

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CONTENTS

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



KEY ISSUES & EVENTS

USAID suspended all USAID-funded development assistance activities in Afghanistan.

Following the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan's formal economy stalled and public services were on the verge of collapse as the country lost foreign development assistance and a UN agency foresaw "near universal poverty."

The combination of economic problems, drought conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and insecurity has driven a worsening humanitarian crisis within Afghanistan.

At the September 2021 donors' conference in Geneva, over \$1.1 billion was pledged in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, including \$64 million from the U.S. government.

AFGHANISTAN'S GROWING CRISES

Following the August 15 collapse of the former Afghan government and the full withdrawal of U.S. forces on August 30, the United States suspended development activities in Afghanistan.¹ Other foreign governments and international organizations have likewise halted efforts to strengthen the country's economic growth, public health, and educational sector following the Taliban takeover, though they have continued humanitarian aid, such as food and other short-term emergency assistance, to Afghans.² Coupled with Taliban dictates that threaten progress made over the preceding two decades in areas such as education (especially for women) and public health, Afghanistan faces a worsening economic and humanitarian crisis.

In early September, a spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned that basic public services in Afghanistan were on the verge of collapsing with the formal economy coming to a virtual stop.³ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said the economic impact of lost foreign assistance in the wake of the Taliban takeover has Afghanistan facing the prospect of "near universal

Food Security: all people within a society at all times having “physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet daily basic needs for a productive and healthy life,” without being forced to deplete household assets in order to meet minimum needs.

Source: United Nations, Press Release, “World Food Summit Concludes in Rome,” 11/19/1996.

poverty” by mid-2022 and a humanitarian crisis exacerbated by drought and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ As a result, millions of Afghan are threatened by **food insecurity**.⁵ The executive director of the World Food Programme, David Beasley, warned, “Fourteen million people, one out of three, are marching to the brink of starvation. They don’t know where their next meal is.”⁶

U.S. SUPPORT FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: OBJECTIVES AND PROSPECTS

As of September 22, 2021, USAID had suspended all USAID-funded development assistance activities in Afghanistan, including all contact with the new Taliban-controlled government. As such, USAID told their implementing partners not to carry out any agreement-specified activities, but to maintain staff and operational capacity, and to incur only reasonable, allocable, and allowable recurrent costs. USAID continued to disburse funds to implementing partners to maintain staff and sustain operational capacity.⁷

On August 15, 2021, immediately after the collapse of the Afghan government, the United States froze Afghan government monetary reserves being held in U.S. financial institutions, blocking the Taliban’s access to these funds. According to Ajmal Ahmady, the former head of Afghanistan’s central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), approximately \$7 billion of Afghanistan’s assets were held by the U.S. Federal Reserve as a mixture of cash, gold, bonds, and other investments. The remainder of DAB’s assets, he said, were in the Bank for International Settlements in Switzerland and other international accounts, leaving at most about 0.2% of the central bank’s \$9.4 billion (about \$19 million) in total assets available to the Taliban.⁸

On August 30, following the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken highlighted that U.S. engagement with Afghanistan in the near term would focus, first, on evacuating Americans, other foreign nationals, and Afghan allies who wish to depart the country and ensuring that the Taliban allow them to depart and, second, on counter-terrorism efforts, especially against Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K).

Secretary Blinken also stressed the United States’ continued commitment to providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people by working through international organizations and NGOs, rather than by providing support to the Taliban-controlled government. He said,

The conflict has taken a terrible toll on the Afghan people. Millions are internally displaced. Millions are facing hunger, even starvation. The COVID-19 pandemic has also hit Afghanistan hard. The United States will continue to support humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Consistent with our sanctions on the Taliban, the aid will not flow through the government, but rather through independent organizations, such as UN agencies and NGOs. And we expect that those efforts will not be impeded by the Taliban or anyone else.⁹

On September 13, 2021, at the donors' conference in Geneva, the United States announced nearly \$64 million in additional humanitarian assistance, including food aid, emergency health care, medical supplies, and other needed relief, to Afghans facing the “compounding effects of insecurity, conflict, recurring natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic.”¹⁰

On September 24, 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department issued two general licenses authorizing the U.S. government and its partners to continue to support humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.¹¹

On July 23, 2021, President Biden also had authorized up to \$100 million in additional assistance to Afghan refugees and those impacted by conflict, including Special Immigrant Visa applicants.¹²

Regardless of the level of funding appropriated for continued humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, administering vital U.S. aid to the Afghan people will still depend upon the ability of international organizations and NGOs to operate safely under a Taliban-controlled government.

As of September 30, 2021, the U.S. government has provided approximately \$36.2 billion to support governance and economic and social development in Afghanistan since 2002. Most of these funds—approximately \$21.2 billion—were appropriated to USAID's Economic Support Fund (ESF). Of this amount, \$20.1 billion has been obligated and \$18.5 billion has been disbursed. Figure E.1 on the following page shows USAID assistance by sector.

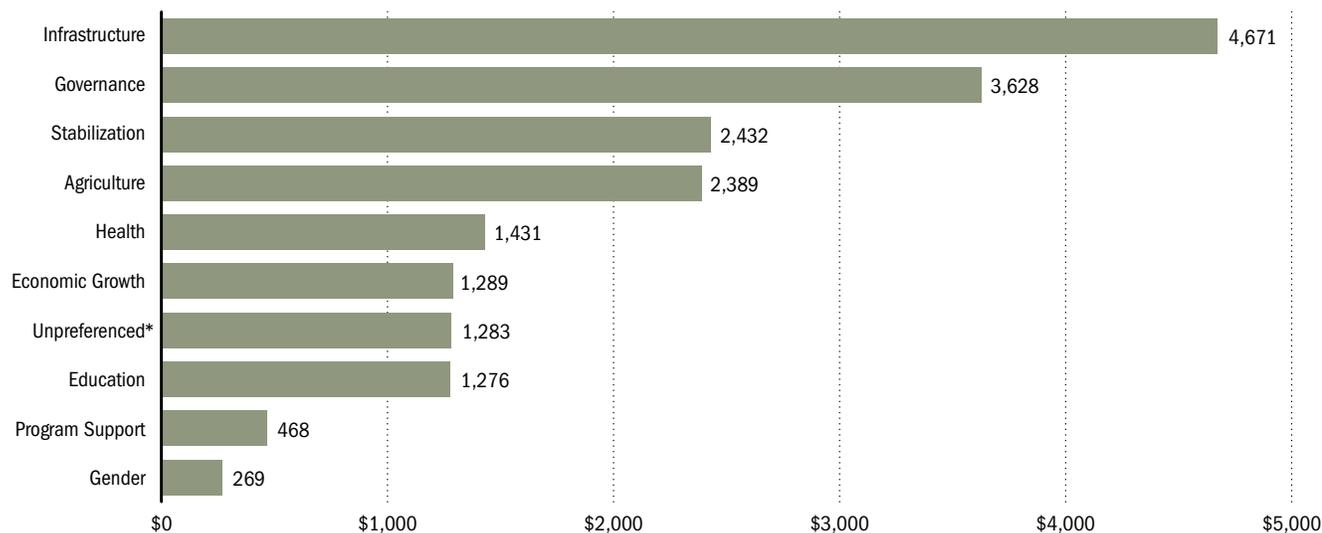
THE TALIBAN AND AFGHANISTAN'S ECONOMIC CRISIS

