



International Relations and Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan -corrected

Wednesday 16 March 2022

10.35 am

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Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Lord Anderson of Swansea; Baroness Blackstone; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Fall; Lord Stirrup; Baroness Sugg; Lord Teverson; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 11

Witnesses

I: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for South Asia, North Africa, United Nations and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); Nigel Casey, Director, Afghanistan and Pakistan, FCDO; Andy McCoubrey, Development Director for Afghanistan, FCDO.

Examination of witnesses

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Nigel Casey and Andy McCoubrey.

Q1 The Chair: Good morning. I welcome to this meeting of the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee Lord Ahmad. He is accompanied by his senior officials, Nigel Casey—I understand, Mr Casey, that last year you were appointed as the Prime Minister’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan—and Andy McCoubrey. Thank you for joining us today. This is a follow-up session for us, not only as a consequence of our report on Afghanistan published last year but because of the debate held earlier this year in the House of Lords.

In opening this session, as always, I remind the Minister, the officials and our committee members that the session is on the record, it is transcribed and it is broadcast. I also remind my colleagues that in asking questions, if they have any relevant interest to declare they should do so at that point.

I anticipate that throughout today as my colleagues ask their initial question, they may wish to follow that up with a supplementary related to it. At the end of the formal round of questions, if we have time left, which I hope we do, I will turn to my colleagues to ask broader questions, particularly focusing perhaps on colleagues who have not yet had the opportunity to ask the Minister a question.

As always, the first question comes from me, and it is very general in scope. What is the Government’s assessment of the current humanitarian situation in Afghanistan? Minister.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Thank you very much for inviting me back and I welcome this opportunity. It would be remiss of me not to start off with two major thank yous, one to the committee as a whole for the very detailed report that was done after my last formal appearance here. It would be fair to say that as I read through many of the recommendations, we all had hoped that those recommendations would not come to be factual, but much of what we discussed has come to bear on the situation in Afghanistan.

I also wish to extend my thanks to Members of your Lordships’ House and of this committee who, during the Afghanistan crisis itself—and particularly Operation Pitting, which was a particularly intense period last August—extended incredible support to me as the Minister and to officials, but most importantly, also to people they were seeking to assist from different vulnerable communities, and individuals, many of whom have worked with us over many years. I extend my thanks in that respect as well.

Turning to your question, undoubtedly the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains a key priority, not just for us but for the community of the world as a whole—24.4 million people are in humanitarian need and that is more than half the population; the population is around 36 million. It demonstrates how dire the situation is. The humanitarian

response to the crisis has been the largest on record and of course there is the call for \$4.4 billion of support. Many colleagues will know that the United Kingdom is acting as one of the co-hosts of the pledging conference at the end of this month on that basis of raising funds for humanitarian support.

I am pleased also to confirm that as well as working with OCHA directly, as the UN lead agency, we will be working with other key partners, including Germany and Qatar. I will come on to that later in our discussions, I am sure, about the importance of Qatar's role both on this particular aspect, but also on the continuing situation in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's food crisis and food security crisis mean that more than one in two children under five are facing acute malnutrition and will be at risk of death if immediate action is not taken. Frankly and starkly put, 95% of the population in Afghanistan is not getting enough food. People are increasingly desperate, exhausted and taking on all the other mechanisms just to try to survive.

Yesterday a report was released by the humanitarian co-ordinator for the UN, Dr Ramiz Alakbarov. There were various elements he discussed, but there is one quote that I want to share with the committee. He says in this report, "We must remain mindful that while the massive humanitarian response mounted since August 2021 has prevented our worst fears being realised over the winter, food insecurity and malnutrition remain at historic highs and require an immediate, sustained, and large-scale humanitarian response to prevent the loss of more lives and livelihoods. The fate of an entire generation of Afghans is at stake".

While assistance is getting through, we remain very much focused on continuing to support the effort in Afghanistan. I have already alluded to the pledging conference that we will be co-hosting, but equally what I can share is there is a lot of work being done directly with agencies both through the UN, but also agencies that have been identified on the ground, but we have not named. I am sure members will understand that that is for their own protection and security. Nevertheless, aid is getting through, and we are getting good responses from other agencies such as UNICEF about their ability to operate on the ground.

In terms of direct engagement, I am in regular contact with all the key lead heads of all the agencies, including the likes of Filippo Grandi and David Beasley, who I spoke to before the winter to ensure that we could play our part in averting the winter crisis. While that crisis may have been averted, it is not a time for congratulations. It is a time for continued focus on the situation on the ground and we are very much focused on that. I am delighted in this respect that officials across the FCDO remain very much focused on this as a priority.

