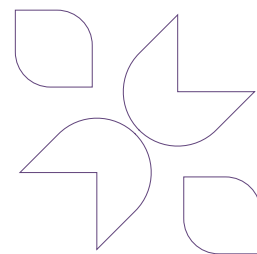


Rights in jeopardy

How the international community should respond to the girls' education crisis in Afghanistan





The international community's response to the Taliban takeover has failed to adequately protect the education rights of Afghanistan's secondary school-aged girls who were effectively barred from the classroom after 15 August 2021.

In the coming months, world leaders must hold the Taliban to their commitment to reopen all girls' secondary schools in late March 2022 and take action to support girls' reenrolment by tackling both preexisting and new barriers preventing them from going to school.

All information is correct as of 17 March 2022.

Background

Access to 12 years of free, safe, quality education is the right of all Afghan girls and fundamental to creating a peaceful, prosperous future for Afghanistan.^{1 2 3}

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates the economic dividend from educating a girl in Afghanistan is more than double that for educating a boy.⁴ Decades of research from around the world show that educating girls increases economic growth, improves public health, boosts workforce participation, reduces conflict and improves environmental sustainability.⁵ International

standards including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Convention on the Rights of the Child all name girls' education as a fundamental human right.⁶ Both the Qu'ran and Hadith — core Islamic texts — stipulate that girls should participate in education.⁷

Over the past two decades, Afghanistan has made promising strides on girls' education. Growing public demand, local advocacy by women's rights activists and civil society groups and increased government investment in education have enabled millions of Afghan girls and women to go to school and realise their ambitions for the future. From 2003 to 2018, girls' secondary enrolment rates across Afghanistan rose from 6.3% to 40%.⁸ Surveys revealed high levels of support for girls' education nationwide, extending to many local communities and rural areas — a sentiment that continues today in Afghanistan (see "Afghans' commitment to girls' education" box).⁹

At the start of 2021, despite the progress of the past two decades, Afghanistan's education system faced many challenges. The quality of education was poor, with 93% of children leaving primary school without basic literacy skills.¹⁰ Girls' secondary schools were often under-resourced, lacking in qualified teachers and learning materials, and had poor physical infrastructure, limiting students' access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities.¹¹ Adolescent girls — especially those from lower-income, rural provinces and those belonging to minority ethnic groups or living with disabilities — faced discriminatory practices like female seclusion and early marriage which impeded school attendance.^{12 13} High dropout rates were particularly acute in certain provinces, like Paktika, and nationally among girls between primary and secondary school.¹⁴ Government

statistics from 2017 indicate that in some provinces, the percentage of students who were girls was as low as 15%.^{15 16} COVID-19, recurrent droughts and sociopolitical insecurity have increased pressure on both the education system and households, exacerbating many of the barriers girls face.^{17 18 19 20}



Afghans' commitment to girls' education

Despite the Taliban's clampdown on girls' and women's rights, popular sentiment in favour of girls' secondary education remains high. In-person and online protesters across the country risk brutal retaliation as they demand schools reopen and women be allowed to return to work.^{21 22 23}

Communities and activists are also effectively pressuring the Taliban at a local level to reopen schools. In Herat, for example, parents and teachers successfully advocated for local authorities to formally reopen girls' secondary schools in some areas.²⁴ Meanwhile, women's rights activists and civil society organisations are secretly providing education to adolescent girls — both online and in underground classrooms — at great personal risk of retribution from the

Taliban.²⁵ The nonprofit LEARN, for example, has enrolled about 100 girls in an underground school where they learn science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) on tablets.²⁶

Against the threat of the de facto authorities, girls in Afghanistan are determined to keep learning. As an anonymous Afghan student shared in Assembly, Malala Fund's digital publication and newsletter:

"Afghan girls don't ever want to go back to how things were. We don't want to receive lashes or remain at home. We want the freedom to dream of becoming psychologists, engineers and journalists — and the opportunity to achieve those dreams."²⁷

The current crisis

Against this backdrop, the actions of the Taliban since they seized power in August 2021 – compounded by the international community’s response – have created an existential crisis for girls’ secondary education in Afghanistan.

