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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 [2678 \(2023\)](#), in which the Secretary-General was requested to report every three months on the situation in Afghanistan and the implementation of the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), including at the subnational level.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, and human rights efforts, since the issuance of the previous report, dated 1 December 2023 ([A/78/628-S/2023/941](#)).

#### II. Relevant developments

3. After two and a half years in power, and although they have attained a consolidation of administration in political, security and economic areas, the de facto authorities appear to be facing growing internal disagreements over key governance issues, including the enforcement of the drug ban. The de facto authorities continue their outreach efforts towards the population at the subnational and national levels, but there has been no progress towards greater inclusivity in institutions and decision-making processes. Women's rights are being further curtailed in all spheres of public life, including by the enforcement of the hijab decree through the arrest and detention of women who are deemed not to be in full compliance. The de facto authorities remain responsive to addressing the large-scale forced returns of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan, including through an institutionalized approach to reintegration at the provincial level. Attacks and rhetoric by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) continue, although on a lesser scale. Nearly half of the country's population live in poverty, with women and children particularly



affected. The Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2024, targeting 17.3 million people out of an estimated 23.7 million in need, requires \$3.06 billion.

## **A. Political developments**

4. In late November 2023, the first official de facto Cabinet meeting took place in Kandahar City, chaired by the Taliban leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada. It resulted in decisions about appointments, reshuffles, and a number of policy directives, which were made public and implemented over the following months. At the meeting, the Taliban leader commissioned the drafting of a document outlining the general principles of the de facto authorities' "domestic and foreign policy approach." De facto Deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Kabir, is in charge of the drafting process. He has chaired three de facto Political Commission meetings and engaged in extensive outreach efforts.

5. The leadership of the de facto authorities remained focused on outreach at the national and subnational levels, working through various de facto institutions to narrow the gap between the de facto authorities and the population. However, women remained largely excluded from those outreach activities. Statements by senior de facto officials at graduation ceremonies for madrasas and security-sector training events stressed obedience to sharia law and the privileged status of those who fought on the side of the Taliban. In subnational outreach, officials from the de facto Ministries of Education, Higher Education, and Information and Culture emphasized the importance of madrasas and religious education, along with some mentions of the need to integrate science teachings in a revised curriculum. None of this messaging suggested a possible return of girls to secondary and higher education.

6. In response to the forced returns of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan that began in early November, de facto Deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Salam Hanafi, chaired several meetings of the de facto High Commission for Returnees, while designated committees addressed specific issues such as registering the returnees, providing for their basic needs upon their return and transporting them to their areas of origin. The response effort largely shifted to the subnational level, but the need for employment and housing for the returnees continued to be discussed at de facto Cabinet and de facto Political Commission meetings.

7. The de facto authorities continued to appoint and reshuffle individuals loyal to the leadership. At the national level, this included 8 de facto deputy ministers and 14 national directors within de facto ministries. Subnational appointments included 4 de facto provincial governors, 3 de facto provincial deputy governors, 2 de facto provincial capital mayors, at least 23 subnational directors and at least 13 district governors. In the security sector, appointments included 5 new provincial chiefs of police, 2 provincial deputy chiefs of police, 3 new provincial chiefs of the de facto General Directorate of Intelligence, around 30 district chiefs of police and 28 reshuffles related to corps commands. Reshuffles at the provincial and district levels were conducted largely in Kandahar and Badakhshan, with those in the latter owing mainly to a lack of compliance by some de facto officials with the implementation of the opium ban. The de facto Ministry of Interior announced an increase in the number of its troops by 50,000 to a total of 200,000. Plans were announced to hire an additional 80,000 troops from among former Taliban fighters for checkpoint duties.

8. In early January, the de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice started to actively enforce the hijab order of April 2022, with the arrest and detention of women and girls found to be non-compliant in Kabul and other provinces. The arrests disproportionately affected urban and some non-ethnic Pashtun communities. Other de facto institutions have defended the arrests, stating the need

to respect the order and rejecting international criticism by stressing that it was an internal matter.

9. The end of November and the beginning of December saw a number of meetings by various political opposition groups in exile in Moscow, Dushanbe and Vienna. The meetings did not yield any significant consolidation, and the groups reiterated their well-known positions.

10. On 26 January, the de facto Minister of Education issued an instruction to all provincial de facto Departments of Education outlining the curriculum changes and teaching guidelines for the next school year starting on 21 March 2024. According to the instruction, subjects such as civic education, calligraphy, life skills, and foreign languages other than Arabic are to be reduced or removed in favour of Islamic studies. There is also an emphasis on prioritizing the teaching of Islamic subjects over other subjects and on hiring religious scholars to teach in schools.

11. The de facto authorities continued to create new registered madrasas, primarily for males. Seven de facto authority-registered madrasas were established, including one for females, bringing the total number of de facto authority-registered madrasas to 6,836 for males and 380 for females. From 1 November 2023 to 4 February 2024, at least 2,464 individuals graduated from de facto authority-registered madrasas, with the number of female graduates (128) reported for the first time. De facto Ministry of Education officials reported that a new standardized madrasa curriculum was under development and could be finalized in time for the upcoming academic year beginning in March. Private madrasas also continue to operate, but there is little documentation on them, including on their curricula.