The Chair: Minister, thank you. In coming to my supplementary, I say before that we all appreciate the wide range of work that the FCDO has to be engaged in, not only with Afghanistan, but remaining issues on

humanitarian aid throughout the world and its focus on Ukraine at the moment.

Against that very bleak background and the crisis mode in which the FCDO finds itself having to operate, it was indeed good news this morning, a moment or two ago, to hear that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has been freed. As a personal comment, I wish to pay tribute to her family, her husband in particular for his persistence and bravery, but to Nazanin herself for her courage in enduring what has been an appalling oppression on her, when all she wanted to do was to return to her family. I will put on the record my thanks to the FCDO for the work that it has done throughout in the diplomatic world on these matters.

Minister, my supplementary. You mentioned that you are given indications by the INGOs that the aid is getting through. How confident are you that that aid is reaching those who are in desperate need, which is often the women, particularly in areas where climate change has made food a difficult matter in any event, and that it is not being siphoned off to go to the Taliban? We have seen what has happened in Yemen, where a percentage has been siphoned off. How confident can we be that those who need this are receiving the aid for which the FCDO and the Government are responsible?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: It is a very pertinent and important question and I think that has been a guiding principle in our support and in our discussions with the UN agencies. It is a point that we have emphasised, along with other key international partners, to the agencies on the ground, that this is an essential prerequisite to continued support. I would distinguish in the sense that in terms of humanitarian aid and support and the issues of conditionality that are sometimes imposed by others, I am proud to say that it is not something that we would impose, with the exception of money not going direct to the Taliban. I am sure we will come on to that, but there are specific conditions we are setting for certain asks that the Taliban has made of us through officials, but at the same time we have been very determined to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those in need, particularly the most vulnerable, and women and girls are priorities in that respect.

What we rely on, of course, is the specific reports back from the agencies on the ground. We are also working directly with Afghans who are now here in the United Kingdom. I have convened several one-to-one meetings but also round tables in this respect. I am also grateful to Baroness Hodgson, who has acted as a conduit with women Afghan leaders. The message there is clear: for them to inform us of the messages they are getting from key agencies still working on the ground to ensure that they are getting the kind of support they need. Linked to that is looking ahead as well. There will be NGOs, particularly those working in the interests of women and girls, which need support. It has been a direct ask from me to Afghan leaders who are now here in the UK and others we are meeting internationally to tell us specifically who they

are so that we can direct the UN agencies appropriately and as a follow-up to ensure that they receive the support.

As I said earlier, we may not advertise the fact in terms of the specifics of who they are, but many will still rely on a small amount of money to ensure that they can continue their important work. We will remain focused on that.

Nigel Casey: One silver lining from what is otherwise a terrible situation in Afghanistan is that access for humanitarian workers has improved as a result of the decrease in violent conflict. That is another way of saying that the Taliban takeover has meant that there is a degree of security control, particularly in those provinces that had previously been contested prior to last August, which did not exist before. The NGOs and the internationals are telling us that they now have access to all parts of Afghanistan in a way that they did not before. The humanitarian workers are able to get through.

The principles of humanitarian access that Martin Griffiths from OCHA negotiated with the Taliban when he visited Kabul last September have by and large been respected, with some local issues that we have raised whenever they have come up. I have a meeting every two weeks with a group of about 50 British and international NGOs to keep connected with what is going on on the ground. They report the same thing to me: that access has improved, they are able to do their work and by and large they are able to do it with a degree of safety that was not always the case before. In that narrow sense in terms of improvement, that has made a difference. Andy talks to the UN and other donors all the time. Do you want to add to that?

Andy McCoubrey: In addition to the issue on access and the principles that are so important, as Nigel said, we meet very regularly with implementing partners; for example, international NGOs, the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent. There are weekly meetings with the Humanitarian Country Team, which we participate in. We are also meeting at a senior level, on a bilateral level, with senior UN leaders to ask the very questions that you are raising with us today.

We are also meeting regularly with individual agencies. For example, my team have just been in Doha for a day and a half meeting with the World Food Programme to run through a very extensive list of questions of how aid is being delivered, the risks that are being managed and the results that are being achieved. As you would expect with taxpayers' money, we are taking the issues you raise very seriously.

The Chair: Thank you very much. A very helpful start to our questions. I will turn next to Lord Anderson.

Q2 **Lord Anderson of Swansea:** Minister, we admire your personal commitment in this dire situation. A two-part question: first, in the current financial year, what can you tell us about the distribution of aid? Secondly, for the next financial year, what are the priorities and the sums

involved?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I can confirm what we announced that we are continuing to focus on. We doubled our support for Afghanistan in the current financial year to £286 million. I keep a tab on this to make sure that this is not just one grand announcement, and that the specifics of what is being allocated, but more importantly disbursed, is something that all of us are updated on, both senior officials and Ministers. I confirm that as of today 93% of our financial allocation has been disbursed, which is about £265 million of the £286 disbursed announced, and we are on track to ensure that the full amount is dispersed before the end of March.