One of the primary questions facing the Taliban now that they have seized power is whether they are able to manage the existing bureaucracy and keep the Afghan economy from collapse. As Princeton economist Atif Mian noted, “Afghanistan is experiencing the mother of all ‘sudden stops.’”¹³

Shortly after the U.S. government froze Afghan government assets in U.S. financial institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) similarly suspended Afghanistan's access to its financial resources due to “lack of clarity within the international community” regarding recognizing the Taliban-controlled government. Over \$370 million in IMF funds were scheduled to be transferred to Afghanistan on August 23 as part of loans to mitigate

FIGURE E.1

USAID DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE, CUMULATIVE DISBURSEMENTS, AS OF OCTOBER 8, 2021 (\$ MILLIONS)



*Unpreferenced funds are U.S. contributions to the ARTF that can be used for any ARTF-supported initiatives.

Note: USAID Mission-managed funds. Numbers are rounded. USAID gender programs managed by the agency's Office of Gender are presented as a separate category. Agriculture programs include Alternative Development. Infrastructure programs include power, roads, extractives, and programs that build health and education facilities. OFM activities (e.g. audits and pre-award assessments) included under Program Support funds.

Source: SIGAR analysis of USAID, response to SIGAR data call, 10/14/2021; SIGAR analysis of World Bank, ARTF, Administrator's Report on Financial Status as of August 22, 2021, 10/14/2021.

Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund

(ARTF): A World Bank-administered multi-donor trust fund that coordinated international assistance to support the former Afghan government's operating and development costs, which financed up to 30% of its civilian budget. Out of 34 total donors since 2002, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have been the three leading contributors, with U.S. contributions comprising 50% of the \$718.6 million paid into the ARTF during 2020.

Source: ARTF, Who We Are, 2021; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 30, 2021, p. 42.

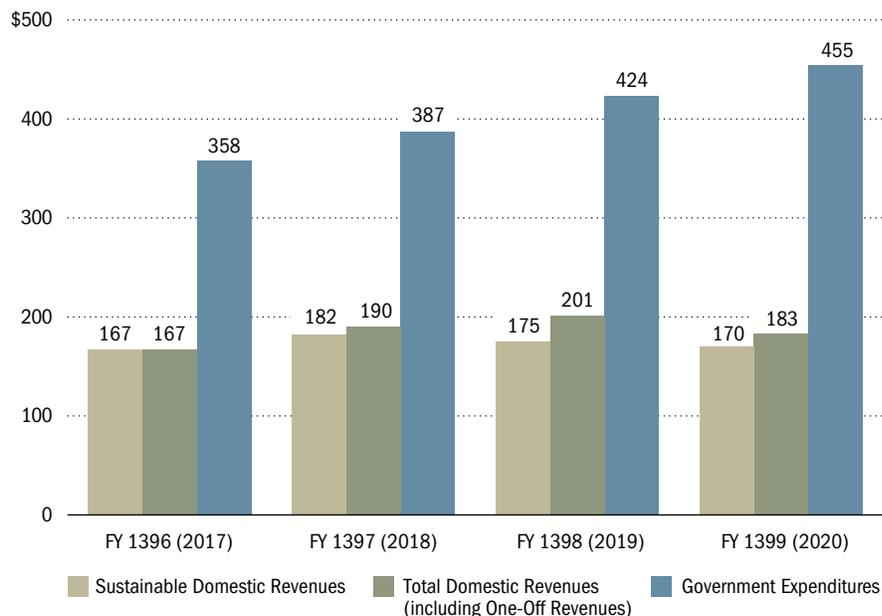
the current economic crisis.¹⁴ Days later, the World Bank also suspended funding for its projects in Afghanistan, including disbursements from the **Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund**. A World Bank spokesperson cited concerns over the repercussions of the Taliban takeover on "the country's development prospects, especially for women."¹⁵

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan faced numerous economic challenges with the former Afghan government relying heavily on international assistance. The former Afghan government consistently faced insufficient domestic revenues to cover government expenditures, offsetting deficits with international grants. Figure E.2 demonstrates this trend in recent years, with sustainable domestic revenues covering on average only 43% of the former Afghan government's largely non-security related expenditures, while foreign assistance made up the rest.¹⁶

In Afghanistan, approximately 90% of the economy is informal and thus largely escapes taxation, hindering the former Afghan government's financial self-sufficiency.¹⁷ For revenue derived from trade, such as customs, more than half of the total value of goods crossing the international border flows to the informal economy. This served as a substantial source of income for anti-state insurgents, other nongovernment groups, and corrupt officials, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue for the former Afghan government.¹⁸ As the Taliban expanded their territorial

FIGURE E.2

AFGHAN GOVERNMENT REVENUES AND EXPENDITURES (BILLIONS OF AFGHANIS)



Source: SIGAR analysis of MOF-provided AFMIS data exported 1/10/2018, 1/12/2019, 1/6/2020, and 1/10/2021.

control over the spring and summer, one of their most crucial gains came when they seized border crossings.¹⁹

The challenge of insufficient domestic revenues only worsened in recent years as domestic revenues stagnated while government expenditures steadily increased.²⁰ Donor grants totaling at least \$8.6 billion per year financed over half of the government budget. That proportion climbed to almost 80% of Afghanistan’s \$11 billion in total public expenditures when off-budget (U.S.-managed) assistance was counted along with on-budget (Afghan-managed) aid.²¹

Increased government service provision, an economy fueled by donor funds, and artificially inflated demand produced by the large international presence rapidly improved many of Afghanistan’s development outcomes until the 2014 drawdown of most international troops. After the Afghan government assumed responsibility for fighting the Taliban insurgency, licit annual GDP growth of just under 10% dropped to low-single-digit rates.²²

The Taliban inherited these challenges and, in many instances, exacerbated many of them after their military takeover prompted donors to suspend most support to the Afghan government. As a result, the Taliban have limited revenue to run the government’s bureaucracy and provide public services, which could lead to a huge contraction of the government and

its expenditures. It also has limited foreign currency to finance the country's large trade deficit, as Afghanistan's currency, the afghani, is not accepted for cross-border trade.²³ The suspension of international funds and revenue shortfalls could have a variety of economic effects on the Afghan economy. Ultimately, fear of international sanctions against the Taliban-controlled government, as well as reluctance to operate under the Taliban, may inhibit foreign investment, trade, and other economic engagement with Afghanistan, especially as the Taliban cabinet includes hardline figures like Sirajuddin Haqqani, who has a \$10 million U.S. bounty offered for information leading to his arrest.²⁴

