Mr. Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor and privilege to speak on behalf of my delegation, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in this Mid-Term Review of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development.

Mr. Chairperson, I congratulate you on being elected as chair and would like to express my gratitude and appreciation from the member states for considering Afghanistan as the voice chair for this important event. I wish to express our gratitude to ESCAP and UNFPA for their support to this regional review process which we consider as a critical opportunity to advance Afghanistan’s efforts to further improve the lives of our people, with equity and dignity; and ensure sustained economic growth and sustainable development that will be further cause for sustainable peace in the country and the region.

We expect that the overview report and the outcomes of this midterm review is used as the regional input for the full review and appraisal of ICPD during the 52nd session of the UN Commission on Population and Development being held in 2019.

Mr. Chairperson,

My country reaffirms in this regard the importance of the Asia Pacific Ministerial Declaration of 2013 and the ICPD Programme of Action for the achievement of national development priorities.

Mr Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to share with you, my country’s progress towards the implementation of the proposed priority actions of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development.

Health

Recent data from Afghanistan Health Survey shows quite impressive improvement on our health care indicators. The coverage of basic health package is expanded from 60% of the population in 2013 to over 85% in 2015. Afghanistan developed and implements the RMNCAH Strategy (2017-2021) in line with the ICPD PoA. Important indicators for maternal and child health include ante-natal examination by a skilled health-care provider and skilled birth attendance.
According to Afghanistan Living Condition Survey (ALCS 2016-17), the percentage of pregnant women who had at least one ante-natal check-up increased from 23 percent in 2005 to 70 percent now.

**Distinguished Delegates,** we would like to reiterate the benefits of investing on maternal and newborn health through increasing the ‘proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel. We reaffirm the need to ensure that ‘all women and men and young people have information about and access to the widest possible range of safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning services.

**Education**

**Mr. Chairperson,** there has been a significant progress for many education indicators in the first decade since 2002. However, it is still among the poorest in the world. The national youth (aged 15 to 24) participation rate in education and training is as low as 28 percent. The attendance rate in primary education was increased from 37 percent in 2005 to 57 percent in 2011-12, and it is now 56.1 percent according to Afghanistan Living Condition Survey (ALCS 2016-17). The secondary education (increasing from 16 percent in 2005 to 37 percent in 2013-14 and now 36 percent) and last in tertiary education (5 percent in 2011-12, 9 percent in 2013-14 and 10 percent in 2016-17).

We would like to highlight the importance of improving access to education, skills development and employment to achieve increased productivity and shared prosperity, and we recognize that girls and boys, young women and young men are key agents of change in creating a better future and when empowered they have great potential to advocate on behalf of themselves and their communities.

**Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment**

Efforts have been made to strengthen women’s rights and gender equality in my country. Elimination of Violence Against Women law was adopted, Gender equality and women’s empowerment were made a key dimension in Afghanistan’s National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan is being implemented across the sectors in line with resolution 1325, Women economics empowerment National Priority Programme developed, Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry established we had recently witnessed a parliamentary election in the country and we have an active Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA).

**Mr. Chairperson,** we would like to call, however, for further investment in gender equality and the empowerment of all women by ensuring ‘women’s full and effective participation and equal rights in all fields and in leadership at all levels of decision-making, by ensuring decent work and equal pay for equal work, or work of equal value, for all women and by preventing and eliminating all forms of discrimination, violence and harassment against women and girls in private and public spaces.

**Youth**

Afghanistan has one of the youngest population in the region. This youthful population can provide an economic benefit only when sufficient investment is made in their empowerment, education and employment. The country already has potential for demographic dividend and its economic advantages in its sights, if comprehensive policies are fully implemented. In order to open the window
of opportunity for the dividend, we must with support from our international partners focus on the policies that improve women’s well-being and in turn promote desirable demographic changes. Investing in voluntary family planning and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) would change the demographic structure and this, in turn, can improve health, education and employment outcomes and accelerate economic growth.

