

Country Update

Afghanistan

(March 22, 2021)

Context and government response:

As of March 22, 2021, Afghanistan has registered 56, 177 cases of COVID-19, including 2,463 deaths. The actual figures are expected to be much higher, due to lack of testing facilities and tools, lack of reliable data, further hindered by the ongoing conflict. The COVID-19 cases have begun to surge in the country, with Kabul, Herat and Balkh being the epicenter, as they account for over 50% COVID-19 cases. Initially, the government had announced a complete lockdown starting last month but the deteriorating economic conditions sparked outrage and forced the government to ease lockdown measures by scheduling rotating shifts in various industries and businesses. However, all public offices remained closed.

On March 14, 2020, the governments closed all schools and educational institutions, which means that more than 9.5 million children in public schools and 500,000 children enrolled in community-based education classes, in addition to the 3.7 million out-of-school children in Afghanistan, have now been out of school for nearly seven months. Human Rights Watch reports that on August 22, 2020, government schools across the country reopened for grades 12-7 and private schools reopened for grades 12-1, which depicts the deepening inequalities in access to education for children living in poverty.

The government started taking strict measures by announcing a nation-wide lockdown at the end of March, but the lack of adequate health care infrastructure, ongoing conflict, widespread poverty, the return of 300,000 migrants and the recent \$1 billion fund cut have curtailed the ability of the country to manage the outbreak of the COVID-

19. Today, only 1 in 4 individuals have access to quality health care services in Afghanistan and COVID-19 has made the situation more dire.

The return of 300,000 migrants from Iran and Pakistan since February has further exacerbated the situation. Herat province has been hit the hardest because it borders Iran. The border of Iran remains open to the return of the refugees while Pakistan has closed its borders. Several humanitarian organizations have advised against the closing of the border as hundreds of thousands of refugees rush to cross the border and are forced to stay in mosques, locals shops and railway tunnels because the borders open sporadically.

Summary of impact:

On February 29th, 2020, the United States and the Taliban agreed on a peace deal that required the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Another peace agreement was due to be signed by the Afghan government and the Taliban, however the peace process has been delayed and the Taliban has denied observing a ceasefire. The group continued to carry out strikes against Afghan government forces across the country. According to National Security Council spokesman Javid Faisal, 30 non-combatants have lost their lives earlier in April. Furthermore, the delayed negotiation between two opposing parties over the results of the 2019 election saw the U.S. cut its \$1 billion in assistance in 2020. Considering Afghanistan's heavy reliance on international assistance, there have been severe consequences for the government's ability to pursue its fiscal policy and to contain the spread of COVID-19. The Taliban and other terrorist groups have capitalized on existing political instability and continue their brutal attacks inside the country with the majority of districts under their control.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted women and girls in Afghanistan. The pandemic has impacted young women and girls' access to schooling, and as the economic pressures exacerbated by COVID-19 increase, families are prioritizing sending boys to school rather than girls. The pandemic has also increased the number of domestic violence cases in Afghanistan. Income loss due to lockdown and economic hardships have led to disputes and violence in the families and women, and women are often the target of this violence. Moreover, there has been an increase in families are marrying off their young daughters in order to receive dowries to support the rest of



the family members. The lockdown has also impacted women's economic and social independence, particularly in rural communities and in the informal sector.

In early April 2020, the government has called for a comprehensive ceasefire, in particular in the rural areas controlled by the Taliban. The Taliban responded by declaring a "readiness" to declare a ceasefire in the areas it controls "if they are hit by a coronavirus outbreak."

In May 2020, the Taliban declared a three-day ceasefire for the period of Eid, which was also observed by the government. The Afghan government released more than 900 prisoners in "good faith" with the "goal to get the Taliban to extend the ceasefire beyond the agreed 3-day period." However, the Taliban did not extend the ceasefire, and the fighting resumed on May 29, 2020.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

Several women-led civil society organizations have called on the government of Afghanistan and international actors to continue their project implementation in the country, especially on women's economic empowerment. They noted that a total halt of project implementation can erode achievements for women's empowerment accomplished in the last 18 years. Some of these grassroots organizations have started awareness campaigns about COVID-19. GNWP's partner, the Afghan Women Welfare and Development Association (AWWDA), is distributing masks and basic sanitation kits to women. They have also arranged online weekly discussions engaging young peacebuilders, government authorities and members of international organizations to talk about the women's inclusion in the current peace process and the role of women at the centre of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, Afghan civil society organizations and Afghan Women's Network have sent an open letter regarding the conditions of female prisoners and demanded extra care from Afghan government during the COVID-19 pandemic.