12. Recruitment of madrasa teachers continued following the promulgation in July 2023 of the Taliban leader's decree mandating the recruitment of 100,000 new madrasa teachers by the end of 2023. On 30 December, the de facto Ministry of Education reported that the recruitment of 9,000 madrasa teachers for Kandahar Province had been completed. Recruitment in the remaining 33 provinces continues.

13. There is a continued lack of clarity with regard to the constitutional and legal frameworks for the de facto administration. The de facto spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, denounced calls for the de facto authorities to commence a constitution-making process, stressing that improving the governance and economic situation of Afghans would precede such a process and that the process needed to be consistent with sharia law.

14. The de facto authorities made several announcements on legal and policy issues related to public resource management. The de facto Review Committee of Legal Documents reported a second meeting, on 15 November, to discuss the draft law on administrative corruption and announced the finalization of the Public-Private Partnership Law on 29 January. On 16 January, an edict was issued to establish an independent institution to manage companies with public capital. On 17 January, the de facto General Directorate for Administrative Affairs of the Internal Legislative Committee of the Prime Minister's Office held a meeting on the revision of the law on the registration of government officials' assets.

15. On 27 November and 23 and 24 December, the de facto Supreme Court reshuffled 82 de facto court officials, including judges, muftis and court clerks countrywide. On 18 November, the de facto Supreme Court reported that de facto courts had handled 272,463 cases and processed 293,944 official documents since August 2021. In December, de facto Departments of Justice in Kabul, Gardez, Jalalabad and Kapisa Provinces inspected defence lawyers' offices to ascertain compliance with procedures.

16. Together with local members of the ulama and tribal elders, the de facto authorities mediated 16 local disputes in nine provinces during the reporting period. Since 1 December, de facto municipal authorities in four provinces have organized at least 125 municipal dialogues to highlight programming achievements, promote support and hear public concerns, including on local needs and inter-tribal tensions.

17. From 1 November 2023 to 4 February 2024, UNAMA facilitated 93 outreach meetings in 34 provinces on governance-related issues, including on human rights and service delivery. De facto authorities, civil society organizations, the media, youth representatives and other community members gathered for the meetings. UNAMA field office reporting indicates some improvement in service delivery in terms of road and dam construction, local revenue collection and the addressing of land-grabbing issues at the provincial, municipal and judicial levels.

18. On 18 and 19 February, the Secretary-General convened a second meeting of special envoys on Afghanistan to discuss how to increase international engagement in a more coherent, coordinated and structured manner, including through consideration of the recommendations of the independent assessment on Afghanistan mandated by the Security Council in its resolution [2679 \(2023\)](#).

## **B. Security**

19. Between 1 November 2023 and 10 January 2024, the number of conflict-related security incidents increased in comparison to the same period in 2022–2023. The United Nations recorded 1,508 security-related incidents, a 38 per cent increase from the 1,090 incidents recorded during the same period in 2022–2023. The central region saw the highest number of incidents, with 263 incidents recorded during the period, followed by the north-eastern region, where 247 incidents were recorded.

20. The increase was largely due to a rise in the number of incidents related to narcotics from 102 to 263, the majority of which were arrests of small-scale narcotics dealers, while data indicated consistent efforts by the de facto authorities to disrupt methamphetamine production in the western region and prevent the trafficking of narcotics into neighbouring countries through arrests in the eastern and south-eastern regions. The de facto authorities arrested also at least six Hizb-ut Tahrir members. Armed clashes occurred at a frequency similar to that during the same period in 2022–2023, decreasing from 61 to 60 incidents.

21. The armed opposition continued to pose no challenge to the Taliban for territorial control. However, assessing their capabilities remained difficult because many of the attacks claimed on social media could not be verified. The Afghanistan Freedom Front continued its campaign of assassinations and small-scale attacks against the de facto security forces, conducting at least 24 verified attacks between 1 November 2023 and 10 January 2024. The group continued to shift its activities from rural to urban areas, with four attacks in Pul-e Khumri city (Baghlan Province), four in Kabul city, one in Kandahar city, one in Aibak city (Samangan Province) and one in Mazar-e Sharif city (Balkh Province). The National Resistance Front was most active in Parwan Province and conducted no attacks in its traditional stronghold of Panjshir. There were no verified attacks by other armed political opposition groups, although the National Battle Front claimed on social media to have conducted several attacks. A new group initially known as the Freedom or Death Front and later renamed the Martyrdom or Freedom Front announced its formation on social media on 4 December and claimed to have conducted several attacks that were not verified. The few attacks claimed by the Afghanistan Liberation Movement and the National Mobilization Front were also unverified.

22. Between 8 November 2023 and 10 January 2024, three attacks were claimed by ISIL-K, a decrease from eight in the previous reporting period, with two of the attacks recorded in Kabul city. The group detonated improvised explosive devices against Shi'a civilians in the Dasht-e Barchi neighbourhood of Kabul on 6 January and against employees from Pul-e Charkhi prison in Kabul on 9 January. ISIL-K maintained its focus on targeting Shi'a civilians and the de facto authorities while continuing to call for attacks on the international community, including the United Nations, in its propaganda. It also continued its efforts to recruit from regional countries and, in its propaganda, promoted the involvement of foreign nationals in its attacks.

23. Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the presence of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) members on Afghan territory continued, leading to multiple security incidents on the border. There were several exchanges of fire between TTP members and Pakistani security forces in Paktiya Province. Pakistani forces reportedly fired mortars targeting TTP members across the border in Nuristan Province on three occasions. On 1 November, Pakistani forces reportedly opened fire on de facto security forces in Kunar Province while the latter were building a new outpost close to the border.

24. The illicit accumulation and diversion of small arms, light weapons, ammunition and explosives remain a security concern. The de facto security forces reported seizures of firearms in 17 provinces of Afghanistan, compared with 14 provinces in the previous reporting period. These included the discovery of several caches of weapons in abandoned properties and the arrests in Paktiya and Kandahar Provinces of alleged firearms traffickers aiming to transport weapons to Pakistan.

25. Between 1 November 2023 and 10 January 2024, the United Nations documented 30 incidents directly affecting its personnel, including 8 cases of intimidation, 1 improvised explosive device detonation, 4 cases of theft and robbery, 2 arrests, 1 dispute, 1 demonstration and 13 other incidents affecting United Nations compounds, offices and property. This represented a slight decrease from the 35 incidents recorded during the same period in 2022–2023.

### **C. Regional cooperation**

26. Regional organizations and countries continued multilateral and bilateral engagements on Afghanistan. On 9 November, secretaries of the security councils of the Commonwealth of Independent States discussed security challenges emanating from Afghanistan, including drug trafficking, terrorist groups, radical ideologies and illegal migration. On 21 December, in Moscow, the working group of the Secretary-General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization voiced grave concerns about the security challenges from Afghanistan, including intensified terrorism and drug and weapons trafficking, and called for concerted efforts to tackle these issues.

27. On 29 January, the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs, Amir Khan Motaqi, hosted a meeting entitled “Afghanistan’s Regional Cooperation Initiative” in Kabul. It was attended by the special envoys of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation, as well as Kabul-based representatives of India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. At the meeting, the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs called for increased positive interaction between Afghanistan and countries in the region. In the lead-up to the meeting, some regional countries had reportedly stressed the need for inclusive governance in Afghanistan.

28. De facto officials also travelled to international and regional cooperation forums. On 16 November, in the Russian Federation, the de facto Deputy Minister of

Information and Culture, Zabihullah Mujahid, participated in the ninth Saint Petersburg International Cultural Forum, the theme of which was “History and modernity in artistic culture”. On 28 November, the de facto Governor of the Central Bank, Hedayatullah Badri, participated in the annual conference of the Accounting and Auditing Organization for Islamic Financial Institutions and the Islamic Development Bank, held in Bahrain. On 23 December, the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs participated in the international consultative conference on Palestine held in Tehran, where he also met the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, to discuss bilateral and regional issues.

29. During the reporting period, regional countries dispatched representatives to Afghanistan to engage with the de facto authorities. On 18 December, the Special Envoy on Afghan Affairs of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of China, Yue Xiaoyong, met with the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs and the de facto Minister of Defence, Yaqoob Mujahid, to discuss bilateral relations and economic cooperation. On 20 December, the Presidential Special Representative for Afghanistan of the Russian Federation, Zamir Kabulov, met with the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs to discuss the enhancement of bilateral relations and the participation of de facto officials in international forums and structures.

30. Efforts continued to strengthen bilateral diplomatic ties between the de facto authorities and regional countries. On 30 January, the de facto Ministry for Foreign Affairs announced that Bilal Karimi had presented his credentials as Ambassador to the President of China, Xi Jinping, in Beijing. On 1 December, Afghan consulates in Mumbai and Hyderabad were officially reopened at the request of the Government of India. On 29 December, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan announced a plan to reopen its embassy in Afghanistan in 2024, and the Security Council of Kazakhstan decided to remove the Taliban group from its registry of terrorist organizations. On 4 February, the de facto authorities assumed the administration of the Embassy of Afghanistan in Tashkent. On 7 February, de facto Deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Kabir, stated that the de facto authorities had 38 active diplomatic representations in foreign countries.

31. There was also regional engagement on trade, transit and energy issues. On 16 and 17 December, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, led a delegation to Herat Province, where he discussed trade issues and joint projects, including on energy and railways, with the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs. On 26 December, the de facto Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation travelled to Uzbekistan to discuss transit cooperation. On 7 January, the office of de facto Deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Ghani Baradar, reported an inaugural meeting of an Afghanistan-Iran joint committee at which it was agreed to extend customs working hours and eliminate some transit fees. From 24 to 27 January, the Minister of Economy and Commerce of Kyrgyzstan, accompanied by private sector representatives, met with the de facto Deputy Prime Minister for Administrative Affairs and the de facto Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Commerce and Industry, and Mines and Petroleum in Kabul with a view to enhancing bilateral trade and transit. Between 15 and 31 December, the de facto authorities signed contract extensions for electricity provision in 2024 with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In addition, two Emirati airlines resumed routes to Kabul on 15 November and 10 January, respectively, and an Iranian airline started operating the Tehran to Mazar-e Sharif route on 21 January.

32. UNAMA continued to promote regional cooperation with the de facto authorities and regional countries and convened regular coordination meetings with Kabul-based ambassadors. On 11 December, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance

Mission in Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva, met officials in Pakistan with the aim of helping to address the issue of forced returns of Afghan nationals.

