

Crisis, COVID-19, and Vulnerable Groups in Afghanistan's Border Areas

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Summary

This briefing paper builds on an empirical study of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the health, economic status, and mobility of wage laborers and women in three border districts in Afghanistan. The study was conducted one year into the pandemic and a few months before the Taliban completed their takeover of the country. By juxtaposing that study's main findings against open-source data and background interviews, this paper seeks to explore the dynamics identified in the study from the vantage point of Afghanistan of today, more than six months into the Taliban's rule.

- 1. This study suggests that the ongoing economic crisis is likely to have impacted wage laborers more compared to the general population, and therefore, they should be prioritized as a vulnerable group for assistance.** The study also suggests that wage laborers can be helped with fewer resources since they have modest economic expectations. Programs such as cash transfers, cash-for-work programs and other initiatives that are meant to generate short-term employment opportunities are likely to have a positive impact on the livelihood of wage laborers and other correlated variables such as domestic violence.
- 2. Border closures have real and immediate impacts on the livelihood of residents of border districts, particularly wage laborers.**

- 3. Making rural health clinics operational, where wage laborers and women of border districts and rural communities are the main users, is likely to have a positive impact on wage laborers' and women's access to healthcare.** Further delays in resolving the bottlenecks in public health sector funding in rural areas are likely to negatively impact vulnerable populations in border districts and other rural communities, especially at a time when the country may be experiencing an Omicron wave.

- 4. Programs aimed at generating economic opportunities and stimulating community participation need to be cognizant of the needs of female economic actors. This includes women who lack male caretakers and whose position of influence in rural communities was dependent on support from donors and the previous government, often at odds with local norms.**

- 5. Domestic violence is a serious issue in the border districts.** The nexus between domestic violence and loss of economic opportunities, as well as the impact of different economic support programs on domestic violence, should be incorporated into program assessments.

Methodology

The empirical study on which this piece builds examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health, economic status, and mobility of Afghan women and wage laborers in border communities of three major Afghan border provinces: Nangarhar, Kandahar, and Herat.

ACSOR prepared the original report of this study for The Asia Foundation, however, the Taliban takeover delayed the release of the findings.