The Taliban takeover and girls’ secondary education

On 15 August 2021, Taliban leaders shut secondary schools for girls, making Afghanistan the only country in the world to prohibit girls’ education. This de facto ban nearly doubled the number of girls out of school at the secondary level and has cost Afghan girls more than 200 million days of learning to date.^{28 29 30}

Despite their promise to respect girls’ and women’s rights – including the right to education – the Taliban’s measures have effectively barred Afghan girls and women from participating in economic, social or political life.³¹ Since assuming power, the Taliban have dismantled the Ministry for Women’s Affairs, closed women’s shelters and forbidden female staff members at the Ministry of Education from returning to work.³² Activists and protesters who oppose these measures risk harsh retribution. Women’s rights groups in Afghanistan have reported an increase in gender-based violence and forced marriages since the Taliban took power.^{33 34 35} This wider system of oppression threatens girls’ safety and undermines the value families place on educating their daughters, who now have little hope of a life outside the home.

Since January, Taliban statements have signalled an intent to reopen girls’ secondary schools by late March.³⁶ However, despite the scale of this



challenge, plans are still awaiting approval (at the time of publication) and have been developed without consultation or transparency.³⁷ Tellingly, while the new school year has already begun in Afghanistan's southern provinces, observers say that boys' schools are open while girls' remain shut.³⁸

The international community's response: compounding the crisis

The international community's punitive and swift reaction to the Taliban takeover had catastrophic consequences for civilians in the country. High-income nations froze almost \$9.5 billion of Afghanistan's assets held in overseas banks. Donors cut off almost all aid. Both actions sent the Afghan economy into freefall.³⁹ Overnight, the loss of 75% of government spending wiped out 40% of Afghanistan's GDP,⁴⁰ triggering an economic and liquidity crisis.⁴¹ In September 2021, the UNDP warned that 97% of the population was at risk of falling below the poverty line by mid-2022.⁴²

During this period, Afghan and global civil society called for an urgent response from the international community to the worsening humanitarian crisis and its effect on education in Afghanistan. In September, more than 50 civil society organisations called on world leaders for a funded plan to support education for children remaining in Afghanistan and those fleeing to neighbouring countries.⁴³ In November, Education Cannot Wait (ECW) estimated \$1 billion was critically required for education,⁴⁴ but attempts to rally financing behind an Afghanistan Inter-Agency Action Plan by early December were not successful.⁴⁵ Although small aid amounts for education in emergencies reached Afghanistan through other mechanisms in late 2021, these fell short of the needs of secondary school-aged girls and the education system at large.^{46 47}

The freeze on Afghanistan's foreign reserves and halting of most aid programmes had far-reaching implications for the people of Afghanistan. The ongoing economic crisis will likely lead to a decline in demand for girls' schooling as more families fall below the poverty line.⁴⁸ Rising rates of early marriage and child labour suggest many families' coping and protection mechanisms are eroding.⁴⁹ An estimated 70% of teachers continue to go unpaid,⁵⁰ and while most who are able to work have continued to teach, some have had to turn to other income-generating activities.⁵¹

Too little, too late?

Amid Afghanistan's compounding crises, donor governments took months to act. In December, donors released \$280 million from the \$1.5 billion Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF).⁵² Prior to the Taliban takeover, the ARTF was the main aid mechanism for education funding and other social services. However, no amount of the December sum was specifically earmarked for education. In March 2022, the World Bank board agreed to release another \$1 billion in phases, starting with \$600 million to support urgent needs in education and other sectors with a strong focus on girls and women. At the time of publication, project designs and funding allocations have yet to be decided.⁵³

At an emergency meeting in December, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) agreed to establish a humanitarian trust fund by the end of March 2022, although it is unclear if or how this initiative will support girls' education.⁵⁴

But while some donors — including the EU, Asian Development Bank and Indonesia — have committed education-specific aid (see timeline),





the amounts are small, indicating that shoring up Afghanistan's education system has been a low priority for the donor community.^{55 56 57}

The U.S., the U.N. Security Council and others eventually passed sanctions exemptions to help facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.⁵⁸ However, even with permission to conduct transactions in Afghanistan, financial institutions may continue to avoid doing so out of fear of reprisals for unintentionally processing payments that involve Taliban actors.⁵⁹

Humanitarian aid, though essential, is a short-term solution. Measures to support the reconstruction of Afghanistan's economy must be enacted in

parallel. In addition to affecting humanitarian aid flows, sanctions have blocked the import of essential goods and denied access to Afghanistan's foreign assets, contributing to the liquidity crisis and curtailment of resources for the education system.^{60 61 62} Although the U.S. recently granted sanctions exemptions for commercial and financial transactions (including with "governing institutions"),⁶³ Malala Fund partners expressed deep concern about U.S. President Biden's executive order to redirect Afghanistan's assets and the possibility of more delays in getting aid to Afghan civilians.^{64 65} Afghanistan's central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), has approximately \$9.5 billion in assets held overseas, almost 80% of which is held by U.S. financial institutions.⁶⁶



Inclusion of girls' secondary education in aid frameworks since the Taliban takeover

Towards the end of January 2022, U.N. agencies agreed to the **One-U.N. Transitional Engagement Framework**. It has a number of provisions relating to education — only for 2022.