### III. Human rights

33. Attacks using improvised explosive devices caused at least 84 civilian casualties between 10 November 2023 and 4 February 2024 (11 killed, 73 wounded). On 6 January in the Dasht-e Barchi area of Kabul, an improvised explosive device targeting a public minibus killed at least 5 people and wounded at least 20 others, and on 9 January, an improvised explosive device targeting a commuter bus transporting staff of the de facto Office of Prison Administration killed at least 3 people and wounded at least 13 others. On 11 January, two further attacks were carried out. Also in Dasht-e Barchi, an explosion in a commercial centre killed at least three people and wounded at least 35 others; responsibility for the incident remains unclaimed. In Mazar-e Sharif, an improvised explosive device attached to a taxi wounded three people, with responsibility also unclaimed.

34. Between October and December 2023, unexploded ordnance continued to kill and wound civilians, primarily children, causing at least 67 casualties (15 killed, 52 wounded). On 22 December, in Kunar Province, seven members of one family (three adults and four children, including a seven-year-old boy) were wounded after unexploded ordnance found by the children detonated.

35. The de facto authorities continue to reiterate their publicly stated commitment to the general amnesty decree for former government officials and Afghan National Defence and Security Forces members. On 31 December, the de facto Ministry of Defence stressed in a press conference the “full commitment” to the decree, denying any violations of the amnesty and stating that cases had been investigated by courts and found to be a result of personal enmity. During the reporting period, UNAMA documented at least five extrajudicial killings and seven arbitrary arrests of former government officials and members of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. UNAMA also recorded 2 extrajudicial killings, 17 arbitrary arrests and detentions and 2 instances of torture and ill-treatment of individuals accused of affiliation with the National Resistance Front and ISIL-K.

36. Restrictions against women and girls remained in place, and in some areas, enforcement of the restrictions became stricter. Since the end of 2023, in certain areas of Kabul and in Bamyán, Baghlan, Balkh, Daykundi, Ghazni and Samangan Provinces, the de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice and the de facto police have warned or arrested women and girls for allegedly violating the hijab decree of 25 April 2022. In Kabul city, a large number of women and girls were arrested and detained for several hours. UNAMA documented allegations of ill-treatment, incommunicado detention and the requirement of payment in exchange for the release of a female relative. UNAMA has engaged with the de facto authorities to discuss these allegations and measures.

37. In November, the Law on Complaint Hearings was approved by the Taliban leader. Among other things, it defines the role of the de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in reviewing complaints against de facto officials. The de facto Ministry also released a manual standardizing the duties and responsibilities of its staff. A draft law on the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice was reportedly sent to the Taliban leader for approval.

38. On 14 December, UNAMA issued a report in which it found that there was no clear legal framework regarding gender-based violence against women and girls in Afghanistan. Survivors reportedly prefer to seek redress through traditional dispute

resolution mechanisms out of fear of the de facto authorities. Complaints are predominantly handled by men.

39. The de facto authorities continue to implement corporal punishment in public places. For example, on 10 November, in Nimroz Province, Zaranj city, 25 men were publicly lashed between 1 and 50 times each at the Central Sports Stadium after the de facto City Court had convicted them of various crimes, including robbery and adultery. Around a dozen male spectators who were detected recording and/or photographing the punishment were also flogged.

40. On 11 January, the de facto Minister of Interior highlighted the de facto authorities' commitment to engaging with the media during a capacity-building seminar for de facto spokespersons. In the meantime, journalists and civil society activists continue to face significant risks in conducting their activities. On 11 December, in Daykundi province, the de facto Primary Court sentenced the Director of Radio Nasim to a one-year term of imprisonment on the charge of reporting against the de facto authorities. While three of the four women's rights activists arrested since September were released, one (arrested on 8 October) remained in detention.

41. The de facto Office of Prison Administration continues to face challenges in managing its increasing incarcerated population, which exceeded 19,000 detainees as of January 2024. Financial constraints and discontinued donor funding continue to affect the ability of the de facto Office to meet international standards, including with regard to the systematic provision of adequate food and hygiene supplies, vocational education and training, and health needs. A proposal of the de facto Office, on developing alternatives to incarceration, is under discussion with the Taliban leader's office and concerned entities, including the de facto Ministries of Finance and Justice and the de facto Supreme Court.

42. Since the release of its report on the treatment of detainees in September 2023, UNAMA had engaged with the de facto Ministry of Interior, the de facto General Directorate of Intelligence and the de facto Office of Prison Administration on the implementation of the report's recommendations, including investigations and accountability for violations by de facto personnel. On 31 December, the de facto Ministry of Defence stated in a press conference that the torture of detainees and their prolonged detention without a court order were absolutely prohibited, claiming that "dozens" of offenders in violation of this decree had been arrested over the previous year and investigated. Furthermore, 4,261 cases involving de facto military personnel were reportedly resolved in the past year, although no information was available as to the alleged crimes or judicial outcomes in the cases involving de facto military personnel.