For internationally backed development, Western governments are taking a “wait and see” approach regarding the Taliban's actions. On September 7, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said, “There is no rush to recognition. ... It is really going to be dependent on what steps the Taliban takes. The world will be watching—the United States included—and they will be watching whether they allow for American citizens and citizens of other countries to depart, whether they allow individuals who want to leave the country to leave, whether they allow for humanitarian assistance to travel, how they treat women and girls around the country.”²⁵ Similarly, Germany has laid down various conditions before it would restart development aid and reestablish its diplomatic presence in Kabul, such as respect for human rights, including rights for women.²⁶

Electricity Provision for Economic Activity

To address shortfalls in domestic power production, Afghanistan relies heavily on electricity imports from neighboring countries. This has made Afghans' access to reliable electricity vulnerable to changes (seasonal domestic demands, energy output levels, etc.) in other countries. By late 2020, according to data provided by Afghanistan Inter-Ministerial Commission for Energy, Afghanistan's total installed capacity for domestic power production is approximately 699 MW, versus the 2000 MW the Afghan Ministry of Water and Energy estimated the country needs. Domestic generating capacity consists of 280.5 MW of hydroelectric power, 353.5 MW of thermal/oil plants, and 65 MW from renewable energy.²⁷ This limited access to reliable, grid-based power has been an obstacle to economic growth.

Moreover, the expansion of Afghanistan's energy supply was tied to power-purchase agreements between independent power producers (IPPs) and Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), Afghanistan's national power utility, which obligated DABS to purchase all IPP-produced electricity.²⁸ Given the former Afghan government's heavy reliance on international donor assistance, DABS's financial viability was tied to either continued donor support or the government's ability to generate far greater levels of domestic revenue. IPPs warned that unpaid invoices from DABS for

generated electricity in the past contributed to cash-flow problems that put power plant operations at risk.²⁹

Not only does the Taliban-controlled government face potential technical and personnel difficulties in managing the country's power infrastructure, particularly as trained personnel leave the country, it now faces severe revenue shortages that inhibit its ability to provide both domestically and externally generated electricity to the power grid. DABS's operations will be further impacted by the rising levels of poverty that inhibit households' ability to pay their electric bills.³⁰

In early October, it was reported that the Taliban-controlled government had not paid for electricity imports from neighboring countries or resumed bill collections from electricity consumers. Central Asian countries can suspend their electricity exports under the existing contracts due to non-payment. The current drought is adding to these problems as it inhibits hydroelectric production in Afghanistan.³¹

Financial Sector Challenges

Afghanistan's largely cash-based economy also has struggled with an acute cash shortage, which has limited day-to-day economic activities. While banks have remained largely closed, there have been media reports of periodic openings. However, banks have instituted a 20,000 afghani (around \$200) weekly limit on cash withdrawals to conserve their cash balances, combined with a limited number of open ATMs that are often depleted. Media reports have shown lengthy lines at banks as Afghans waited hours for a chance to withdraw what money they could. In late August, a public servant in Herat stated, "Banks are still closed. Only two ATM machines are working in the entire city, you have to line up for hours. But when your turn arrives, they run out of money or an electricity cut happens."³²

Additionally, as of mid-September 2021, government workers were reportedly last paid in July, with the Ministry of Finance attributing the delay to "technical problems."³³ It was estimated that the former Afghan government employed over 800,000 people in the civilian and military sectors, so their unpaid salaries contribute to the decline in day-to-day economic activity.³⁴ Adding to the stress, prices for food, fuel, and other essentials have skyrocketed by as much as 75%.³⁵ Afghans resorted to selling their housewares to help feed their families, though some reported weak demand and ended up selling their goods at a loss.³⁶

The devaluation of the afghani (AFN) also impacts the Afghan economy, which could further diminish Afghan households' ability to purchase food and other necessities. Since the collapse of the former Afghan government, the AFN has depreciated against the U.S. dollar, dropping from approximately 77 AFN to the dollar to around 90 as of October 8, 2021.³⁷ Adding further pressure to the country's limited cash reserves, Afghanistan does not have the technical capabilities to print its own currency. In January

SIGAR OVERSIGHT OF AFGHANISTAN'S ENERGY SECTOR

Given the U.S. government's significant investment in Afghanistan's energy sector, SIGAR has focused a considerable portion of its oversight portfolio on projects and programs in the sector. An ongoing SIGAR audit is examining the broad scope of U.S. investment in the Afghan energy sector since 2009, including efforts to improve generation, transmission, and distribution.

2020, the former government contracted a Polish company, Polish Security Printing Works, to print 10 billion afghanis worth of new bills.³⁸

On September 2, 2021, Western Union, the world's largest money-transfer firm, announced it was resuming services in Afghanistan, a move enabled by the reopening of banks. Services will be limited to only a handful of locations, largely in Kabul, and money transfers out of the country are still suspended. Western Union had originally suspended its operations on August 18, 2021, due to bank closures, insecurity, and other constraints on its employees' ability to conduct business. Another money-transfer firm, MoneyGram International, also suspended its services in August due to the security situation but resumed services in early September.³⁹

BANKING UPDATE: FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN'S BANKS UNCERTAIN

On August 23, 2021, the Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce warned, "Afghanistan and its banking sector are at an 'existential flash point' where the collapse of the banking sector is at hand."⁴⁰ Prior to the Taliban takeover, Afghan banks had weathered the COVID-19 pandemic, in part due to their small loan portfolios helping to minimize losses, and had seen some modest improvements.⁴¹ While banks' deposits initially declined and nonperforming loans increased because of the pandemic, the World Bank found that bank deposits grew by the end of 2020 as international grants and government expenditures fueled private-sector activities, and individuals and firms sought to reduce their cash holdings amid increasing political uncertainty and insecurity. In late 2020, bank deposits reached 292.6 billion AFN (equivalent to 19.9% of GDP), an increase from 263.8 billion AFN (equivalent to 18% of GDP) at the end of 2019; the loan to deposit ratio fell from 15.8% in 2019 to 13.8% in 2020.⁴²

With the collapse of the Afghan government on August 15, banks closed for around 10 days before slowly starting to reopen. Given the central banks' sudden halt in access to foreign assets and resulting cash shortage, commercial banks announced they were suspending all services until Afghanistan's central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), could confirm liquidity and security arrangements. Even before the Taliban takeover, liquidity was an issue for the banking sector as many customers withdrew cash from the banks as security quickly deteriorated.⁴³ In the weeks leading up to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, DAB reportedly had already depleted most of its U.S. currency reserves, exacerbating the current economic crisis.⁴⁴

In mid-September, Afghan companies stated that all financial transactions had stopped due to the disruption between Afghanistan and international banks over the previous month.⁴⁵ Businessmen also complained that companies are subject to the banks' weekly limit on cash

withdrawals. One member of the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment said, “The plan that allows people to withdraw \$200 USD [U.S. dollars] each week may work for ordinary people, but businessmen cannot do business with \$200 USD each week.” As a result, many companies are facing serious financial shortages with many laborers remaining unpaid as businesses are unable to withdraw enough funds to pay them.⁴⁶