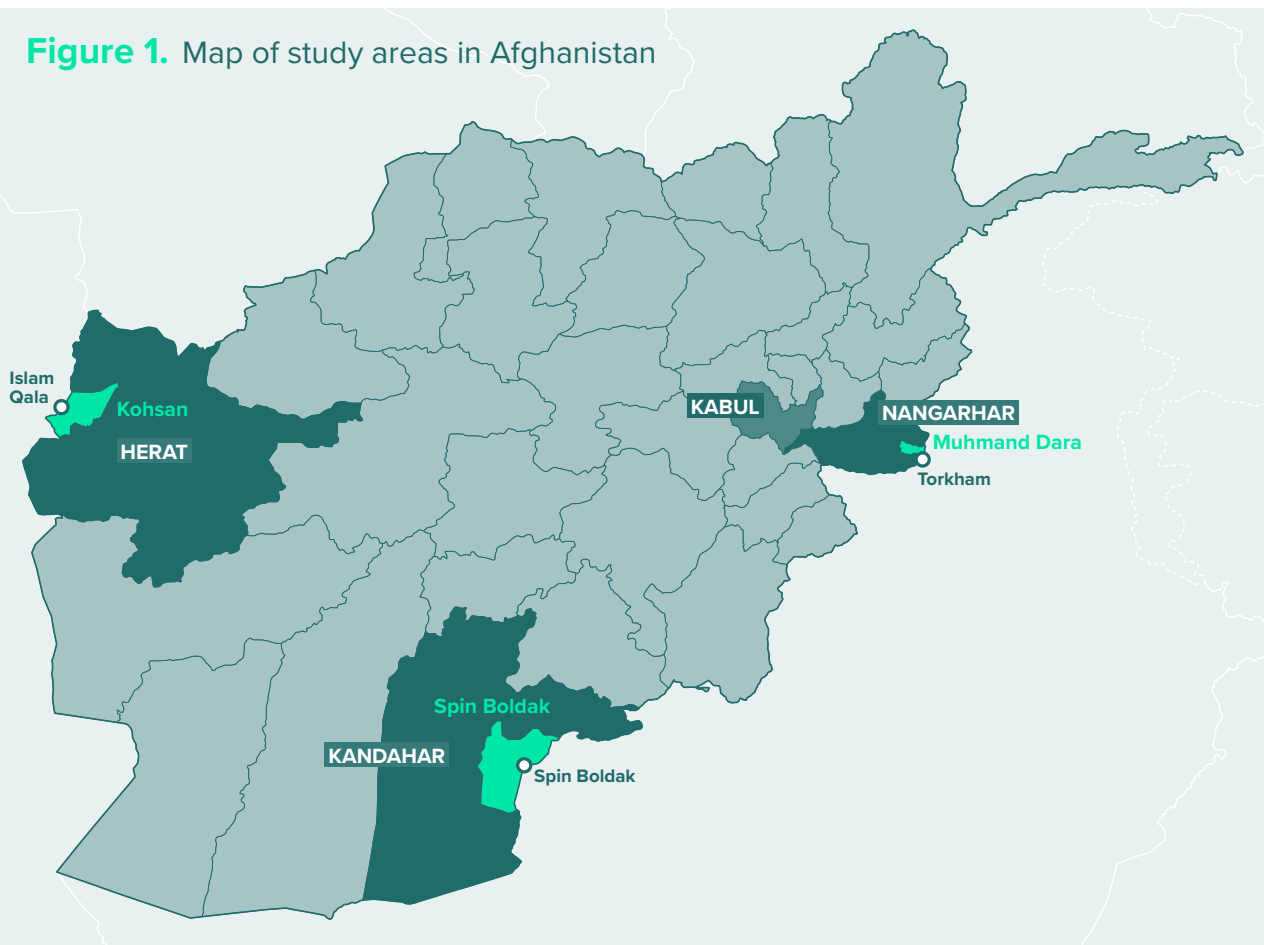
The study's methodology comprises key informant interviews with individuals in provincial centers and border districts who had direct knowledge of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities (KII 1-9) as well as survey interviews with members of the general population and wage laborers in three border districts (N: 936).

The latter two groups of respondents were intercepted for a survey interview through random walks in

the border districts of Muhmand Dara, Nangarhar; Kohsan, Herat; and Spin Boldak, Kandahar. An equal number of 312 individuals were interviewed in each of these districts with the number of interviewees from the general population being twice the number of wage laborers interviewed. This weighted sampling approach had a direct effect on the gender division of survey respondents; of the 936 interviewees, 2/3 were male and 1/3 were female. Due to the gender composition of wage laborers in Afghanistan, only three wage laborers interviewed were women.

Survey interviews were conducted between April 28 and May 5, 2021, more than a year after the initial impacts of COVID-19 appeared in Afghanistan, and roughly three months before the Taliban completed their takeover of the country. The key informant interviews were conducted between July 12 and July 17, 2021, a month before the collapse of the Islamic Republic. Two more key informant interviewees were conducted in February 2022 (KII 10-11).

Figure 1. Map of study areas in Afghanistan



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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to negatively impact the health and livelihood of Afghanistan's population, even as the country grapples with a multitude of humanitarian, human rights, and political crises. While the lack of testing capabilities, particularly for the Omicron variant, makes it difficult to understand the prevalence of COVID-19 in the country, experts believe that the pandemic continues to spread across Afghanistan, battering the country's crumbling health sector¹ (KII 10).

Though war in Afghanistan has ended it has given way to a repressive Taliban regime and universal poverty as the aid-dependent economy collapsed. The United Nations estimates that 22 million Afghans are currently in need of assistance inside the country, with several million Afghans needing assistance outside the country's borders.²

On 26 January 2022, the UN announced the *Transitional Engagement Framework for Afghanistan* [TEF]. The largest single country aid appeal in the UN history³, TEF calls for more than \$8 billion to "provide life-saving assistance; sustain essential services; and preserve social investments and community-level systems essential to meeting basic human needs." Furthermore, TEF

identifies the pandemic as a factor exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the country⁴ and lists COVID-19 treatment as one of its intended activities in the health sector.⁵