The migration patterns in Afghanistan are particularly complex. Regular and traditional migration flows feature both internal and cross-border movements, permanent, and seasonal migration. The patterns of migrations are highly gender-specific and very different for those of short and long distances. These flows are mixed with the effects of one of the world’s largest and most protracted refugee and displacement situations. Recent data shows, a largest volume of returnees from exile combined with large-scale internal displacement and newly emerging destinations for labour migrants and asylum seekers.

The number of Afghans involved in international migration – and more particularly the number of refugees and returnees – is so large that it is a critical factor to the population equation in national estimates.

**Poverty Eradication and Employment,**

**Mr. Chairperson,** unfortunately, there has been a sharp deterioration in welfare of the population in my country. The proportion of population living below the national poverty line (SDG indicator 1.2.1) increased from 36 percent in 2013-14 to 54.5 percent in 2016-17.

Almost one quarter (24 percent) of our labor force is unemployed, and this number does not include the many millions of home workers and those who have abandoned searching for employment. Our challenges include but are not limited to: slow economic growth and a highly skewed trade imbalance. Latest figures show that 4 out of 5 jobs that were created before the political and security transition in 2014 were lost in 2018. Over the last 24 months, around 1.5 million Afghans refugees returned to the country, around 1.4 million people internally displaced and unpredicted droughts, adding more pressure to the job market and economic growth. This current state of income and wealth inequality in my country is a major risk to future economic growth.

We would like to reaffirm Government’s full commitment with support from International community to further invest in full and productive employment and decent work for all, combined with social integration and protection mechanisms as a key component of poverty eradication efforts.

**Data and Statistics**

**Distinguished Delegates,** it is still a challenge in my country to make a precise description of the Population Dynamics. Currently, the basis for population estimates in my country is the 1979 population census and the household listing carried out in 2003-2005 and updated in 2010. The data from these sources records an annual population growth rate of 2.14 percent, placing the country as having the highest population growth rate among countries in South-Central Asia. This high population growth is mainly due to the high fertility rate. The Total fertility rate (TFR) in my country is 5.3 children per woman. This high fertility resulted into a young population where about half of the population is below 15 years of age. In a country such as Afghanistan, with untapped natural resources and the continuing insecurity, a high population growth poses serious challenges to economic growth and national development.
Ladies and Gentlemen, The Government, under the leadership of the Ministry of Economy, with the technical support from UNFPA, has recently developed the first ever National Population Policy of the country with the aim to improve the living standards of the people and sustainable development via attaining a sustainable population growth by reducing fertility, preventing ill-health and deaths of women and girls especially as relates to their reproductive lives.

Mr. Chairperson, we call for enhanced actions to support the role and capacity of national, subnational and local governments in data collection, mapping, analysis and dissemination and in promoting evidence-based governance, building on a shared knowledge base using both internationally comparable as well as locally generated data, including through censuses, household surveys, population registers, civil registration, community based monitoring processes and other relevant sources, disaggregated by income, sex, age, ethnicity, migration status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national, subnational and local contexts.

Mr. Chairperson, security is the bedrock for socio-economic development, for ICPD PoA, and Sustainable Development Goals. In my country the security situation has made it difficult to sustain the hard gained progress.

Towards achieving goals of ICPD beyond 2014 and the SDGs, both country ownership and international partnerships are essential. These are more important in the case of my country as it is on the eve of transformation decade (2015-2024).

Mr. Chairperson, we reaffirm the importance of continued support by ESCAP, UNFPA and other relevant institutions in the fulfilment, follow-up and review of the Ministerial Declaration, the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda. We would like to suggest that ESCAP and UNFPA work on a monitoring framework in-line with the SDG targets and indicators, as well as other indicators to cover all aspects of ICPD beyond 2014, and issues related to data availability.

I thank you for your attention!