43. In January, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNAMA convened group and individual consultations, reaching 673 Afghan women across 31 provinces. The women consulted observed that the active enforcement of the hijab decree had significantly reduced their mobility, further fostering a permissive environment for the harassment of women in public. Some 57 per cent of the women felt "not at all safe" leaving the house without a mahram and were voluntarily confining themselves to the home instead. Owing to the lack of access to education and employment, only 1 per cent of women consulted felt they had "good" or "full" influence on decision-making at the community level – a substantial decrease since January 2023. They noted that the absence of infrastructure for their political and social participation had left them with no pathway to engaging in or influencing decision-making. A total of 69 per cent of the women consulted felt that international recognition of the de facto authorities would have a significant impact on their lives,



possibly further exacerbating restrictions and violations of their rights. Some 31 per cent of the women consulted felt that recognition should happen only after all restrictions were reversed, and 28 per cent felt that it should not happen at all.

#### **IV. Economic development, donor coordination and aid effectiveness**

44. The macroeconomic situation of Afghanistan remained stable as of January 2024, albeit with gross domestic product stagnant throughout 2023 after a 6.2 per cent contraction in 2022 and persistent deflation. The trade deficit increased from \$4.4 billion in 2022 to \$5.9 billion in 2023, as imports increased by 23 per cent (to \$7.8 billion), while exports grew modestly by 0.4 per cent (to \$1.9 billion). The afghani maintained its appreciation against foreign currencies, in particular against the United States dollar, with a 20 per cent year-on-year appreciation as of January.

45. State revenue for the first 10 months of the current fiscal year, which started on 21 March 2023, reached \$2.27 billion (131.2 billion afghanis), a 5.7 per cent increase from the same period in the previous fiscal year. Border taxes, which represent 54 per cent of total revenue, grew by 4 per cent year on year but remained 1 per cent below the target, while inland revenue grew by 8.2 per cent but remained 4 per cent below the target.

46. The de facto Central Bank announced a further relaxation of cash withdrawal limits for banks on 30 November. It also announced, on 27 December, that it had replaced and destroyed 803 million end-of-life banknotes worth \$67.4 million (4.7 billion afghanis). In addition, it reported that it had received 283 suspicious transaction reports from commercial banks by that date in the current fiscal year and that it had conducted training sessions on governance and reporting requirements for money service providers in 10 provinces since November. Following the Afghanistan microfinance conference in October 2023, UNAMA, together with other United Nations entities, has been coordinating with the de facto Central Bank on regulations to be introduced to promote transparency, accountability and sustainable growth in the microfinance sector.

47. The de facto authorities continued to promote domestic and foreign investment, announcing, in early December, incentives for returning Afghan businessmen. On 27 December, the de facto authorities reported the receipt of \$10.6 billion worth of “investment proposals” since the start of the fiscal year and, on 11 January, the signature of four mining contracts for \$146 million (10.1 billion afghanis) with Afghan companies. Several other announcements indicated progress towards plans to establish export processing zones and agricultural complexes.

48. Some 69 per cent of the population lack access to basic items, utilities and essential services to survive. These subsistence insecurities are at much more alarming levels for women and rural populations. While this rate of subsistence insecurity is high, it represents an improvement of 19 percentage points compared with the 85 per cent subsistence insecurity in 2022.

49. A joint post-disaster needs assessment by the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Union and the Asian Development Bank, finalized on 31 January, assessed the impact of the Herat earthquakes that occurred in October and recovery needs for key sectors in the nine districts most affected. The earthquakes resulted in the loss of 22,932 jobs, of which approximately 26 per cent had been held by women. The value of the loss of workdays and of personal income due to reduced work opportunities estimated for the 12 months following the earthquake was \$6.96 million and \$35.6 million, respectively. The agriculture sector was the most affected,

accounting for 93.8 per cent of the job losses and 76 per cent of the projected income loss. The commerce and industry sector, in particular small and medium enterprises, also suffered significant damage. The earthquakes further increased the vulnerability of the affected communities to multidimensional poverty, disrupted their access to basic services and infrastructure and exposed the affected population to harsh weather conditions, insecurity and displacement. Reconstruction and recovery needs are estimated at \$383.9 million for the next five years, of which 40 per cent is required for housing reconstruction, 18 per cent for education and 16 per cent for agriculture, livestock and minor irrigation.

50. With a view to addressing the needs of returnees and host communities, an assessment task force was formed by the United Nations and its partners on 20 December to provide effective humanitarian and basic human needs nexus support in areas of returns. The returns also present an additional challenge to the existing burden on the shrinking labour market, which has lost more than 500,000 jobs since August 2021.

51. The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan, created in 2021, had mobilized \$212.1 million as of January for the delivery of basic human needs support for the northern, southern, eastern and south-eastern regions of Afghanistan through integrated multisectoral solutions, with a primary focus on the promotion of gender equity and women's empowerment.

52. On 29 January, the fifth Board of Trustees meeting of the Fund for the Afghan People was held in Washington, D.C. The Board agreed that the Fund, amounting to \$3.74 billion as of December 2023, would make a first disbursement to the Asian Development Bank in order to address the arrears owed by Afghanistan to that institution.