As of February 2022, the UN is yet to receive the funding it needs to implement TEF. On 10 February, the UN Secretary-General tweeted that donor countries have contributed only nine percent of what is needed to provide assistance to 22 million Afghans.⁶ To address the gaps in funding and garner international support for humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, the United Kingdom is set to co-host a donor summit in March 2022.⁷

As the international community looks for ways to scale up support in an effort to end the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, it is critical to understand the interplay between the COVID-19 pandemic and socio-economic conditions in the country. Against this background, this piece builds on an empirical study of how the pandemic has impacted the livelihood, health and mobility of wage laborers and women in three border districts. Additionally, this piece examines the survey's key findings following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

Main Findings

The paper's findings are organized by the main lessons they offer to the ongoing humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. The lessons are further grouped by their relevance to wage laborers and women in the three border districts studied. The findings presented here are also instructive of the country's broader socio-economic and humanitarian dynamics.

Impact on wage laborers

Lesson 1: the ongoing economic crisis is likely to have impacted wage laborers more compared to the general population, and therefore, they should be prioritized as a vulnerable group for assistance.

The study found that wage laborers experienced a loss of income at a higher rate compared to the general population during the first year of the pandemic; however, their perceived economic well-being appeared to rebound faster than the general population in 2021. These perceptions of an economic rebound might have been due to the wage laborers' relatively modest economic expectations. Even as they reported a positive economic outlook their income remained low: around 200-300AFN a day when they could find work. Despite their subsistence level earning, wage laborers were no more economically anxious than male respondents from the general population of their district at the time of the survey.

1. "New COVID surge batters Afghanistan's crumbling health care" (9 February 2022),

<https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-kabul-9e983468daac7ef86367b6b9f76a704f>

2. "Afghanistan: UN launches largest single country aid appeal ever" (11 January 2022), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109492>

3. "Afghanistan: UN launches largest single country aid appeal ever" (11 January 2022), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109492>

4. TEF P. 4

5. TEF P. 15

6. "People in Afghanistan face one of the world's most rapidly growing humanitarian crises. We have plans to reach over 22 million people in need, but have only received 9% of the funds required. I urge the international community to support our efforts before it's too late." (tweeted on 10 February 2022), <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1491759606254604290?s=20&t=D1MrVbc0wOjm9wwwZeldZcA>

7. "UK to co-host summit to address Afghanistan humanitarian crisis" (15 February 2022),

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-co-host-summit-to-address-afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis-15-february-2022>

The lack of savings and relatively low salaries of wage laborers, two features common among those living in border and non-border areas, suggest that they are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns. The two main factors that drove the economic downturn during the survey period were the pandemic and insecurity, compared to the ongoing economic crisis in Afghanistan, which is largely driven by a decline in foreign aid. However, wage laborer's low economic expectations and their familiarity with short-term employment allowed them to rebound relatively quickly once the pandemic-related restrictions were eased and the fight over the control of their districts came to an end. Therefore, it is likely that once foreign aid resumes in Afghanistan, wage laborers may be quick to experience an economic rebound. For example, the UNDP cash-for-work program is likely to have a positive and immediate impact on the livelihood of wage laborers.⁸



The economic wellbeing of the wage laborers surveyed was wholly reliant on the border areas Spin Boldak, Torkham and Islam Qala.

Lesson 2: border closures have real and immediate impacts on the livelihood of residents of border districts, particularly wage laborers.

The economic wellbeing of the wage laborers surveyed was wholly reliant on the border crossings at Spin Boldak, Torkham and Islam Qala. Wage laborers lost and regained the opportunity to make a subsistence living based on whether the border was open or closed, and how much economic activity the border generated. This highlights the immediate hardship that border closures generate for wage laborers and residents of these districts.

