noted that the total area under opium poppy cultivation decreased 19 per cent in 2015, to an estimated 183,000 hectares (ha), as compared with 224,000 ha in 2014. This represents the first decrease in cultivation area since 2009. Potential opium production in 2015 has amounted to 3,300 tons to date, representing a decrease of 48 per cent from its 2014 level of 6,400 tons. Despite these decreases, the number of poppy-free Provinces fell in 2015. Hillmand, with some 86,400 ha (47 per cent of the national total), remains the country’s major opium-cultivating Province, followed by the Provinces of Farah, Kandahar and Badghis. The low production can be attributed to a reduction in the area under cultivation but, more significantly, to a drop in opium yield per hectare. Yield decreased in all of the main opium poppy cultivating regions, led by the southern region, with a 45 per cent decrease, followed by the western region (with a 20 per cent decrease) and the eastern region (with an 8 per cent decrease).

59. The national counter-narcotics plan for 2015-2019 was approved by President Ghani on 15 October. The National Drug Action Plan developed by the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics focuses on sustainable alternative development and agriculture and eradication, as well as interdiction, anti-money laundering and asset forfeiture, and regional and international cooperation. It outlines Afghanistan’s intention to pursue a balanced, comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable approach to combating illegal drug production, trade and usage.

60. From 12 August to 15 November, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted 621 counter-narcotics operations, resulting in the seizure of approximately 10,600 kilograms (kg) of narcotics, comprising 673 kg of heroin, 5,083 kg of opium and 4,848 kg of hashish, in addition to 493 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 873 litres of liquid precursor chemicals, as well as the arrest of 705 suspects and confiscation of 164 vehicles and 158 weapons. In the course of these operations, 8 personnel from the Afghan security forces were killed and 15 were wounded.

61. From 21 to 24 September, the United Nations supported the Third Regional Workshop on Illicit Use of Money and Value Transfer Services. The event featured the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Financial Intelligence Units of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, which provides a basis for sharing information on suspicious financial transactions so as to counter illicit financial flows.

VII. Mission support

62. In response to the security situation in the northern regions, United Nations staff members were relocated temporarily from offices in Kunduz, Baghlan, Faryab and Badakhshan Provinces, a measure enabled by United Nations air assets. UNAMA provided support to the mission staff affected by the relocations to enable them to continue their work. In Kunduz, the UNAMA office was severely damaged. UNAMA

signed a lease for new premises whose refurbishment will require the installation of necessary information technology infrastructure and security enhancements in order to ensure compliance with the Organization's guidelines on Minimum Operating Security Standards. Following the completion of preparatory activities, the next phase of the Umoja platform was launched in UNAMA on 9 November.

VIII. Observations

63. Afghanistan continues to face formidable security, economic and political challenges, whose combined effects were registered forcefully during the reporting period. The security situation underwent a marked deterioration as the Taliban and anti-government elements undertook an expanded campaign, which included the temporary capture of a provincial capital, Kunduz City. This event, combined with the existence of an economic environment that is a source of continued difficulty, fuelled an increasing contestation of the political space, as debates among the political elites and the public became more vocal. The sum of these challenges finds Afghanistan at a point where uncertainty about the future is pushing an increasing number of Afghans to emigrate and the need for sustained international assistance remains acute.

64. This was the first year in which Afghanistan found itself without the same level or form of international military support provided in the past decade. The Afghan security forces have largely withstood the mounting pressures, however, and shown the ability to retake those areas temporarily under the control of the insurgency. If the costs have been heavy, ranging from attrition to casualties, so have the demands, which at times have been answered with international support. Additionally, reports of intra-insurgent violence point to an increasingly volatile and complex security situation. I welcome recent announcements by Member States affirming their commitment to assisting the Afghan security forces in their efforts to bring security and stability to the country.

65. The Government of Afghanistan is seeking to revitalize the economy, which has been affected by the political and security transitions of 2014, through such measures as increasing revenue collection and tackling corruption, and boosting regional trade. Though much-needed plans to promote growth have been put forward, gains are still slow, as reforms must gain traction and fiscal consolidation must translate into job creation. While progress relating to tax revenue and other structural reform benchmarks measured under the IMF Staff-Monitored Programme is encouraging, both the Government and international development partners must still remain focused on building confidence in the Afghan economy. Mutual efforts are particularly important in this regard, in advance of pledging conferences to be held in 2016.

66. There has been a revival in the reporting period of popular mobilization and increasingly active discussions centred within and around the Government, with the opposition becoming more vocal in presenting its views. While the Government has shown an appreciation for dialogue and inclusiveness, this must not come at the expense of implementing key reforms such as the strengthening of meritocracy, fighting corruption and delivering services to the Afghan population. I commend the international community for its unity in supporting the Government and forgoing entry into the political space, and for its message that all must act in the interests of Afghanistan.

67. The recommendations announced by the Special Electoral Reform Commission represent an important step in the process of strengthening public confidence in the electoral institutions and elections. It is my hope that the Commission, through its demonstrated commitment to improving the sustainability, integrity and transparency of the electoral process, will carry through on the resolution of outstanding issues on the basis of consensus. The United Nations will continue to support this reform process through the provision of advice and technical support.

68. Afghan civilians continue to bear the brunt of the conflict, as they are caught in the crossfire, victimized by indiscriminate attacks and subject to targeted killings. The increasing numbers of civilian casualties and reports of human rights abuses, including those against women, are deeply troubling. I deplore and condemn the targeting and killing of human rights defenders, among them a UNAMA national staff member, Ms. Toorpaki Ulfat. I remind all parties that it is of the utmost necessity that they respect their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law to prevent attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including medical facilities.

69. The conflict is causing immense hardship and suffering through the displacement of populations and related socioeconomic effects, putting further strain on humanitarian response mechanisms. On the other hand, the Afghan-led response to the October earthquake has demonstrated the growing national capacities in disaster response; and the appointment of a State Minister for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Affairs marks a further positive development. However, multiple crises, including the need to address displacements from Kunduz, have reduced humanitarian resources. Their replenishment is crucial for addressing potential demands, which may increase during the winter period. I urge Member States to continue their support through the contribution of financial resources to the Common Humanitarian Fund.

70. Efforts to launch a peace process are at an impasse. Although the importance of a political solution is acknowledged in public statements by the Taliban, the movement has not yet shown a commitment to resuming direct talks with the Government of Afghanistan. There is no alternative to a political settlement for achieving a peaceful future in Afghanistan; and I welcome renewed statements from Pakistan, China and other members of the international community indicating their readiness to support an Afghan-led peace process. I encourage Member States to facilitate stability in Afghanistan and to exert such influence on the Taliban as may be possible in order to enable the movement towards resumption of direct talks with the Afghan Government. My Special Representative continues to explore opportunities, in full consultations with the Government of Afghanistan, to advance a peace process.

71. The security situation continues to have a negative impact on the efforts of the United Nations to conduct its activities and programmes across the country. After its temporary relocation of staff from several field offices to ensure their safety, the United Nations has begun to redeploy and resume operations where the security environment permits. In addition, the appearance of ISIL-affiliated groups raises significant concerns for United Nations safety and security, over incidents ranging from abduction and complex attacks to use of improvised explosive devices.

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