53. Explosive remnants of war and improvised mines continued to pose a threat to civilians and humanitarian personnel across Afghanistan. The Mine Action Technical Cell, enabled by the Mine Action Service, coordinated and ensured an efficient response to explosive ordnance through planning, prioritization, quality assurance, information management and the processing of land release. Since 21 December, about 500 quality assurance visits had been conducted to assess mine action operations in different parts of the country, ensuring technical quality and safety. The Technical Cell facilitated the survey and clearance of contaminated land, the delivery of risk education, the safe removal of explosive remnants of war and improvised mines, and support to victims of explosive ordnance, through the Cell's coordination of mine action operators. A total of 230 land release teams were tasked with clearing 93 contaminated areas affecting 73,261 people, including women and girls, and contributed to a reduction in accidents from scrap metal collection performed largely by young men and boys. The Technical Cell also carried out three needs assessments in Nangarhar and Kandahar Provinces to support the recent returnees from Pakistan, a situation which led to the deployment of 13 explosive ordnance risk education teams and 4 quick response teams at border crossings and at transit and encashment centres to provide risk education on the explosive ordnance threat and assist with safe mobility.

54. In mid-February, the United Nations common risks assessment report was updated and included new emerging risk consequences and the associated mitigation measures. The updated assessment is in support of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan for 2023–2025 and the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2024. Furthermore, an online dashboard was launched in February, which provides a real-time overview of the common risks and mitigation actions, facilitating effective monitoring and analysis.

55. The de facto Ministry of Economy discontinued the online requirement for gender-segregated project data for the registration of civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), effectively reinstating the operational capacity of such organizations with women in their ranks. Nevertheless, existing women-led NGOs and civil society organizations might require a male sponsor to resume their operations, and it is currently impossible to set up new women-led organizations. In December 2023, the de facto Ministry of Economy issued a letter to NGOs asking donors to focus on humanitarian and development projects rather than areas deemed unnecessary by the de facto authorities, including conflict resolution, peace consolidation and the rule of law.

## V. Humanitarian assistance

56. Afghanistan remains a protection emergency characterized by prolonged displacement; explosive ordnance contamination; restricted freedom of movement; increased risks of gender-based violence, child labour and early marriage; and increased mental health and psychosocial support needs. An estimated 23.7 million people – more than half of the population – will require humanitarian assistance in 2024. Fragile economic conditions affected 65 per cent of families in 2023 and are expected to continue to contribute to acute food insecurity in 2024. The country also faces a climate change-induced crisis, with 25 of 34 provinces experiencing drought-like conditions and 67 per cent of households reporting difficulty accessing water.

57. Since the December 2022 ban on Afghan women working for non-governmental organizations and the subsequent severe restrictions on United Nations female national staff introduced in April 2023, the gender in humanitarian action working group and the humanitarian access working group have been tracking the impact of both measures. The latest survey in October 2023 revealed that 28 per cent of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies fully operate with both genders, 43 per cent partially operate with both genders, 16 per cent operate exclusively with men, 4 per cent fully operate exclusively with women, 3 per cent partially operate exclusively with women and 6 per cent were non-operational. Despite this progress, the de facto authorities' ban and new restrictions hinder organizations from engaging with women in person, monitoring the humanitarian impact of those measures, and facilitating women's access to information. In November 2023, the de facto Ministry of Public Health introduced a directive banning some health work related to psychological care, public health awareness, female-friendly health centres and social behaviour change, exacerbating the already compromised health situation for women.

58. Notwithstanding challenges, the humanitarian community continued to address urgent needs by implementing robust risk mitigation measures and common tools to ensure minimum standards for quality programming. The Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2023 received 45 per cent of the required \$3.23 billion, while the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2024, targeting 17.3 million people of the 23.7 million in need, requires \$3.06 billion.

59. Between January and November 2023, 29.4 million people received humanitarian assistance. Some 23.8 million people were provided with food and livelihood support, 15.1 million people with health care, 5.5 million children and nursing mothers with support to prevent and address acute malnutrition, 3.4 million people with at least one form of protection assistance, 2 million children with access to education and 812,000 people with emergency shelter and household items. From January to December 2023, more than 9.8 million people were reached with water, sanitation and hygiene interventions, including 5.7 million people with safe water,

4.9 million people with hygiene promotion interventions, 4.4 million people with sanitation interventions and 3.1 million people with water, sanitation and hygiene supplies.

60. Between October and December 2023, more than 5.78 million people benefited from support towards household food security, including 3.8 million with crop cultivation and alternative livelihood support, and 1.3 million with cash-for-work initiatives to rehabilitate community infrastructure. To improve nutritional status and empower women economically, extensive awareness-raising and training programmes were conducted, including village-level training.

61. Between 22 October 2023 and 13 January 2024, 35,588 cases of acute watery diarrhoea with dehydration (of which 57 per cent were children under the age of 5) were reported, compared with 44,033 cases (of which 55 per cent were children under 5) in the same period in 2022–2023. There were 4,580 suspected measles cases (of which 72 per cent were children under 5), compared with 7,351 suspected cases (of which 77 per cent were children under 5) during the same period in 2022–2023. Between 1 January 2023 and 13 January 2024, six cases of wild poliovirus type 1 were recorded, compared with two cases in 2022.

62. The number of conflict-related trauma consultations decreased by 24 per cent to 2,019 individuals between October 2023 and January 2024, compared with 2,735 in the same period in 2022–2023. During the same period, more than 162,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition were admitted and treated in 141 in-patient and 3,154 out-patient medical facilities. Some 356 mobile health and nutrition teams reached populations in remote areas, providing more than 310,000 consultations every month.