- **Under Outcome 1:** the previously announced \$4.4 billion **Humanitarian Response Plan** (HRP) which budgets a mere \$162 million to reach the education needs of only 19% of Afghan children in 2022, focusing on primary and community-based education (CBE).⁶⁷ To date, none of the HRP's 2022 education budget has been funded.⁶⁸ The HRP currently represents 95% of all humanitarian funding going to Afghanistan and it is likely that funding the HRP will be the sole focus for a pledging summit on 31 March 2022.^{69 70}
- **Under Outcomes 2 and 3:** efforts to prevent education system collapse and lend learning support for adolescent girls for an estimated \$739 million in 2022. These provisions also include supportive community and social protection initiatives like cash transfers and the creation of safe spaces for women and girls.

The Education Cluster and donors have recently agreed to the **Afghanistan Education Sector Transitional Framework (AESTF)**. The AESTF aims to sustain access to learning, education quality and critical education system components. Key activities that will support girls' secondary education include rehabilitating public school facilities to ensure safe access, providing incentives for attendance and supporting and paying teachers directly. It further recognises that the majority of children

most in need are girls and that interventions must be tailored for their needs. The AESTF estimates a total cost of \$708 million per year for two years. Much of this for 2022 is already aligned with the One-U.N. Transitional Framework budget (including the HRP). It proposes using a variety of existing funding mechanisms and sources, including ECW and the Global Partnership for Education, to navigate the current political and legal landscape.



Four key actions to address the girls' secondary education crisis

The Taliban have committed to reopening classes for all girls by late March 2022. **But the de facto authorities simply issuing an edict or unlocking classroom doors is not enough for girls to return to school and learn safely.**

While ending all violations of the rights of girls and women should remain a precondition for diplomatic recognition of any future government, the international community can take immediate action for Afghan girls' secondary education rights.

To begin alleviating the girls' education and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, the international community must move forward on the four priorities below:

1. Shore up the education system and maintain demand for girls' education.

For the majority of Afghanistan's secondary school-aged girls, state-funded schools are the only point of access to 12 years of education. But the economic crisis is quickly eroding the country's education system.

Starved of funds and reeling from ongoing political developments, schools are now barely able to function even if open. Teachers in most provinces have received at best 1–2 months of pay since August, devastating both their households and the education system at large. Families suffering severe economic hardship are using coping strategies that involve withdrawing girls from school.^{71 72 73}





Humanitarian aid can help alleviate this situation. Some initiatives are already showing promise. The EU, for example, provided €50 million to enable UNICEF and the World Food Programme to pay teachers and provide in-school meals to female students in provinces like Balkh, where some secondary schools remain open.⁷⁴ These initiatives have bolstered the presence of teachers and girls' attendance in Balkh, according to observers.⁷⁵

However, the humanitarian response — favouring expansion of community-based education (CBE) and provision of temporary learning spaces — can only buoy the education system for so long, and does not meet girls' secondary education needs. **To strengthen Afghanistan's education system in the long term and maintain demand for girls' education, the international community must:**

- Prioritise girls' education at the pledging summit in March by making ambitious funding commitments, mobilising resources for the AESTF and supporting the scale-up of programmes that pay secondary teachers and provide direct assistance to adolescent girls.
- Earmark funds for girls' secondary education in the forthcoming OIC humanitarian trust fund for Afghanistan.
- Ensure that girls' secondary education is prioritised within the World Bank's disbursement of the recently released \$1 billion from the ARTF.
- Create a successor to the ARTF that can help facilitate aid flows to support the formal education system and protect girls' right to secondary education.
- Work with civil society organisations and teachers' unions to track shortages regarding girls' secondary enrolment and completion rates, quality of schools, curriculum developments and supply and training of female teachers, including in AESTF implementation.
- Ease Afghanistan's economic crisis by creating innovative financing mechanisms that facilitate the return of the Afghan people's foreign reserves, supporting lower-risk ways to process payments and enabling Afghanistan to resume importing critical goods like food, medical supplies and resources for schools.