During the period of the survey, the border had experienced closures to curb the spread of COVID-19 and in response to the Taliban takeover of border crossings. The same dynamic has endured during the first six months of Taliban rule. At major border crossings

vaccination and testing from Iranian and Pakistani authorities have allowed a new normal to emerge. This new normal; however, has been disrupted by the new variants of the COVID-19 virus. For example, Iran closed its border to Afghans seeking to enter Iran for two weeks in response to the Omicron variant⁹—even though the deportation of Afghans has never been halted. Disputes over requirements of entry into Pakistan and the fencing of the Durand Line have also led to temporary closures of both Chaman and Torkham border crossings.¹⁰

The Taliban takeover is likely to have had two additional impacts on the economic opportunities available in border districts. First, economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Afghanistan might have increased the country's trade with Iran as Iranian businesses do not have to concern themselves with the US sanctions — Iran is under US sanctions itself.¹¹ The Pakistani government's recent decision to allow the export of 14 selected items to Afghanistan using Pakistani rupees may have been an attempt to counter this effect.¹²

Second, although legal trade at both Pakistani and Iranian borders may have dropped due to a decrease in aggregate demand (driven by a decline in Afghanistan's purchasing power), there has been an increase in the number of people crossing the border into Iran and Pakistan as Afghans are increasingly trying to leave the country.¹³ This too is likely to have increased certain economic opportunities within the border districts.

Cross-border movement

The survey found that the frequency of crossing the border had not been regular or uniform among border communities in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some wage laborers and border residents may rely economically on their ability to access both sides of the border, others appear to view it as a more theoretical option they might exercise depending on their need. The lack of parallels between location, profession, needs, experience, and barriers demonstrate that the drivers of these differences are likely either hyper-local or very personal, which made them difficult to disaggregate in the survey.

However, the more often a respondent reported having crossed the border, the more likely they were to believe

8. "UN provides cash assistance, jobs to save Afghan families from hunger, economic hardship" (10 December 2021), https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2021/12/10/feature-02

9. "Iran closes Afghan border as Omicron surges" (29 December 2021), <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/468580/Iran-closes-Afghan-border-as-Omicron-surges>

10. "Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan" (4 February 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/320-pakistans-hard-policy-choices-afghanistan>

11. "U.S. Sanctions Push Iran and Afghanistan's Taliban Together" (30 December 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sanctions-push-iran-and-afghanistans-taliban-together-11640860210>

12. "Pakistan allows exports to Afghanistan in rupees" (12 February 2022), <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2343131/pakistan-allows-exports-to-afghanistan-in-rupees>

13. "Over a Million Flee as Afghanistan's Economy Collapses" (3 February 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/world/asia/afghanistan-migration-refugees.html>

that the pandemic had negatively affected their mobility. Wage laborers, particularly those in Kohsan, Herat, and Spin Boldak, Kandahar, were less likely than those in Muhmand Dara to have crossed a border in the last year but comparatively more likely to say that the crossing was easier now and that they would attempt it to access healthcare.

The Taliban takeover of the country is likely to have had an impact on the ease of crossing the border. For example, borders with both Iran (Islam Qala) and Pakistan (Torkham and Chaman), when open, allow entry subject to a negative COVID-19 test, in the case of former, or test and vaccination (vaccination is provided to unvaccinated people at the border) in the case of latter. This may pose an increased cost to wage laborers who have meager means, although it is unlikely to be the most important impediment.

Evidently, the Taliban takeover triggered an exodus of Afghans. From October 2021 through the end of January, an estimate of one million Afghans have gone through major migration routes in southwest Afghanistan bound for Iran.¹⁴ Many more wish to leave via legal and illegal routes. For those who need or want to go through the legal route, the sharp increase in demand has overwhelmed both the limited capacity of the passport department and visa services available within Afghanistan—both of which were already too expensive for wage laborers to obtain even before the Taliban takeover.



The Taliban takeover caused Afghanistan's public healthcare system to nearly collapse, as it was entirely reliant on foreign funds.

Although the Taliban have resumed issuing passport with some delays, technical challenges persist. The Taliban caretaker government may wish to use their passport issuance authority to slow down the exodus of Afghans to mitigate the concomitant reputation cost, brain drain, and capital flight. They may also be concerned about

some Afghans who they wish to keep under their control from fleeing the country.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan led to a stoppage in the issuance of visas from inside the country as well. While Iran and Pakistan have continued to issue visas with minor interruptions, they have been struggling to keep up with the increased demands; other countries have suspended visa services inside the country.