63. In 2023, IOM reception centres in Herat, Nimroz, Nangarhar and Kandahar assisted 1.4 million undocumented Afghan returnees, a 57 per cent increase compared with 2022. Between 15 September and 23 December 2023, more than 763,662 undocumented Afghan returnees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran received assistance – of which 31 per cent were deported and 69 per cent returned spontaneously or were forced to return. Between 15 September and early November 2023, the number of Afghan returnees from Pakistan peaked at over 25,000 daily. The returns decreased significantly by early January 2024 to a daily average of 305 returnees.

64. Between 19 October 2023 and 7 January 2024, more than 22,400 Afghan refugees from Pakistan (22,323), the Islamic Republic of Iran (83) and other countries (12) returned under the voluntary repatriation programme facilitated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). From 1 November to 31 December, UNHCR assisted 59,835 returnees, comprising 35 per cent with voluntary repatriation forms, 44 per cent with proof-of-registration cards and nuclear families and 20 per cent with UNHCR slips/asylum-seeker certificates. This marks a 744 per cent increase in total returns compared with 2022. Returnees attributed their decision to return to an unfavourable protection environment in Pakistan. The United Nations supported more than 630,000 internally displaced persons, returnees, asylum-seekers and host communities in 80 priority areas of return and reintegration throughout Afghanistan in 2023. Assistance included protection monitoring and the provision of legal assistance, psychosocial support, seasonal support, shelter and non-food items.

65. In 2023, humanitarian partners reported 1,775 access incidents, witnessing a notable increase in bureaucratic and administrative impediments and restrictions on women aid workers. The de facto authorities and armed forces were reportedly responsible for 95 per cent of access impediments in 2023. Of the 730 suspended projects in 2023, 34 were interrupted in December, with half reactivated within the

month. The ban on women aid workers continued to pose challenges including registration difficulties, exclusion from leadership roles and movement restrictions, all of which had led to the suspension of 89 projects and temporary facility closures.

## **VI. Counter-narcotics**

66. On 2 February, the de facto Deputy Minister of Interior for Counter-Narcotics declared that, during the past two years, more than 2,000 counter-narcotics operations were conducted across the country, with over 1,100 drug production factories destroyed and more than 13,000 individuals arrested on charges of the production, sale and trafficking of illegal drugs. The 95 per cent decrease in poppy cultivation following a drug ban by the de facto authorities, as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its Afghanistan opium survey in November 2023, resulted in a sharp and continued increase in opium prices. The national average price for dry opium climbed to \$802 per kilogram in December 2023, almost double the price of \$417 in August 2023. Available evidence from the field indicates that some farmers in Badakhshan are cultivating opium, in particular in remote areas. Similar reports were received from northern Kandahar and Nangarhar. In the meantime, UNODC estimates that opium farmers lost half of their total incomes as a result of the ban. The total income made by farmers selling the 2023 opium harvest declined by more than 92 per cent compared with 2022, from more than \$1 billion to just over \$100 million.

67. During the reporting period, the UNODC alternative development programme benefited more than 3,791 vulnerable households (of which 564 were female-headed households) through technical assistance on improved agricultural practices, inputs and training on vocational skills and post-harvest management and marketing. This led to income generation for farmers of \$129 per month from dairy products and \$1,029 per season from pistachio nurseries.

68. On 13 November and 31 January, the Working Group on Counter-Narcotics co-chaired by UNAMA and UNODC convened Kabul-based ambassadors and the de facto Deputy Ministers of Interior for Counter-Narcotics and for Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. At the meetings, the de facto authorities shared their achievements and challenges including the lack of resources, asking for international attention and support.

69. In November, UNODC launched a collaboration with UN-Women aimed at providing protection, essential health care and reintegration services for women detainees and those recovering from drug use in Kabul, Herat and Kandahar.

## **VII. Mission support**

70. As at 31 December 2023, vacancy rates in UNAMA were 9 per cent for international staff, 11 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 20 per cent for National Professional Officers and 14 per cent for national staff, compared with approved rates of 9 per cent, 10 per cent, 4 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively. The proportion of female staff was 33 per cent for international staff, 39 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 11 per cent for National Professional Officers and 8 per cent for national staff. The national United Nations Volunteers programme remains a critical pipeline for young Afghan women wishing to join the United Nations workforce.

## VIII. Observations

71. Notwithstanding the complex challenges, there remains a potential future in which Afghanistan is able to achieve sustained economic growth by promoting trade and transit with the neighbouring countries, thus reducing its dependence on foreign aid, as well as the end state described in Security Council resolution 2721 (2023): an Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbours, fully integrated into the international community and meeting its international obligations. In his independent assessment, the Special Coordinator, Independent Assessment Mandated by Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023), Feridun Sinirlioğlu, takes comprehensive stock of the current situation and offers a way forward that will require commitment and compromises from all stakeholders. I was pleased to convene, on 18 and 19 February, a second meeting of special envoys on Afghanistan to discuss the way forward, at which I heard an overall consensus that the international community was united in its continued engagement on Afghanistan, and in a more coherent, coordinated and structured manner.