The breakdown might be helpful: £259 million will be in Afghanistan and £17 million in the neighbouring region, those key countries which take the bulk of people leaving Afghanistan. The majority of our funding has been channelled to the World Food Programme—as I said, we have been talking at all levels with it, including with David Beasley—the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the ICRC.

The Chair mentioned other crises. I was in Geneva about 10 days ago and met Peter Maurer. While we focused on Ukraine, we also covered the continuing situation in Afghanistan in quite a lot of detail. The DEC continues its work and I know, looking towards Lord Campbell, this is of particular interest: we are working and focused on the issue of supporting the United Nations Mine Action Service as well.

On the specifics of how many people this would have helped, we assessed that about 6.1 million people would have benefited from this support. At the same time, to add to the point made earlier about the way Afghanistan currently is, we have not held back to say that we need to deal with Afghanistan as a whole. There are certain areas, as Nigel mentioned, where security is much better, somewhat ironically. Where the Taliban have been in control for longer the agencies are reporting back that they are able to work much more quickly and effectively because there is no conflict. Nevertheless, there are some regions which are more forward-leaning and progressing much more quickly than other parts and we ensure that through our work on the ground we channel support appropriately. That is resonating even in political circles in Afghanistan.

Just a quick point—we will come on to politics—that is something we are watching very carefully. In Afghanistan the Taliban itself remains quite a fragmented organisation, but there are some who perhaps see the direct benefit and wish to seek further support in terms of what we are doing.

In terms of next year and beyond, we are currently going through our three-year spending review. Of course, to be very up front with the committee, the situation in Ukraine has meant that there has been additional focus and announcements have been made in that respect. What I can share with the committee is that the Foreign Secretary, on her appointment, made very clear two issues that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office would remain focused on, and I

know they are key issues of concern for the committee. One is the prioritisation of humanitarian support, and the other is the prioritisation of the budgets and support for women and girls.

Lord Anderson of Swansea: You mentioned that we are co-hosting the UN Pledging Conference at the end of this month. What can you tell us about the conference thus far? Are you satisfied with the attendance and any precommitments of funds?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: In terms of our own diplomatic missions, several weeks ago everyone was directly instructed to ensure that in country that they are approaching for pledges and support for both attendance at the conference as well as the objective of support in terms of funds. There are ongoing discussions we have had. Some have given indicative pledges, but I am sure they are waiting for the conference to announce these.

It is also important that this is not just about the UN. In the case of OCHA and the United Kingdom, it is important that the other partners in this case have also announced their support, including Qatar, and this is a significant point to note. One of the areas—and I am very seized by this—in our engagement on pledging and support has been the important role of the Islamic world and the broader Muslim world in support of the situation in Afghanistan, both politically but also stepping up to the mark in terms of humanitarian support.

Qatar has been a very constructive and strong partner for us on various areas and humanitarian support and access in getting humanitarian support has been a vital role that Qatar, along with other partners, has played. The broad nature of others which are co-hosting demonstrates that there will be, we hope, strong support not only for the attendance but in terms of pledges. I hope, of course, to share with the committee once we have had the conference what our approach will be thereafter.

Nigel Casey: To be clear, Lord Anderson, this is a bit different from the three conferences that we have hosted in London on Afghanistan in previous years. This is an online event, so it is entirely virtual, and the focus is on making sure that we have attendance virtually at senior level by Governments participating and substantial pledges as well. We will be looking at not just the immediate pledges for the immediate humanitarian response led by the UN but the totality of resources that we can use this event to mobilise.

That includes the money that we are trying to get out of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund at the World Bank, the money that we have successfully got out of the Asian Development Bank trust fund for Afghanistan, the money that we hope the OIC will contribute and so on. We are trying to use this event to generate maximum support for Afghanistan across the board.

Q3 **Baroness Fall:** Thank you, Minister, for your time and for all you did, especially last year, trying to get so many people out and also to Nigel

Casey, who I know is heading up that unit.