There are a number of questions and uncertainties regarding the Taliban’s ability to manage the banking sector. The Taliban appointed Haji Mohammad Idris as the acting head of DAB. Idris has served as the head of the group’s finance section, but possesses no formal financial training or university education.⁴⁷ The banking sector is also concerned that if the Taliban bars female employment, banks will lose a significant portion of their trained staff, making it even more difficult to operate. There also is much uncertainty about the future structure of Afghanistan’s banking system, including what kind of approach the Taliban will implement for Islamic banking and finance given their commitment to restructure the government according to their interpretation of *sharia* or religious law.⁴⁸

Before Afghanistan’s current banking crisis, the private sector’s reliance on bank-sourced credit was already weak, with private-sector credit largely directed towards the trade (41%) and services (27%) sectors.⁴⁹ According to the Asian Development Bank, Afghan banks provided a line of credit to only around 5% of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, with the remainder seeking financing largely from informal sources.⁵⁰

Afghanistan’s small banking sector was severely limited in its ability to finance private investment and support economic growth. Instead, the Afghan economy is heavily informal with 85% of Afghan adults lacking access to formal financial services. Prior to the collapse of the Afghan government, DAB estimated that only 3.9% of businesses rely on banks to finance capital expenses, with only 0.8% using banks to finance investments due to both demand and supply constraints. Those constraints included high interest rates and collateral requirements, lack of expertise, and limited access in rural areas.

As the Afghan economy has struggled to find areas of sustainable economic growth in recent years, the country has increasingly relied on remittances from Afghans working abroad, especially in neighboring Iran. By 2019, remittances accounted for the equivalent of 4.3% of Afghanistan’s annual GDP, an increase from 1.2% in 2014, according to World Bank data.⁵¹ However, officials from the UN’s International Organization for Migration estimated this figure could be as high as 15–20%, given that many remittances are sent through the informal *hawala* money-transfer system.⁵² In 2020, remittances to Afghanistan dropped by 10%, according to the World Bank.⁵³ Afghans in Iran, for instance, struggled to find work due to COVID-19 and economic sanctions, forcing many to return to Afghanistan where they faced rising levels of unemployment, poverty, and insecurity.⁵⁴

Hawala: informal money transmission networks that arrange for the transfer and receipt of funds or equivalent value, and settle their accounts through trade and cash.

Source: Treasury, *Hawala: The Hawala Alternative Remittance System and its Role in Money Laundering*, 2003, p. 5.

FinTRACA Activities Suspended

Following the Taliban takeover, the Afghan financial intelligence unit known as the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Center of Afghanistan (FinTRACA) was suspended. On August 15, this unit was disconnected from secure international servers used for exchanging information on illicit flows of money. As of September 14, 2021, it remained offline.⁵⁵ Established in 2006 by Afghanistan's Anti-Money Laundering Law, FinTRACA was responsible for combating money laundering and terrorist financing through analyzing and disseminating information received from traditional financial institutions, such as banks, as well as informal financial institutions, such as hawaladars.⁵⁶ Prior to its suspension, FinTRACA listed the Taliban as a terrorist group, with resulting prohibitions on its financial activities.⁵⁷

FinTRACA served a vital role in scrutinizing financial traffic for suspicious or criminal activity, critical for Afghanistan's link with financial and banking networks abroad. As of August 2021, the organization had logged 645 suspicious financial transactions reports for the year.⁵⁸ Its suspension effectively cuts Afghanistan's ties with international financial institutions and hastens its departure from the global financial system.

Without a mechanism for tracking illicit money flows and with the Taliban now in control of the Afghan economy, local banks expect the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to lower Afghanistan's compliance status, which could further inhibit the country's connections to the global financial system.⁵⁹ FATF is a global, intergovernmental mechanism for money laundering and terrorist financing and acts to ensure that governments implement various international standards and reforms to combat illicit financing. It conducts periodic assessments to review compliance; noncompliant countries are subject to various sanctions limiting access to international financial markets. Afghanistan's next FATF assessment is currently planned for July 2022. FATF announced that it "is closely monitoring the developing situation in Afghanistan."⁶⁰

UNCERTAIN ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

With Afghanistan largely cut off from international funds, the financial analysis firm Fitch Solutions projected the country's GDP to contract by as much as 9.7% in 2021, with an additional drop of 5.2% next year. Before the collapse of the government in August, the Afghan economy was projected to grow by 0.4% this year.⁶¹ Following the U.S. suspension of Afghanistan's foreign assets, the UN Secretary General's special representative for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, said, "The understandable purpose is to deny these funds to the de facto Taliban administration. The inevitable effect, however, will be a severe economic downturn that could throw many more

millions into poverty and hunger, may generate a massive wave of refugees from Afghanistan, and indeed set Afghanistan back for generations.”⁶²

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line (defined as 2,064 afghanis per person per month or around \$1 in daily income), according to the most recent household survey data, an increase from 34% in 2008.⁶³ In 2020, during the early months of the pandemic, the World Bank projected that Afghanistan’s poverty levels could rise to as high as 73% due to the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19.⁶⁴ In April 2021, however, the World Bank estimated that overall poverty levels actually decreased from the pre-pandemic level to 47.1%, as the pandemic had a less severe economic impact in rural areas than originally projected. In urban areas, the Bank estimated that poverty levels rose from 41.6% to 45.5% in 2020.⁶⁵

With the economic disruption caused by the collapse of the former Afghan government, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) projects that by mid-2022, poverty levels could increase by between seven and, in the worst-case scenario, 25 percentage points, compared to 2020. Relying on the World Bank’s initial projection of Afghanistan’s poverty level increasing to 73% in 2020 as its baseline, the UNDP’s analysis further warns that Afghanistan could face the prospect of “near universal poverty” with around 97% of the population living below the poverty line.⁶⁶ The UNDP representative in Afghanistan, Abdallah Al Dardari, pointed to a “budgetary shock,” a “reserve shock,” and a “trade shock,” combined with the absence of international economic support, as driving the rapidly deteriorating economic crisis.⁶⁷

There are also a number of other uncertainties on economic-related issues looking forward, including what the Taliban’s ultimate position on female employment will be and to what extent the international community will remain engaged on Afghanistan’s economic and social development.

Female Employment

Shortly after taking control of Kabul, the Taliban dismissed female government employees and forced women out of their jobs in other sectors, such as banking. Taliban officials ordered women to stay home from work until the Taliban are able to implement “proper systems” for their safety, saying that Taliban security forces are “not trained (in) how to deal with women.”⁶⁸ However, Taliban officials called for some women to return to work, especially for jobs in which they would be engaging with other women including the health-care sector and airport security.⁶⁹

In 2020, according to World Bank data, women made up 21.6% of Afghanistan’s workforce.⁷⁰ A Taliban ban on female employment, whether de jure or de facto, will deal a further blow to Afghanistan’s current economic crisis and exacerbate widespread poverty.