Lesson 3: making rural health clinics operational, where both wage laborers and women of border districts and broader rural communities are the main users, is likely to have a positive impact on wage laborers' and women's access to healthcare.

COVID-19

The study found that health outcomes appeared more closely aligned with location than occupation. Wage laborers did not report seeking notably different care than the general population and the reported trends in the severity of COVID-19 varied more widely between regions than between samples within regions.

The Taliban takeover caused Afghanistan's public healthcare system to nearly collapse, as it was entirely reliant on foreign funds, that due to sanctions, could no longer reach the country. After some delay, the international community restructured its funding mechanism, some exceptions were granted to the sanction regime, and funding to the health sector resumed. However, the problems of actually getting funds into the country and distributing them to health service providers persist.¹⁵

The vaccination process appears to have been least interrupted by the Taliban takeover since it had a different source of funding. However, the COVID-19 treatment and testing centers, which were largely reliant on funds being channeled through the previous Afghan government, experienced the most disruption and are yet to return to full operation.¹⁶

Security

The survey respondents identified security as one of the aspects of life least impacted by COVID-19. Wage laborers and the general population tended to think their security was the same in each location. While the Taliban takeover of the country has led to an overall drop in violent incidents, certain areas such as Spin Boldak experienced violent incidents in the form of revenge killings.¹⁷ In addition, Nangarhar, albeit not necessarily

¹⁴. "Over a Million Flee as Afghanistan's Economy Collapses" (3 February 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/world/asia/afghanistan-migration-refugees.html>
¹⁵. "Afghanistan's Health Care System Is Collapsing Under Stress" (6 February 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/06/world/asia/afghanistans-health-care-system.html>
¹⁶. "Afghanistan's Health Care System Is Collapsing Under Stress" (6 February 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/06/world/asia/afghanistans-health-care-system.html>
¹⁷. "Taliban accused of 'massacring civilians' in Afghan border town" (2 August 2021), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/2/taliban-accused-of-massacring-civilians-in-afghan-border-town>

the Muhamand Dara district, experienced a high level of violent incidents connected to fighting between the Taliban and Islamic State – Khorasan Province.¹⁸

Impact on women

Lesson 4: programs aimed at generating economic opportunities and stimulating community participation need to be cognizant of the needs of female economic actors. This includes women who lack male caretakers and whose positions of influence in rural communities was dependent on the support from donors and the previous government, often at odds with local norms.

The study found that while geography appears to have impacted how men experienced issues like security and mobility, women’s responses were comparatively more uniform across the three locations of this study. This may indicate that the cultural factors defining women’s roles in Afghan society were the most impactful elements of female respondents’ experience, more so than location.

The Taliban represent the most conservative elements of Afghan society. Since in power, they have undertaken both symbolic and legal actions to reinforce the cultural norms that restrict women’s agency, mobility, and economic opportunity. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the restrictive cultural norms identified in the study have only been strengthened over the six months of Taliban rule. A small number of women who challenged those norms—like a few that were also present in the KII sample—lost the support they might have otherwise been able to receive from the previous government and donors.

Despite only four percent of female survey respondents (n=312) earning an income, all women, working or not, had a comparatively more negative outlook on multiple aspects of the economy and were more likely to say that the economy had slowed down (57% vs 49%), that employment opportunities had dwindled (63% vs 58%), and that poverty was increasing (85% vs 73%). This might have stemmed from a lack of direct experience with the local economy and an overreliance on the self-reinforcing narrative spread by economically disadvantaged members of women’s social networks. Alternatively, the female respondents’ more negative outlook might have been a function of their caring roles within families, which burdens them with greater responsibility for ensuring that families have enough food to eat, or that children are not sick.

Since the Taliban takeover, the near-universal decline in economic opportunities is likely to have turned the outlook of both men and women much more negative.

However, it is still expected that women’s economic outlook is comparatively more negative due to one of the two foregoing hypotheses.

KII respondents highlighted that most women in border communities are not allowed to travel without a male chaperone. This restriction may explain why female survey respondents were more likely than male respondents to say the pandemic had a limited impact on their mobility, as their mobility was already low before the pandemic.