2. Ensure girls can attend school safely.

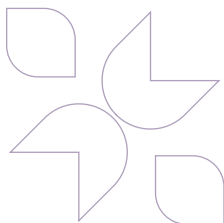
Even before the Taliban takeover, fears for girls' safety deterred families from sending them to secondary school.⁷⁶ The Taliban leadership took advantage of this anxiety in their justification for delaying the reopening of girls' secondary schools in September, saying they needed more time “to make schools safe for girls.”⁷⁷

In practice, however, the Taliban themselves have created a climate of fear for women and girls exercising their right to education. Recent restrictions on who female teachers can teach and what they can wear to work have worsened the shortage of female teachers — a key factor in determining families' comfort level with girls attending school. Activists also point to forced admission of school-aged girls to Madrassahs — Islamic religious schools — by Taliban sympathisers as a deliberate attempt to deter girls from attending government schools.^{78 79} Nationwide protests demanding the restoration of women's and girls' rights have been met with

violence from the de facto authorities. Activists who have spoken out against the Taliban have been abducted, detained and even executed.^{80 81 82}

Alleviating families' concerns about girls' safety in the classroom and on the way to school has to be a priority for both de facto authorities and aid agencies operating on the ground. In service of this goal, the international community must:

- Work with local communities and civil society organisations to support girls' and women's safety and direct resources to Afghan education activists and women's rights groups.
- Ensure that girls' safety in and on the way to school — as well the safety of Afghan education activists — is closely monitored through U.N. Human Rights mechanisms. This oversight requires the approval of a Human Rights Service under the Office of the Special Representative within the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) mandate renewal⁸³ and the appointment of the new Special Rapporteur.
- Prioritise, support and monitor girls' safety in and around secondary schools within the implementation of the One-U.N. Transitional Engagement Framework and AESTF. This can be accomplished by rehabilitating girls' secondary schools — particularly WASH facilities and boundary walls, committing to building more girls' secondary schools and ensuring an adequate supply of female teachers.



3. Prevent rollbacks on education quality.

Over the last 20 years, Afghanistan, with the help of donors, has invested substantially in improving the quality of education, ensuring students can access a wide-ranging curriculum. But the Taliban authorities are likely to undo this progress, mandating curricular changes that will reduce the quality of education girls receive. Educators and leaders of CBE programmes have already reported ad hoc interventions from the de facto authorities to bar the teaching of subjects like life skills, civic education, sports and art, ordering schools to replace them with additional religious content.⁸⁴ Activists also point to the appointment of clerics to senior positions within the Ministry of Education and replacement of women teachers in government schools with Taliban sympathisers as an attempt to informally influence teaching and learning.⁸⁵ Attitudes towards women's literacy are mixed: One civil society group reported that





the Taliban ordered them to cancel women's literacy programmes. But in other contexts, literacy programmes have continued without interference.⁸⁶

The exclusion of women civil servants from workplaces and lack of engagement with teachers' unions and civil society representatives — in both plans to reopen schools and in developing terms of reference for a revised curriculum — further undermine confidence that any changes will advance quality education for girls.^{87 88 89} To prevent this regression, the international community must:

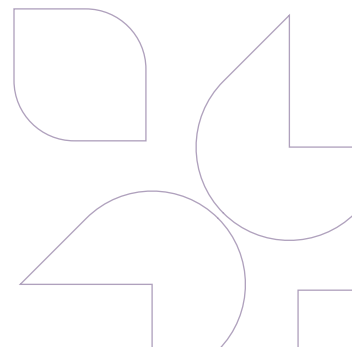
- Hold the Taliban accountable for ensuring school curriculums are inclusive and evidence-based, in compliance with international human rights law. This should be a key measure of their commitment to girls' education and a precondition for diplomatic recognition.
- Ensure that forthcoming UNAMA and U.N. Special Rapporteur mandates will closely monitor education quality. This should include particular focus on the participation of women, girls and teachers' unions in the development, implementation and monitoring of school reopenings and curriculum revisions. Women's right to work within the Ministry of Education should also be included.
- Through the AESTF, provide support for the implementation of the existing curriculum, teacher training and learning catch-up opportunities.