International Development and Trade

The Taliban have expressed interest in maintaining Afghanistan's existing trade relationships and attracting new international development to the country. For instance, a Taliban spokesperson announced that the group "would like Germany to support us in the humanitarian sector, and we need help in the health care sector, in the area of education and with the infrastructure."⁷¹

In late August, the Taliban also said they hope to maintain Afghanistan's trade relationship with India and keep the air corridor open between the two countries, with the Indian foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla saying that India is taking a "wait-and-watch" approach to engagement with a Taliban-controlled government.⁷² However, the costs of shipping goods through the air corridor connecting India and Afghanistan were heavily subsidized by the former Afghan government. According to the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce, government subsidies covered around 83% of shipment costs for flights to New Delhi and 80% of shipment costs for flights to Mumbai.⁷³

Before seizing power in Kabul, the Taliban had recognized the importance of customs duties, which comprised approximately one-fifth of all domestic revenues for the former Afghan government, by seizing border crossings as they expanded their territorial control. This had the effect of denying customs revenue to the former Afghan government and putting further financial strain on it. In late July 2021, the former Afghan government reported a widening deficit due to an increase in security-related and public-health expenditures with a decline in domestic revenues due to the Taliban's seizure of the border crossings. On August 1, the Ministry of Finance asked all ministries to suspend their development projects due to declining revenues.⁷⁴ The Taliban kept the seized border crossings open for trade and were reportedly collecting customs revenue before the collapse of the government in August.⁷⁵

Following the Taliban takeover, two key border crossings with Pakistan remained open for trade. However, many traders complained about continued insecurity along the roads and confusion over customs duties under a Taliban-controlled government.⁷⁶ On August 6, Iran instituted a ban on fuel exports to Afghanistan due to rising insecurity, but resumed them at the Taliban's request as fuel prices spiked in the country.⁷⁷ On September 8, an official from Iran's Ministry of Industry, Mining, and Trade announced that other exports to Afghanistan had also resumed with all border crossings between the two countries reportedly open to trade.⁷⁸ The Iranian Foreign Minister said, "Iran will keep its borders and border crossings with Afghanistan open to ease the current situation in this country, and will continue to trade."⁷⁹

In 2018, the U.S. government waived sanctions against Iranian fuel exports to Afghanistan to avoid harming the Afghan economy, given its

reliance on Iranian fuel. However, a State Department spokesperson said this waiver “remains under active review” by the Biden administration following the collapse of the former Afghan government.⁸⁰

Following a September 8, 2021, virtual meeting of the foreign ministers of Pakistan, China, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, a joint statement was released affirming “the importance of sustained international engagement on Afghanistan, especially in supporting its humanitarian and development needs.” Afghanistan’s six neighboring states further expressed their “readiness to keep ports open for Afghanistan and ensure the smooth cross-border flow of goods to facilitate Afghanistan’s access to external support, in particular the transport of humanitarian supplies, as well as to help Afghanistan strengthen economic and trade connectivity with the regional countries.”⁸¹

In early October, Pakistan (one of Afghanistan’s main trading partners) reported that its exports to Afghanistan had dropped by 73% following the Taliban takeover and the current economic crisis. On the other hand, the value of Afghan exports to Pakistan increased by 142% from August 16 to September 30, as compared to the period July 1–August 15. A customs official reportedly attributed this increase in trade from Afghanistan to a decline in the corrupt activities at the border crossings, such as government officials extorting drivers to pass into Pakistan with their goods, a practice that had inhibited trade.⁸²

Afghanistan’s economy has been highly dependent on imports, generating a severe trade deficit that was almost entirely financed through external aid. Afghanistan’s main imports include petroleum, machinery and equipment, food items, and base metals and related articles.⁸³ In 2019, Afghanistan imported goods totaling \$7.33 billion while exporting only \$975 million worth, according to World Trade Organization data; this produced a negative merchandise trade balance of \$6.36 billion, equivalent to 30.1% of GDP.⁸⁴ In 2020, amid declining imports and exports (exports fell by 2% and imports by 5%), the negative trade balance narrowed to \$5.1 billion, equivalent to 26.7% of GDP.⁸⁵ The trade deficit was in part caused by Afghanistan’s low manufacturing capacity and poor domestic infrastructure, which results in a narrow export base—largely agricultural products and carpets—to limited destination markets.⁸⁶

Extractives Potential for Economic Growth

In early September, a Taliban spokesperson was quoted as saying that China would be “our main partner” for Afghanistan’s future economic development. In particular, he pointed to the potential of the country’s mining sector, stating, “We own rich copper mines, which, thanks to the Chinese, will be modernized. Finally, China represents our ticket to the markets of the world.”⁸⁷

China has long expressed interest in tapping into Afghanistan's vast mineral wealth, including procuring stakes in various mining projects such as the Mes Aynak copper mine located around 25 miles southeast of Kabul and estimated to hold 11.08 million tons of copper. China's Jiangxi Copper and the Metallurgical Corporation of China took a 30-year lease on Mes Aynak in 2008, but, to date, development of the mine has been stalled, reportedly from a variety of factors including insecurity, corruption, lack of an enabling infrastructure, and archaeological sites near the mine.⁸⁸ In early September 2021, the chairman of Jiangxi Copper stated, "Due to the unstable situation in Afghanistan, the Mes Aynak copper mine invested by the company has not yet undergone substantial construction." However, he added that the company continues to monitor the situation in Afghanistan and would move forward on developing the mine when it becomes possible to do so.⁸⁹

The strength of the informal mining sector, whose products are frequently smuggled out of the country, and lack of an enabling infrastructure limited the former Afghan government's ability to benefit from the extractives sector. Afghanistan's formal extractives sector was limited by low processing capacity, lack of reliable energy sources, poor transportation infrastructure, and insecurity which raised mining costs compared to regional markets. The potential for profitable mining operations, even in the formal economy, was further weakened by widespread corruption, which acts as an additional deterrent to investors in capital-intensive mining operations.⁹⁰

The multiple obstacles to development have left a large percentage of mining activity in Afghanistan to be conducted by informal or illegal small-scale operations that smuggle their products out of the country.⁹¹ Mining revenues accounted for only around 1% of the former Afghan government's sustainable domestic revenues in recent years, according to Afghan government accounting data.⁹²

Illegal mining had increasingly been a key source of revenue for the Taliban. In areas under its control, the Taliban issued mining licenses, collected taxes and protection money from mining operations, and controlled the smuggling of quarried minerals and gems abroad, particularly to Pakistan.⁹³ In late January 2021, then-Minister of Mines and Petroleum Mohammad Haroon Chakhansuri stated, "The Taliban are currently mining in 750 areas. This group is using the money [made from] mining against the government."⁹⁴ As a result, the formal extractives sector failed to attract investment and materialize as a driver of economic growth and a source of sustainable domestic revenues for the former Afghan government.