I want to look at the economic and financial situation in Afghanistan. You talked about the situation in relation to development in aid. We know that Covid, cold and famine have made that situation so much worse, and we hear terrible stories about people selling their children, which is devastating. I want to know your views on the strategy of the freezing of assets and whether that is the right thing to do. I understand the dilemma in terms of not wanting to recognise the Taliban, but at the same time the situation is so dire there. Is there a way through that?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On the humanitarian issue specifically, I think it is important to differentiate between what we did and have done specific to humanitarian support and the economy, but the issue of the economy is not lost on us. When you have an economy dependent on around \$9 billion of development support and that is switched off in an instant, it is going to have an impact. Some of the economic forecasts talk of a reduction of up to 30% and more in GDP. We are very seized by that, but I think that it was the right approach that we look to support humanitarian assistance as a priority. In that regard, diplomatically we worked very hard on UN Security Council Resolution 2615, which allowed for the humanitarian exemptions to apply, which allowed us to provide the essential support that is required.

Nigel has already touched on the specific support in addition to this at the next level, I suggest, which is very much focused on the support for teachers and health workers. Last year, together with other key partners, we worked very hard—I know Andy and his team were involved in this, as was Nigel—at releasing some of the funds from the World Bank. The first tranche of around \$280 million was released and that allowed certain key health workers to be paid.

The next tranche that we are working on is the \$1 billion that is held in the ARTF—the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund—which was set up, which we supported. I would not say the release of that fund will change the economy, far from it, but it will release some of the pressure economically in trying to get some of the essential services in Afghanistan up and running.

As you rightly say, Baroness Fall, what we are trying to do there is balance between doing the right thing, building up and ratcheting up support for essential workers, essential key sectors in Afghanistan, but at the same time being very clear to the Taliban directly about its conditionalities, particularly on issues of human rights, humanitarian access and security and of course allowing for the access of Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan to be key priorities. I think it recognises that.

The other thing I would add is as we look to try to ratchet up some of the support in these essential services is holding firm on the international line. Looking at the situation in Afghanistan in August to where we are now, it has been quite remarkable that the international community across the piece has held the line on important issues of recognition.

While there have been different perspectives about engagement at what level with the Taliban, international recognition is an important priority for the Taliban. The international community, despite the different challenges we continue to face, has held a consistent line and there remains a lot of diplomatic focus on that.

In terms of what next with Afghanistan, we have also looked at creative situations. There was the whole issue of the swaps facility on how we could release more funding in Afghanistan. For someone who was in banking for 20 years, swaps are always quite a complex product, but it was using creativity to allow the release of additional funds in Afghanistan for the use and support of these essential services.

In the more medium and long term, we are a long way off economic stability in Afghanistan, but we were in that position prior to the Taliban takeover. As I said, the country was development aid-reliant. It looked towards support. What the future beckons may be a very serious issue. I once worked for the chief economist of a bank and when I pointed out that he had his forecast wrong he said, "What do you expect? I am an economist. I am allowed to do that", so I would not put forward a particular view as to the timeline on when we will see some stability, but I think the conditionalities that are very much incorporated in the UN Security Council resolution we need to remain firm on. At the same time, in good faith, and because we are seeing some positives—and Nigel talked about the silver lining to the dark cloud—it is important that we ratchet up our support for key essential sectors in Afghanistan and we are working on that as I speak.

Nigel Casey: I will clarify one point, if I may. The Taliban has been quite successful since August in pushing a narrative that everything that has happened to the Afghanistan economy is our fault and a lot of people who should have examined it more closely have repeated that fairly uncritically. The reality, as you will know, is that we have not imposed any new sanctions on the Taliban. What we have done is created the humanitarian exemption in UNSCR 2615 to enable humanitarian support to flow without impediment. That humanitarian support has been without political conditions, only the access conditions that Martin Griffiths negotiated.

What the Taliban has done is to make the problem of the individual Taliban sanctions listings by the UN much bigger by knowingly appointing 17 people who are on that sanctions list to head up government departments. In the central bank it has appointed as a new governor somebody with no background at all in banking or economics; he is a theologian. As the deputy, the man in charge of anti-money laundering and counterterrorism regulation, it has appointed someone on the UN sanctions list. It has made the problem of UN sanctions much bigger. It is important to understand that we have not added to that.

On the asset freezes, similarly we have not taken any action to freeze assets held in the UK. There are, we understand, assets belonging to Afghan commercial banks held in at least one British-based commercial

bank, but the reason they have not been able to access them is that when a bank gets a request from the central bank of Afghanistan it needs to satisfy itself that the person making that request is a fit and proper person who represents the authority of the Government of Afghanistan and is legitimately asking for those funds; otherwise, you cannot transfer them and there will be all sorts of risks to the bank in doing so.

At the moment the Afghan central bank, as I say, is headed by people who have been appointed without the authority of the previous Government and they are not qualified. The capacity of the bank to perform its key functions is not there and that is why recapacitating and rebuilding the independence of the central bank is a central objective of the international community.