72. The de facto authorities are making efforts to present their policy directions through the drafting of a “domestic and foreign policy approach” led by de facto Deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Kabir, who has conducted consultations with de facto officials as well as with ulema and elders. Subnational outreach by the de facto authorities also points to greater efforts to win broader popular support and increase domestic legitimacy. However, it is concerning that recent statements at madrasa graduation ceremonies contradict the previously stated vision by the de facto authorities that all people in Afghanistan are equal and that the de facto authorities are focused on serving the whole population. The achievement of a future fully realizing the potential of Afghanistan will require inclusive, effective and accountable governance.

73. Despite dwindling financial resources and competing priorities, the need for assistance funding to support the people of Afghanistan has further increased due to the earthquakes, large-scale returns of Afghans from Pakistan, and persistent drought. The United Nations continues to deliver vital humanitarian assistance in a principled manner to the country’s most vulnerable communities. I implore donors to urgently renew their support for the 23.7 million people in need of life-saving responses. I also reiterate my appeal to the de facto authorities to rescind their restrictive measures imposed on Afghan female aid workers and Afghan female staff of the United Nations in order to facilitate the reach and effectiveness of humanitarian operations. I further call upon Member States to support Afghan refugee responses, to promote greater responsibility-sharing and global solidarity with the neighbouring countries which have hosted Afghan refugees for decades despite the significant cost.

74. Notwithstanding the relatively stable macroeconomic situation, the country’s economy continues to lack sustainable and inclusive opportunities for its population, with no drivers of significant growth. The private sector continues to face debilitating banking and trade challenges. This situation has been further exacerbated by the large-scale returns of refugees from Pakistan, the impact of earthquakes, and climate change-induced challenges, including what appears to be another year of drought. Addressing those challenges would require international assistance beyond humanitarian aid. More sustainable forms of assistance are needed for the country to make progress in addressing basic human needs and urgent economic issues, as well as towards longer-term development, including in relation to climate adaptation. The de facto authorities and the international community have yet to find the pathway to promoting mutual trust and cooperation to address the needs and aspirations of the diverse population of Afghanistan.

75. Counter-narcotics and consequent alternative cultivation is an area that requires immediate support and could promote mutual trust and cooperation between Afghanistan and the international community. The drug ban by the de facto authorities resulted in a large reduction in opium cultivation but also led to a vast loss of income for farmers, which, compounded by the absence of alternative income sources, has the potential to incentivize some farmers to revert to poppy cultivation. This presents an opportunity for the international community to step in and help Afghanistan to finally build and sustain a future without opium cultivation.

76. The accessibility and quality of education for girls in Afghanistan remain deeply concerning. As the ban on secondary schooling for girls remains, the start of the new school year in March will be another day of grief for Afghan girls and for the world. I reiterate my call for the immediate reversal of the ban. Furthermore, there remains great uncertainty as to whether the de facto authorities will be able to provide an effective education system to address the challenges faced by the young people who need to acquire essential knowledge and skills to contribute to Afghanistan's development. On the basis of the limited information currently available on madrasas, I am concerned that the quality of education in these institutions does not adequately prepare girls or boys for higher-level education and professional training to join an effective workforce in the future. The latest instruction by the de facto Minister of Education to reduce hours of secular subjects has further raised such concerns.

77. The continued restrictions of the de facto authorities against women and girls, including the arrest and detention of women and girls for not observing hijab, are unacceptable. Such actions are in direct violation of their fundamental human rights and carry enormous stigma for women and girls in Afghan culture, creating a chilling effect among the wider female population who are now afraid to move in public. During consultations conducted by UNAMA, UN-Women and IOM, Afghan women stated that their physical and mental health had been steadily worsening as a consequence of repressive policies. I urge the de facto authorities to reverse policies and practices that restrict the enjoyment by women and girls of their human rights and fundamental freedoms and to investigate allegations of ill-treatment by personnel of the de facto authorities.

78. Attacks targeting minority communities such as the Hazara Shi'a are in violation of international law and must stop. I also remain concerned by the ongoing targeting of former government officials and Afghan National Defence and Security Forces members, despite the de facto authorities publicly stating that such individuals are to be protected. I call for urgent action to protect these individuals and hold perpetrators to account.

79. While the de facto authorities have taken steps to improve discipline among their officials, the continued introduction and implementation of policies that infringe on the human rights of women and men living in Afghanistan are alarming. I call upon the de facto authorities to cease corporal punishment, which contravenes the obligations of Afghanistan under the Convention against Torture. Furthermore, I remain concerned by the de facto authorities' use of arbitrary arrest and detention, threats and ill-treatment against media actors and civil society activists aimed at limiting dissenting opinions.

80. I welcome the increased access granted by the de facto Office of Prison Administration to prisons countrywide in response to the UNAMA report and urge the de facto Ministry of the Interior and the de facto General Directorate of Intelligence to do the same. I reiterate my call upon the international community to support the engagement of UNAMA and the United Nations with the de facto authorities through appropriate advice and targeted awareness-raising sessions to increase knowledge of law enforcement actions and their compliance with

international norms. Members of the international community are also encouraged to consider scaling up financial support to meet the basic needs of the incarcerated population, including through the provision of adequate food, medical, educational and clothing needs and the deployment of health and education personnel in detention facilities.

81. For the country to address a myriad of challenges, the presence and support of the United Nations continue to be critical. I extend my deep appreciation to all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan under the leadership of my Special Representative, Roza Otunbayeva, and her team, and to non-governmental organization partners for their continued dedication and service to the people of Afghanistan in an extremely challenging environment.

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