4. Ensure women's and girls' full participation in negotiating an inclusive political settlement.

The above actions are critical to effectively addressing the girls' secondary education crisis in Afghanistan. But realising the rights of Afghan girls and women is dependent on a long-term solution to the country's political situation, culminating in the formation of a representative, inclusive government.^{90 91} Without such a solution, girls' education and future prospects remain in serious jeopardy due to the renewed risk of civil war.

The U.N. continues to advocate for an “inclusive administration that reflects the diversity of the Afghan people.”⁹² The de facto cabinet — in which no women hold government rank or senior positions — does not meet this standard.⁹³ The international community can address this through the following actions:

- Establish a process to build political structures in Afghanistan that are just, democratic and sustainable, centring women's and girls' participation and demands.
- Mandate the U.N. to negotiate with the Taliban to form an inclusive administration that reflects the diversity of the Afghan people.
- Make women's and girls' rights — especially to 12 years of free, safe, quality secondary education — a non-negotiable condition for recognition of any new government in Afghanistan.





Conclusion

The Taliban's rise to power and subsequent closure of secondary schools was a devastating blow to Afghanistan's girls.

It is now the responsibility of world leaders, NGOs, civil society organisations and external monitoring groups to hold Taliban leadership accountable to their word to reopen schools across Afghanistan and realise girls' rights to 12 years of free, safe, quality education. By acting on the recommendations in this paper, the international community can begin to ease the compounded crises that have cost so many Afghans their lives and well-being and left a generation of girls reeling, their futures suddenly uncertain.





Timeline



INTERNATIONAL EVENTS



DOMESTIC EVENTS

15 August 2021

- ▲ Taliban take power and immediately order suspension of all schooling.⁹⁴

18 August 2021

- U.S. freezes approximately \$7.5 billion in Afghan central bank reserves held by the Federal Reserve and other U.S. banks.

23 August 2021

- ▲ Taliban Education Commission announces primary school reopening on 28 August and an announcement on the reopening of secondary schools at a later date.



31 August 2021

- ▲ U.S. relinquishes control of airport and final troops leave Afghanistan.

28 August 2021

- ▲ Primary schools reopen for girls and boys.

24 August 2021

- World Bank pauses aid disbursement from the ARTF.

- ▲ Taliban tell working women to stay at home "until proper systems are in place to ensure their safety."⁹⁵



Early September 2021

- ▲ Taliban leadership announces a new 53-member cabinet. There are no female members.

13 September 2021

- Donors pledge \$1.2 billion, more than doubling the U.N.'s flash appeal for Afghanistan. Almost \$12 million was specifically committed for education in emergencies by the EU, Italy and the U.S.⁹⁶

17 September 2021

- ▲ Taliban Education Ministry issues instructions to reopen secondary schools for boys only and dismantle the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Early October 2021

- ▲ Reports that some secondary schools are open for girls in Balkh, Jawzjan, Kunduz, Samangan and Uruzgan provinces.⁹⁷

23 September 2021

- The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued two general licences (14 and 15) to provide sanctions exemptions for humanitarian transactions and a further licence (16) for personal remittances.

20 September 2021

- ▲ The Taliban institute a de facto ban for working women (except in primary education and health).

- ▲ Male staff members at the Ministry of Education allowed to return to work.

7 October 2021

- UNHRC adopts resolution for a Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan.

- ▲ The Taliban Education Minister announces plans to create a "safe and secure environment" for girls that complies with the rules of Islam, to be announced "soon."

12 October 2021

- G20 Extraordinary Leaders' Meeting on Afghanistan - Chair's Summary reaffirms importance of humanitarian aid and education as "an essential element of a resilient, inclusive and peaceful society."





INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

DOMESTIC EVENTS

**15 November 2021**

- ▲ Ministry of Education announces that girls in grades seven–12 will not be taking exams but rather “promoted” to the next grade or automatically graduate.

24 November 2021

- ▲ Reports that some secondary schools in Herat and Zabul are open to girls.⁹⁸

December 2021

- ▲ Additional reports that some secondary schools are open in Faryab, Ghazni and Kunduz provinces.

22 December 2021

- U.N. Security Council adopts Resolution 2615, a humanitarian exemption to Taliban-related sanctions resolutions (2255 and 1988). U.S. issues three General Licences (17, 18, 19) to support UNSC Resolutions.

17 December 2021

- OIC holds an emergency session on Afghanistan and announces commitment to establish a humanitarian fund.

10 December 2021

- Donors to the ARTF agree to release \$280 million in frozen funds to support famine relief and health assistance in Afghanistan.