Baroness Fall: I suppose the concern on the economic side is that drugs become the focus yet again for the economy, as they have historically, and that creates a problem for them and a problem for us, frankly. I am interested to know too whether you think the lack of international recognition is helping the treatment of women and girls. I know my colleague is about to come on to this, so maybe you will come to that with her question.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Very briefly, and I know Baroness Sugg is very much focused on this, and rightly so, we are making sure that women and girls specifically are not just in our mindset. The specific asks and conditionalities that we are discussing with the Taliban are focused on those priorities. As I said earlier, there are parts of Afghanistan where there has been more progress in school attendance and attendance at universities. Some of the agencies report from their own workers that maybe perhaps in certain parts they are dressing more conservatively than they were before, but their accessibility and ability to do their job have not been restrained. If anything, they have been able to carry on with their support.

On the broader issue of the economy, the Taliban needs to understand that it tests the international community. Baroness Anelay rightly pointed out that there is a lot going on in the world, but particularly in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office international partners, as Ukraine unravelled, there was an announcement made specifically on restrictions on women, which was about the concept of mahram—a male guardian being introduced, and women not being allowed to leave homes in certain communities. The good thing again was this coming together of the international community. It was picked up very quickly and the point was made at all levels, but specifically to the Taliban leadership, and that announcement was very quickly retracted. As to whether it was a mistake as it presented it or it was an attempt to test the mettle or indeed the attentiveness of the international community, I would hazard a guess and say it was the second.

It is important we watch these announcements carefully and where they do go directly against what it continues to assure us, we stand up for women's rights. We are continuing to create the conditions and security

conditions so more girls can return to school and women can go back to work. We need to keep a very close watch that that is being delivered upon.

Q4 **Baroness Sugg:** Staying on the subject, women of course have seen a huge change in their circumstances since the Taliban took over. You touched on this earlier, but could you say more on what the Government are doing to help stop the deterioration of women's rights in Afghanistan?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: First and foremost, we have to put it at the heart of our approach. If I can put it in three segments, first, which of course continues, is the situation in Afghanistan for those wishing to leave. Obviously, the intensity of that was during Operation Pitting, but even subsequently there are around 4,000 people and that continues, where we are resettling people here from Afghanistan. Again, only last week I met some of the Afghan women who have settled here. There are some amazing women leaders, from judges and doctors to leaders in the public sector; the list continues.

I have met Shukria Barakzai, Fawzia Koofi and Hasina Safi. Hasina Safi, for example, was the Minister for Women's Affairs. The message I have given to them both directly in individual meetings, but also collectively, is that the third level of our policy for the medium and long term must be informed by them in terms of where they see the priorities and how they see Afghanistan mapping out, because they are best informed. They were doing these jobs; they saw the challenges. We have had direct engagements with them at the UN and here at the FCDO, but we are also meeting them in other international fora. Indeed, a number of them have recently received their ability and indefinite leave to remain, which will allow them to be more flexible in travelling to international events.

In terms of specific support, we have been putting a lot of focus on women and girls. I know that you when were also a Minister and a colleague of mine, one of the debates and the discussions we had was to sustain the importance of women in key roles, including teachers. What we have identified is which partner is still able to fulfil the mandate, particularly on issues of girls' education, and then we will support them. We have identified a number of them. Again, for the interests of their own security I will not name specifics, but that is something we have been focused on.

For example, we have the CSW happening in New York as I speak. The Countess of Wessex has been an incredible support on the initiative of preventing sexual violence in conflict, which I continue to lead on for the Government, and that remains central to our thinking about ensuring that women are not just given their rights but are protected. We are working on key issues in terms of the support I alluded to when I was answering a question from Baroness Fall on the requirements of women, particularly when it comes to issues of health, including sexual and reproductive health, which I know is a priority for your good self.

All these areas, some are being done more discreetly, for obvious reasons, with the sensitivity of protecting the individuals and the groups we want to work with, but equally I think we have been very forward-leaning and clear with the Taliban on not just talking about issues of women's and girls' rights, but seeing practical delivery on this. Equally, our focus and support for some of the humanitarian support and what one hopes is the next level of support for key sectors will also be focused very much on supporting women and girls.

Baroness Sugg: We saw such great progress in Afghanistan on girls' education, thanks in no small part to UK aid and programmes such as the Girls' Education Challenge. One of the terrible consequences of what has been happening is that girls have not been able to continue their education. I have seen reports recently that some of the secondary schools for girls are reopening. It would be helpful to get an update on what is happening on the ground and what the Government are still able to do in this area, and what you are able to do with partners to avoid losing all those gains.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We are working on that. I said earlier about certain parts of Afghanistan where we have seen more progress. We have been very clear that where we are seeing progress from key regions we strengthen that. I think there is a message being delivered through action and support for the international community when you are supporting a particular region where you are seeing progress on this level, including through to tertiary education.