However, the KIIs also talked of a group of women who, due to the lack of male supporters, had no choice but to venture out for economic opportunities, often with limited male supervision. The Taliban’s impact on the hardening of cultural norms and their decision to formalize those norms as state policy that could be enforced by state functionaries is likely to have exacerbated the already limited economic opportunities available to these women amidst the ongoing economic crisis.



The Taliban’s rise to power has particularly exacerbated women’s healthcare concerns.

Healthcare

The survey found that female respondents were more likely than male respondents in the general population to be worried about COVID-19 (82% vs. 70%), though both genders reported illnesses at a similar rate. The lack of adequate healthcare facilities in local clinics, where women are more likely to seek care, women’s overall caring responsibilities in families, and the cultural barriers to women seeking care may have contributed to the gendered anxiety around the pandemic’s health impacts.

The Taliban’s rise to power has particularly exacerbated women’s healthcare concerns. First, the initial interruption in fund allocation for the continuation of healthcare delivery and the persistent difficulties in the actual delivery of funds to the healthcare providers is likely to have made it more difficult for women to access healthcare. Moreover, families have always had to supplement public health care with private healthcare, thus in the context of the current economic crisis many healthcare needs, especially of the vulnerable family members, are likely to have gone unmet. Second, the cultural norms that limit women’s mobility, agency, and devalue women’s concerns—creating barriers for

¹⁸. “Is the Taliban’s Campaign Against the Islamic State Working?” (10 February 2022), <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/is-the-talibans-campaign-against-the-islamic-state-working/>

women's access to healthcare—have only worsened since the Taliban's rise to power.

Security

Security is likely to have been the only area where the Taliban's rise to power—marking the end of an intense war over control of the country—might have had a positive impact on women's experiences. In the study, 52 percent of female respondents 'always' or 'often' feared for their own or their family's security, compared to 33 percent of men in the sample. Female respondents' increased fear around security issues was present across almost all types of security incidents (i.e. crime, domestic violence, insurgent attacks, kidnapping) tested in this survey.

The Taliban's rise to power has resulted in an overall drop in violent events connected to war, thus it is likely to have had a positive impact on the overall women's perception of security. However, there are some caveats that bear mentioning. First, the overall decline in violent incidents does not mean that the experience of security has positively changed for all groups. For example, women associated with the ex-government and ex-government officials who are known to be targeted by the Taliban¹⁹ are likely to have experienced increased fear because of the Taliban takeover. Second, increased policing of women's issues by the Taliban might have led Afghan women, who enjoyed a certain degree of freedom under the previous regime, to feel less safe.

Lesson 5: domestic violence is a serious issue in the border districts studied. The nexus between domestic violence and loss of economic opportunities, as well as the impact of different economic support programs on domestic violence, should be incorporated into the program assessments mandated by the UN and donors.

In the survey, only 47 percent of female respondents and 38 percent of male respondents believed that domestic violence has increased during the pandemic, but every KII respondent mentioned the growing prevalence of domestic violence in Afghan border communities. KII respondents believe that the added strain of unemployment and increased poverty was being expressed violently in homes where people might not understand such violence to be an unacceptable violation of a woman's rights.

Given the unprecedented rise in the level of unemployment in the country following the Taliban takeover,²⁰ if the KII assessment is true, one could expect an increased level of domestic violence in border districts. Reports on a potential increase in the number of child brides and other extreme cases such as families selling their children (girls more than boys)²¹ support the assertion that vulnerable members of households are experiencing more violence under the conditions of severe economic distress.

19. "'No Forgiveness for People Like You' Executions and Enforced Disappearances in Afghanistan under the Taliban" (30 November 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/30/no-forgiveness-people-you/executions-and-enforced-disappearances-afghanistan>

20. "ILO estimates underscore Afghanistan employment crisis" (19 January 2022), https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_834527/lang--en/index.htm

21. "Girls increasingly at risk of child marriage in Afghanistan" (12 November 2021), <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/girls-increasingly-risk-child-marriage-afghanistan>; "Afghanistan Facing Famine" (11 November 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/11/afghanistan-facing-famine>

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