**26 December 2022**

- ▲ Taliban bans women from travelling more than 45 miles without a mahram (male relative).

January 2022

- ▲ Boys resume school in Southern provinces, but girls' schools remain closed.

11 January 2022

- U.N. (OCHA) launches the 2022 HRP requesting \$4.44 billion. U.S. Agency for International Development pledges \$308 million.

13 January 2022

- Indonesia announces \$2.85 million to support education and women's empowerment.

**18 January 2022**

- EU pledges €50 million to provide around 194,000 public teachers nationwide with emergency cash support and WFP school programmes (reaching secondary girls).

17 January 2022

- OHCHR issues statement on systematic gender-based discrimination and violence against women and girls, including the continued denial of access to secondary and tertiary education.⁹⁹

15 January 2022

- ▲ Taliban announce their intention to reopen classrooms for all girls by late March.

20 January 2022

- ▲ Reports of Taliban raids of the homes of women's rights activists.¹⁰⁰

22 January 2022

- U.N. launches its One-U.N. Transitional Engagement Framework.

25 January 2022

- Asian Development Bank announces \$405 million for food security and health and education services.

28 January 2022

- U.K. adopts humanitarian exception to the U.K.'s Afghanistan sanctions regime.



INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

DOMESTIC EVENTS

29 January 2022

- ▲ Public universities in Farah, Helmand, Kandahar, Laghman, Nangarhar and Nimroz provinces reopen — including for female students.

5 February 2022

- EU adopts Council Regulation 2022/148, a humanitarian exemption amendment to Afghanistan sanctions regime.

11 February 2022

- President Biden issues an executive order aiming to redirect \$7 billion of Afghanistan's frozen assets.

**1 March 2022**

- World Bank Board approves release of \$1 billion from ARTF in phases prioritising education, health, agriculture, community livelihoods and girls and women.

28 February 2022

- ▲ Taliban begin extensive house searches, sparking fear and diplomatic criticism.¹⁰¹

25 February 2022

- U.S. issues General Licence 20, expanding sanction exemptions to include commercial and financial transactions with Afghan government institutions.

**2 March 2022**

- ▲ Reports that the Ministry of Education has submitted a plan for the reopening of schools to Taliban leadership for approval.¹⁰²

3 March 2022

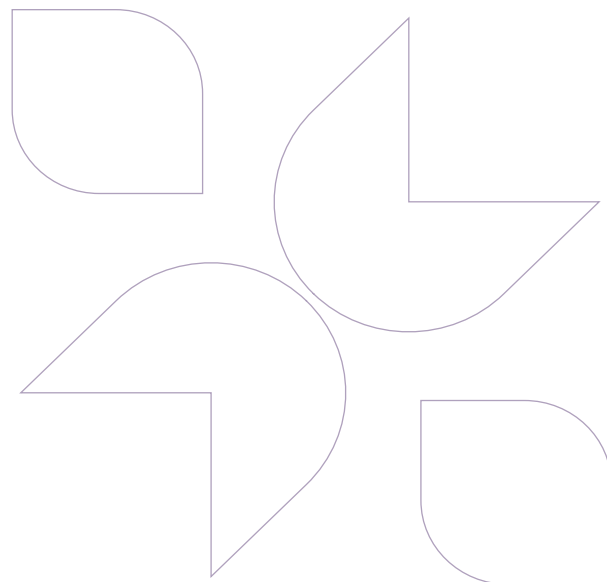
- Nigeria donates \$1 million to the OIC Humanitarian Trust Fund.

Late March 2022

- ▲ Taliban's deadline for schools to reopen.

31 March 2022

- U.N., U.K., Germany and others to co-host an HRP pledging summit.





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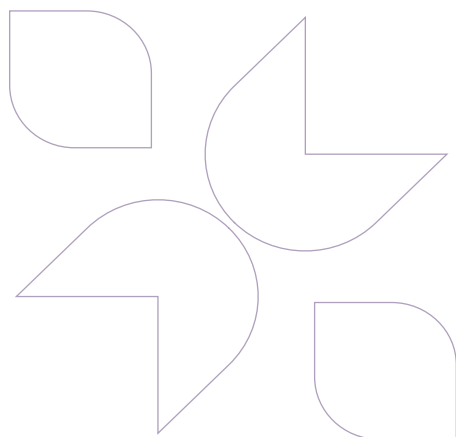
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