AFGHANISTAN'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Before the collapse of the Afghan government, Afghanistan confronted a combination of persistent insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and drought. The takeover of the Taliban and growing economic crisis has only exacerbated the humanitarian crisis facing Afghans.

On June 22, 2021, the Afghan government officially declared a drought.⁹⁵ With less snow and rainfall through the winter months of 2020–2021, many farmers are feeling its impact. A lack of snowmelt from the Hindu Kush mountains, for instance, led to low water levels in the Panjshir River, so that it no longer provided adequate irrigation for crops in Parwan Province. In other parts of the country, the absence of late-winter rains hurt the wheat harvest, driving up wheat prices in some areas by as much as one-third.⁹⁶ Wheat production is expected to drop by as much as 31% in 2021 as compared to the previous year's harvest with a 62% reduction in areas under cultivation; Afghanistan is facing a shortfall of 2.46 million metric tons of wheat as a result of poor harvests. Additionally, rice crops have fallen by 20%, vegetable yields are down 25–30%, and fruit production is expected to drop as much as 80% in some areas.⁹⁷

Drought and lack of irrigation are depleting vulnerable households' financial and asset reserves, with many shouldering “catastrophic levels of debt.”⁹⁸ Forecasts have warned that drought conditions are likely to persist and even worsen into 2022, further deteriorating food security among Afghans.⁹⁹ In late August, Kazakhstan reported that it was unwilling to export its wheat to Afghanistan given the country's inability to pay following the suspension of Afghan financial assets by the U.S. government.¹⁰⁰ In recent years, Afghanistan's domestic agricultural production has been increasingly unable to meet the rising domestic demand for key crops, such as wheat. To meet this shortfall, the former Afghan government relied on agricultural imports. In 2018, for example, Afghanistan imported \$477 million of wheat, primarily from Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. The potential inability to finance the importation of crops to address food shortages increases the risk of famine within Afghanistan. By September 2021, approximately 14 million people—or one out of three Afghans—were on the brink of starvation, according to the World Food Programme.¹⁰¹

Afghanistan is also struggling to contain the spread of COVID-19 with a health-care system that has limited capacity to contain the disease or effectively treat afflicted patients. The pandemic and other public-health issues could be exacerbated by the increase in internally displaced persons. World Health Organization (WHO) officials warned that a spike in COVID-19 cases among displaced persons would increase the transmission of the disease within Afghanistan's cities and increase the burden on the already fragile health-care system. Among displaced persons, WHO is already reporting the prevalence of COVID-19-like symptoms, as well as increases in

cases of diarrhea, high blood pressure, reproductive-health complications, and malnutrition.¹⁰²

According to the UN, the number of Afghans requiring humanitarian assistance in 2021 has reached approximately half of Afghanistan's total estimated population. This figure is nearly double that of 2020, and a six-fold increase compared to four years ago.¹⁰³ In January 2021, the UN said Afghanistan's Humanitarian Response Plan for 2021 would already require an additional \$1.3 billion to address the growing number of Afghans in need of humanitarian aid, including around 10 million children, stemming from a combination of ongoing conflict, drought, poverty, and COVID-19.¹⁰⁴ By September 2021, only 39% of the required funds were distributed.¹⁰⁵

In September 2021, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi further warned that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan would "very soon" result in far greater population displacement this year than the currently estimated 500,000 displaced Afghans within the country since January 2021.¹⁰⁶ Grandi had recently completed a three-day visit to Afghanistan during which he oversaw the arrival of a truck convoy of UNHCR-provided aid for displaced families that had entered Afghanistan through the Torkham border crossing with Pakistan and discussed with Taliban officials continued access and security for humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁷

Donors and international organizations have expressed their continued commitment to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan following the Taliban's government takeover. Delivering humanitarian funding within a Taliban-dominated state will, however, present new oversight challenges given existing prohibitions against providing financial support to the Taliban, with experts warning that some donated funds would inevitably land into the wrong hands.¹⁰⁸

In late August, the WHO dispatched six medical teams to Kabul to provide emergency health-care services to more than 100,000 displaced individuals, with another 14 medical teams sent into eastern Afghanistan.¹⁰⁹ Yet the UN, along with NGOs, remained concerned about the safety of any staff continuing to work in the country.¹¹⁰ After the Taliban takeover, aid organizations suspended operations in Afghanistan and expressed concern that their workers could be targeted by the Taliban for engaging in activities that the Taliban opposes, such as building schools for girls.¹¹¹ During the first week of September 2021, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths arrived in Kabul to meet with Taliban leaders and discuss the continued delivery of humanitarian assistance in the country. During the visit, Taliban authorities pledged that the safety and security of humanitarian staff would be respected, according to a UN statement.¹¹²

Some aid groups have continued to operate in Afghanistan and remain "cautiously optimistic" about their ability to do so moving forward. Such



UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths meets with Taliban leaders to discuss delivery of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. (UN photo)

groups include Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which has operated in Afghanistan since 1980. MSF maintains strict neutrality, is not associated with any Western government and is focused on health care rather than subjects that could draw the Taliban's ire, such as female education and empowerment.¹¹³

A number of NGOs in Afghanistan already have a track record of engaging directly with the Taliban and operating in Taliban-controlled territory. In mid-December 2020, for instance, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) announced an agreement with the Taliban allowing them to establish 4,000 community-based education classes covering the first three grades of primary school in Taliban controlled- or influenced-territory. UNICEF did not inform Ministry of Education officials about the agreement.¹¹⁴ With the Taliban now in control of the government, one aid worker in Kabul stressed that such engagement is possible by adopting a neutral stance and having a clear understanding of local dynamics to be able to operate.¹¹⁵

With the suspension of international development funds and the worsening humanitarian and economic crisis, a UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) spokesperson stated during a September 7, 2021, briefing, "Basic services in Afghanistan are collapsing and food and other lifesaving aid is about to run out."¹¹⁶ Ahead of the September 13 donors' conference in Geneva, the UN aid organization made a "flash appeal" for an additional \$600 million to meet the

needs of the approximately 11 million people in need of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.¹¹⁷ In September 2021, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization called for \$21 million in urgent funding to meet a “commitment gap” for its support of Afghan farmers, which totals \$36 million. This funding is intended to expedite support to farmers to ensure they do not miss the winter planting season and provide other support to Afghans dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods.¹¹⁸ The Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, a French NGO, also made an emergency appeal for an additional \$30 million to address the effects of drought for the most severely affected populations in Afghanistan.¹¹⁹

At September's Geneva conference, donors pledged more than \$1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, including the \$64 million from the United States.¹²⁰ On September 22, UN OCHA also released \$45 million from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund to “help prevent Afghanistan's health-care system from collapse.”¹²¹ Various regional countries also offered direct humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. China promised approximately \$31 million in humanitarian assistance “for emergency use to the Afghan people,” including food, winter weather supplies, three million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, and medicine.¹²² In early September, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain flew food and medical supplies into Kabul.¹²³ On September 9, Pakistan sent its first shipment of approximately 30 tons of humanitarian aid, with promises of future shipments.¹²⁴

At an October 12, 2021, G20 summit in Rome, participating nations announced that they would support UN activities and respond to UN appeals for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, as well as call on the World Bank to explore ways of redirecting support to international agencies operating in Afghanistan to support humanitarian efforts.¹²⁵ During the summit, the European Union also pledged \$1.15 billion in aid, which included the \$346 million it had earlier committed.¹²⁶

CIVIL AVIATION UPDATE: TURKEY, QATAR WORK TO MAINTAIN KABUL AIRPORT OPERATIONS

The completion of the U.S. evacuation on August 30 left the Taliban without the technical expertise to run the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA). A functioning airport system and civil aviation sector are necessary for maintaining any diplomatic presence in Kabul and, more importantly in the near term, vital for facilitating the delivery and distribution of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people.