In terms of specifics, we are continuing to support the Global Partnership for Education. We are currently helping to run community-based education classes for about 112,000 out-of-school children, of which half or over half are girls. You will also recall that we tried during the Covid crisis to see how we could deliver continued support in homes. That is something we are also focused on.

Just to share some figures, we are reaching over 150,000 women and girls with support; I talked about sexual and reproductive health, but also on issues of gender-based violence support and services. We are helping women with dignity kits, protection, support and information—general information—and staying safe. All these things aside, what is very clear to me—I have said this before and will say it again explicitly—is the ideology that governs the Taliban. To me it is perverse. I have never subscribed to "western values", but these are human values and basic values of human dignity. Even with the Islamic lens that the Taliban claim to put on this, and this is something that we are explicit about in our discussions with the Islamic world, if you are that Taliban person making a decision, let us put it into context: if you follow the Prophet Muhammad, the first person to accept his message as a prophet of God was a woman. Guess what, he was working for her, so let us put some context into this.

We must challenge the Taliban's fundamental ideology, in my view, to see lasting and sustainable change. That must be done, as I said earlier,

working with the Islamic and Muslim world and therefore we are pleased that Qatar is playing an important role. It is all very well a British Minister seeking to deliver that message, but it comes most effectively when the Islamic world steps up, is counted and says and does the right thing.

Nigel Casey: Quickly, on your specific question, the good news is that girls have been able to carry on since August in primary education and women were allowed back to university when the university term restarted. The big thing that everybody is watching out for is what happens to secondary schools after Persian New Year on 21 March. Before the winter break there were girls in secondary school in 10 out of 34 provinces. Now we obviously want to see 34 out of 34. That is the message that we and everybody else in the international community has consistently given the Taliban and we will have to watch it very carefully to see if that is delivered.

I predict that even in the best-case scenario, where you had a general decision, and that was promulgated by the Taliban centrally, it would still be messy in the implementation. That is why it is important, in the current debate in New York on the mandate for the UN mission, that a monitoring component is clearly in there so that it can get out and do this vital work, so that when we are putting aid resources behind education in province X we know that that province has delivered on its promise.

Andy McCoubrey: To add one thing, in addition to the Global Partnership for Education and the Education Cannot Wait programmes you mentioned, we have now agreed in principle the release of \$1.4 billion from the international development banks. We are now working very closely with them to ensure that a very significant proportion of that goes to education. As you might expect, in every single discussion that we have with Taliban, girls and women is one of the first things that we talk to them about.

Q5 **Lord Teverson:** Thank you for your very informative and straightforward replies so far. It has been really good. I am interested in the comment there on your discussions with the Taliban because, as I understand it at the moment, we have no consular or diplomatic staff within the borders of Afghanistan. British citizens, any of them that are there, are told to get in touch with embassies of neighbouring states. I want to understand what the Government's approach to their relationship with the Taliban-led Government in Kabul is at the moment.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Of course. I will ask Nigel to come in in a moment. On British nationals in Afghanistan we still operate the "register your presence" element, which allows people to register not with a neighbouring country or appoint them to an embassy or high commission, but continue to register. I would state for the committee's information that there has been a massive decline of that, but I have been very clear that in my view that as long as we have an important mission outside, which we do in Doha, that we keep a facility that allows British nationals access.

I am putting that into context because I think it is an important point. People have come and gone from Afghanistan, so even after Operation Pitting, after August, there have been Brits who through various ways have gone into Afghanistan, understandably to try to help family members, and when they are there, we still have a facility that allows them to register their presence.

On the Taliban specifically, before I hand over to Nigel, I have not engaged directly, and nor has the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister. We decided, rightly I think, that we need the Taliban to step up to the mark in the levels of engagement that we have. Although we have had engagement with the most senior officials, and obviously the Ministers are part of informing that discussion, neither I nor the Foreign Secretary, or indeed any other Ministers, have had direct engagement with the Taliban since the takeover in August. The last engagement we had was at the start of the Doha conference in what was obviously a Covid world, so I can say that I was in the same virtual room as the Taliban.

At that time, the hopes were slightly different, and there was some sense that we would see an outcome that was in the interests of all Afghans. That was not to be, but subsequently we are engaging with the Taliban at official level, which I think is the right approach, to ensure that we are very much focused on the key priorities that we are setting out, including humanitarian access, the rights of women, girls and minorities, and security. I will now turn to Nigel, if I may.