By September 1, a technical team arrived from Qatar to help restore Kabul airport operations, which were suspended after the completion of the U.S. withdrawal.¹²⁷ They were joined by 19 technicians from Turkey, according to media reports.¹²⁸ On September 4, the technical teams were

able to reopen the airport to receive aid shipments and for domestic flights between Kabul and Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, and Kandahar.¹²⁹ During a September 9 news conference, a Qatari engineer stated that the airport was 90% fixed, adding that there were “some technical issues that we cannot fix.”¹³⁰ On September 13, airport security employees, including border police who guarded the airport and female employees, reported returning to work at the request of Taliban officials. However, they also reported that they had not yet been paid and were “working for free.”¹³¹

The first commercial charter flight (operated by Qatar Airways) to depart Kabul following the U.S. withdrawal arrived in Qatar on September 9 with over 100 foreign nationals, including Americans, on board.¹³² On September 11, a spokesperson for Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) announced it was resuming normal commercial air operations between Islamabad and Kabul with five flights per week, the first foreign airline to do so.¹³³ Four days later, Iran also resumed commercial flights into Afghanistan with two charter flights operated by Mahan Air arriving in Kabul.¹³⁴ However, on October 14, PIA announced it was cancelling its flights to Kabul due to Taliban authorities interfering in flight operations.¹³⁵

Shortly after the Taliban takeover, Turkey withdrew its troops from Afghanistan after failing to reach an agreement with the Taliban for Turkish soldiers to remain at the Kabul airport. Turkey had overseen security and airport operations at the Kabul airport under the auspices of NATO’s Resolute Support Mission.¹³⁶ In early June 2021, the Turkish government agreed in principle to continue to run and secure the airport subject to certain conditions including “political, financial, and logistical support” from its NATO allies.¹³⁷

In a September 7 interview, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu continued to express concern about security for Turkish personnel at the Kabul airport, given Taliban opposition to any foreign troop presence. “But the most important is who ensures security?” he stated. “Outside the airport, it could be the Taliban but inside (the airport) it needs to be a private company or a state or two that the international community can rely on.”¹³⁸ On September 26, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was quoted as saying that Turkey’s presence in Kabul would depend on whether the Taliban form an “inclusive” government.¹³⁹

How the Taliban-controlled government will be able to run Afghanistan’s civil aviation sector with limited technical personnel and limited funding remains to be seen. Even before the collapse of the former Afghan government, representatives of the Afghanistan Civil Aviation Authority (ACAA) were concerned about their ability to maintain the runway and equipment at HKIA, as well as their lack of mid-level managers to supervise technical staff.¹⁴⁰ The ACAA maintained that it had challenges with retaining a sufficient number of qualified personnel to manage, maintain, and operate

Afghanistan's airports.¹⁴¹ More information on airport operations in Kabul can be found in the Classified Supplement to this report.

EDUCATION

Even with donor assistance, Afghanistan struggled to improve its education outcomes in recent years, in the face of the Ministry of Education's capacity issues and continued insecurity; many students, particularly girls, remained out of school. Nevertheless, overall trends over the past 20 years show that Afghanistan's education sector and girls' access to education have made considerable gains since 2001. For example, student enrollment, despite being a poor indicator of actual attendance, increased ten-fold between 2001 and 2018, from approximately one million students to 10 million.¹⁴² This figure includes 3.5 million girls, in contrast to almost no girls in school during the 1996–2001 Taliban regime.¹⁴³ The Taliban takeover, however, is a threat to the continued development and expansion of Afghan schools, especially regarding girls' education, and risks undermining the U.S. investment in Afghanistan's education sector, totaling \$1.3 billion since 2002.¹⁴⁴

Taliban Takeover Threatens Girls' Education

After the Taliban took control of the government, many educational institutions closed.¹⁴⁵ Some universities remained open, but reported the vast majority of their students were not showing up for class over security concerns.¹⁴⁶ In preparation for reopening, Taliban officials announced their intention to fully implement their interpretation of *sharia*, or Islamic law, including in matters of education.¹⁴⁷ In early September, the Taliban higher education minister announced a review of the subjects taught in school to ensure compliance with their governing ideology.¹⁴⁸ Regarding female education, the Taliban have so far announced their intention to continue allowing females to attend schools and universities within the limits of the Taliban's interpretation of *sharia*.¹⁴⁹

In early September 2021, the Taliban-controlled government introduced gender segregation among students in universities and colleges; many primary and secondary classrooms were already gender-segregated. According to media reports, schools will be required to maintain separate entrances for male and female students and mixed-gender classes are only permissible if the number of female students is below 15 and the classroom divides males and females with a curtain. Taliban officials also announced that female students would be taught by women wherever possible. Additionally, all female students, teachers, and staff are required to wear a covering garment.¹⁵⁰

The vice chancellor of a private university in Kabul, however, warned of the logistical difficulties many schools will face in complying with requirements for gender segregation.¹⁵¹ According to UNICEF, only one-third of



Girls head to school in Herat even as Taliban restrict females' access to much of the educational system. (UNICEF Afghanistan photo)

Afghanistan's teachers are female, with much lower proportions in rural areas and in higher levels of education, and, therefore, there are not sufficient numbers for gender-segregated classrooms.¹⁵² Even if the Taliban allowed female students to attend gender-segregated universities, logistical difficulties, including the availability of female teachers, could have the effect of limiting their practical ability to access educational opportunities. USAID stated, "The space for girls and women's education continues to shrink in Afghanistan. The lack of a clear policy or strategy to guide the education sector has led to fragmentation, inconsistency, and incoherent guidance from the local-level de facto authorities based on their own interpretations and understanding of education."¹⁵³

On September 19, secondary schools reopened, but only for male teachers and students. The Taliban issued a statement saying, "All male teachers and students should attend their education."¹⁵⁴ Prior to the collapse of the government, the Taliban had reportedly asserted that girls should not attend school beyond the seventh grade and had banned girls from attending secondary school in areas under their control.¹⁵⁵ Primary schools have already reopened for younger female students in segregated classes.¹⁵⁶

While a Taliban spokesperson said they were making preparations for opening girls' high schools (without details on a timeline), it was unclear if the Taliban-controlled government has sufficient resources or female teachers to be able to operate separate schools for female students.¹⁵⁷ Before the collapse of the Afghan government, the Ministry of Education reported that Afghan schools suffered from a lack of educational resources and a

teacher shortage, with the country's schools requiring at least 50,000 more teachers.¹⁵⁸ Even if female students are allowed to attend segregated higher education institutions, their inability to attend secondary schools would effectively bar them from advancing to the university level.