Nigel Casey: As you all know, our general approach to recognition has been to recognise states rather than Governments. That has been the UK Government's policy for some time. As the Minister said, very soon after the end of the evacuation last August the National Security Council met and reviewed our overall interests in Afghanistan and very quickly concluded that our enduring interests remained the same ones that had taken us into a military intervention 20 years ago. They are, of course, the threats from terrorism, drugs and illegal migration in particular, as well as our broader concern to protect, as far as that is possible, the gains of the last 20 years that we have talked about. The very clear political direction from that moment was that we needed to engage pragmatically with the Taliban to pursue those interests. We have done that since August. We have done it openly, whereas in the past we did not talk about those meetings publicly.

We have established a temporary embassy presence in Doha, which is the main conduit for talking to those Talibs who are still based there and for visiting Kabul. We have made two visits by senior officials to Kabul in October and February this year. We have met them in third capitals. I met acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi in Oslo at the end of January, and we have seen them in Geneva. We will take any opportunity that presents itself to sit down with them and to pick up on the core issues that we, with G7 partners back in September, identified needed to be the first issues that we engaged the Taliban on. Those issues were: ensuring that

it delivered on its Doha promise on Afghanistan never again to become a safe haven for terrorists; delivering on its promises on what we call safe passage, allowing Afghans who wanted to leave Afghanistan to do so; and human rights, including the rights of women and girls.

There is a broader point, which I think is important, which is about its style of government, and moving away from what it has done, which is to put in place an exclusive and temporary acting Government who are heavily Pashtun and entirely Talib, with no women and not representative at all of the people of Afghanistan, and which is therefore inherently unstable, and trying to push them to broaden that in the interests of the future of Afghanistan. Our argument has been that legitimacy internationally must start with legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people. If it is not recognised by its own people as having that legitimacy, it is hard for it to demand it from us externally.

We will keep working with it. I do not pretend that it is easy. I do not pretend that it has moved on many of the core issues. There has been very limited movement on counterterrorism. It will repeat the mantra of living up to Doha, but we have not seen much substantive action to make that commitment real. There is an important test on girls' education coming up, as we have discussed.

For the moment, we will keep going at the level of senior officials rather than Ministers, and keep trying to work in concert with our international partners on securing these objectives. We have some specific national objectives in relation to British nationals who have been detained in Afghanistan. I do not want to talk too much about that in the committee, for obvious reasons, but it is one of our top priorities, as you would expect.

Q6 Lord Teverson: If the test is, as you say, the majority of the population recognising its own Government, we might have failed on the previous Government, if we are honest about it. I am very pleased to hear of those contacts; that is very positive.

Perhaps I could be devil's advocate for a minute. We have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kazakhstan and Belarus—we could go through them all—and perhaps we would not want to live under any of those regimes or agree with that type of autocratic or theocratic regime. It seems to me that perhaps leverage is okay for a while. I cannot imagine that the Taliban will disappear as the only effective Government of Afghanistan for many years, and I think that leverage will disappear over time. Is it not important to decide sometimes to engage, to get in and to be present inside the tent or whatever to pursue the values that you rightly portray? My feeling is that, after a while on the international stage, if you ignore a Government who are a de facto Government for an extended period of time, you lose that leverage. It is very difficult to build those bridges and those relationships, and you lose total influence as time goes on.

Nigel Casey: I very much hear what you are saying. We are engaged. We have said on the record that we would like to reopen a diplomatic presence in Kabul when the security situation allows it. At the moment, it does not. We must take the lives of our colleagues extremely seriously, and we do. We will carry on engagement. It is quite striking that in the six and a half months since the fall of Kabul, not one Government has moved to recognise, not even the Governments that recognised the Taliban in the 1990s—the Saudis, the Pakistanis and others, and the reason is even on the core issue of their attitude to violent extremism we have yet to see significant demonstration in practical terms of a real change of heart. That is an issue that everyone in the international community cares equally about.

Lord Teverson: What is the status of the Afghan embassy here in London at the moment? Who controls that, and does it function? Do you talk to it?

Nigel Casey: Yes, it does function. It is issuing visas. The ambassador who was there formerly is still here. We have not accepted the posting of any Talibs to that embassy. Other countries have moved on that, but we have not.

Q7 **Lord Stirrup:** Good morning. The regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan immediately adjacent to the border between the two countries, which stretches for over 2,400 kilometres. This has long been an area of concern. In the past, we have seen radicalisation in the madrassas and the federally administered tribal areas. We have seen the activities of the Haqqani Network, we have seen Baloch nationalists, and of course we have seen Quetta providing a home for the Taliban in exile.

What is your assessment of the latest state of governance in areas on both sides of the border? What discussions are the Government having with the Government of Pakistan on this matter, and do you think that Pakistan is willing or able effectively to address these issues?