In September 2021, several protests by Afghan women erupted in Kabul as they demanded the right to be educated, work, and have representation in government. In response, Taliban forces beat the protestors with whips and batons.¹⁵⁹

PUBLIC HEALTH

Several NGOs and international organizations warned that Afghanistan's health-care system was on the verge of collapse, even as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to ravage the country. Médecins Sans Frontières stated that many Afghan healthcare professionals had not received their salaries in months and clinics are running out of medicine, while the numbers of incoming patients have increased. In early September, the WHO said 90% of their clinics in the country could close.¹⁶⁰

On August 24, WHO announced that due to Afghanistan's instability, it had suspended its efforts to bolster the country's capacity to handle the pandemic, including the establishment of new testing laboratories, the installation of new oxygen plants in hospitals, and the expansion of isolation centers and intensive care beds for COVID-19 patients.¹⁶¹ In mid-September, BBC News reported that the reserve stocks of medicine in hospitals in Mazar-e Sharif would last for only another month. Additionally, many health-care workers had not received their salaries since the collapse of the Afghan government, creating uncertainty over how the Taliban will fund the Ministry of Public Health.¹⁶²

In addition to medicine shortages, hospitals report lack of food for patients and power shortages. One obstetrician in Maidan Wardak Province said, "These days I'm forced to help women deliver their babies by the flashlight on our smart phones because our hospital ran out of money to buy fuel for the generator. Carrying out a C-section by flashlight is a nightmare we now have to face regularly."¹⁶³ Without immediate support for maternity health, the UN Population Fund estimated that Afghanistan could be facing 51,000 additional maternal deaths, 4.8 million unwanted pregnancies, and double the number of individuals unable to access family-planning clinics over the next four years.¹⁶⁴

Health-care services for women have been further restricted due to reports of the Taliban requiring them to be seen only by female staff. The Taliban have reportedly beaten male doctors who have treated female patients. Taliban orders that women must be accompanied by a male family member to be able to leave home potentially further restricts women's ability to access health-care facilities.¹⁶⁵



WHO medical supplies arrive in Kabul, October 2, 2021. (WHO Afghanistan photo)

Afghanistan has long had a shortage of trained health-care professionals. In 2018, the country had a nationwide average of only 4.6 medical doctors, nurses, and midwives per 10,000 people, far below the WHO threshold of 23 per 10,000 people, indicating a critical shortage. In rural regions, this shortage was more pronounced. In Kunar Province, for instance, the number of doctors per 10,000 people dropped to only 0.5.¹⁶⁶ Since the collapse of the government, this figure is most likely even lower given the inability to pay health-care workers' salaries, many individuals' reluctance to work given uncertainty over the security conditions in the country, or health-care workers having fled the country.¹⁶⁷

Health-care service providers have struggled with the departure of various aid organizations, many skilled Afghans leaving the country, and uncertainty over how to operate under the Taliban-controlled government. Under these conditions, hundreds of clinics around the country have closed.¹⁶⁸ On September 22, WHO reported that approximately one-quarter of Afghanistan's COVID-19 hospitals had closed in recent weeks.¹⁶⁹ The clinics and hospitals that have remained open report a limitation on their services because of insufficient funds. This includes suspension of any ambulance services due to the inability to purchase fuel.¹⁷⁰ The disruptions at the airports also have delayed the delivery of urgently needed health supplies within the country.¹⁷¹

In early October, the UN Development Programme announced it would be taking over responsibility for World Bank-managed health-care services in Afghanistan, including managing the salaries of at least 25,000 doctors,

nurses, and other health-care workers. This program will be initially financed by a \$15 million donation from the Global Fund. These payments were stopped when the World Bank halted their funding to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.¹⁷²

Even before the Taliban takeover and the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghanistan struggled to contain outbreaks of treatable diseases due to poor access to health-care services stemming from continued insecurity, repeated population displacement, and insufficient resources, limiting the ability for public health improvements to bolster political stability.¹⁷³ Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, are the only two remaining countries in the world in which polio remains endemic.¹⁷⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated capacity and management problems that have hampered Afghanistan's public health system.¹⁷⁵

Before the collapse of the Afghan government, Afghan doctors expressed grave concern over the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic with the rapid spread of the COVID-19 Delta variant, which data suggests is approximately 60% more transmissible than other variants and about twice as likely to land patients in the hospital.¹⁷⁶ The current number of COVID-19 cases in Afghanistan are severely undercounted as testing rates plummeted by 77% in the immediate aftermath of the Afghan government's collapse.¹⁷⁷ Even before this drop, testing levels were already low, with high test-positivity rates suggesting that actual case count was much higher.¹⁷⁸

Afghanistan's health-care system also has struggled with recent increases in insecurity and the resulting civilian casualties. In early September, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported that it had treated approximately 41,000 people wounded by fighting in Afghanistan over the previous two months.¹⁷⁹ The increase in patients at various health-care facilities, as well as crowding within internally displaced persons camps, has made infection-prevention and control measures difficult to implement, with experts warning of the continued risk of COVID-19 transmission.¹⁸⁰

Vaccination Rates Plummet in Wake of Taliban Takeover

In the days after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, COVID-19 vaccination rates fell by 80% due to individuals prioritizing "their safety and security first."¹⁸¹ With the drastic drop in vaccination rates, over two million vaccine doses in Afghanistan are at risk of going to waste as they are set to expire in the coming months.¹⁸² By August 2021, only around 5% of Afghanistan's estimated population had been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, according to WHO.¹⁸³ COVID-19 testing rates also fell by 77% following the Afghan government's collapse.¹⁸⁴

WHO's director general warned that health gains in Afghanistan, such as progress made towards eradicating polio and the nascent COVID-19 vaccination program, could unravel under the current circumstances.¹⁸⁵ In recent years, the Taliban has opposed vaccination programs conducted through house-to-house campaigns (such as polio vaccinations) within areas under their control because of their suspicions that vaccination workers could use such approaches to gather information or pursue other objectives. The Taliban has not objected to vaccination programs such as routine immunizations in healthcare facilities or campaigns that use fixed sites such as mosques or other public venues close to communities.¹⁸⁶ With the limitations of Afghanistan's health-care system under the Taliban-controlled government and the potential absence of any widespread vaccination programs, public-health experts warn that COVID-19 will continue to spread quickly through the Afghan population and "add more pain and misery to a highly volatile and distressing situation."¹⁸⁷

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