If I may expand the question a bit more broadly in light of current events, given what has been happening in Ukraine, what, if any, impact has this had on our relationship with the Government of Pakistan and with the Government of India, who are both, of course, big players in the future of Afghanistan?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On the issue of engagement with near neighbours, hindsight is a wonderful thing, but there were a lot of questions at the time of the Taliban takeover about whether we were engaging. The short answer is that we were. There was a connectivity conference in July 2021 between central Asia and south Asia, but all the key players concerned with Afghanistan, including the United States, us, Turkey and all the near neighbouring states were very much present in the room, including India and Pakistan. It was important to see that President Ghani was there at that time, and Prime Minister Khan also attended. Although there was an exchange between the two of them quite publicly on the role of the Taliban, what was very clear from my direct meeting with Prime Minister Khan was the cost that Pakistan had

borne from the continued attacks in Pakistan from organisations linked to the Taliban and, of course, the Pakistan Taliban.

I said earlier the Taliban itself is not a homogenous organisation, and you know better than most through your own experience of the region that putting them all together will not provide the solution. There is no love lost between the Pakistan Taliban and the Taliban currently in control in Afghanistan. I think that has played out. There are some on the extremities in the Pakistan Taliban who do not think that the Pakistan Taliban is extreme enough for them, so they have crossed border—it is porous—and continued to do what they do there.

In terms of the Government's relationships with Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, first and foremost practically, I visited the region. If ever there was a time for shuttle diplomacy—and I have experienced it—that was it; there was constant engagement with the region. What I can share with the committee is they were all very practical and supportive of the UK's requirements and what we needed to do, particularly in providing support and access for humanitarian aid, as well as allowing for people who were qualified to come to the UK to extend whatever support they could. That came not just from the civilian leadership in all those countries but from the military.

In that regard, we worked very closely with the Ministry of Defence, and I would like to put on record my thanks particularly to the Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heappey, as well as the Home Office Minister for Future Borders and Immigration. We worked very closely during the crisis, but subsequently with key partners in the region and our teams on the ground. I pay tribute to our ambassadors and particularly our High Commission and Christian Turner's team, who continue at the moment to provide support.

That said, of course we regularly engage with Pakistan. As the Minister responsible for south Asia, I speak quite frequently with interlocutors in Pakistan. Most recently, I spoke to Foreign Minister Qureshi over the concern we expressed on Pakistan's abstention at the GA vote on Ukraine, but at the same time we continue to have very constructive engagement on Afghanistan. Its priority, and it is an understandable one, as we have discussed already, is the cash flow in the Afghanistan economy and the added instability that that creates, as well as issues of security, which again it stresses is of concern.

Equally, in advance of the Taliban takeover, we made very clear the influence Pakistan had in whatever happened next in Afghanistan. It continues to be an important country, in terms of both its military intelligence engagement with us and in Afghanistan, but secondly, and most importantly, because it has the biggest border with Afghanistan and issues of security remain a big concern.

Radicalisation, which Nigel mentioned, and the non-delivery on that—we have seen the growing emergence of ISKP in Afghanistan—are of concern not just to us and our key partners and allies, but to near neighbours.

When you look towards the north of Afghanistan and to the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, there are obviously cultural influences and communities who have deep association not just with Afghanistan but with those two countries. Therefore, we need to invest much more than we are in diplomatic engagement with these key partners. In addition to my south Asia responsibility I now look after central Asia, and we have been doing just that with regard to direct engagement.

We have also, as Nigel pointed out, engaged directly with the Taliban, which I think has also set a constructive tone in our engagement with near neighbours. We have not taken a step back. If anything, we were the most forward-leaning of any country from the western side or indeed any key partner in the UN. We were first on the ground in Kabul to show that we would continue to look to support for advances made by the Taliban on delivering the UN requirements and conditions that were set. As we said earlier, we are certainly looking to unlock more money, but it is important that the conditionalities that we are setting on security remain very much at the forefront of what we are doing. Nigel has also been engaging extensively. He has visited the country, and I am sure he will talk in a moment about his own engagement in Islamabad, where the OIC met and talked specifically about Afghanistan.

Equally, I come back to a point I made earlier: that we need not only near neighbouring countries but other countries more broadly in the region to stand up. They have a role now, and a moment, in making a difference on what kind of Afghanistan emerges, particularly on the issues of broader human rights. We will continue to engage with them. As we said earlier, we have established diplomatic relationships with many countries in the region. I can assure you that, whether engaging at official level or at ministerial level, we are pretty candid in our messages and exchanges about the importance of their role in the future of Afghanistan.

Nigel Casey: To your question, Lord Stirrup, what we have not yet seen, and which I hope does not come to pass, is the major destabilisation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands that many had feared after August. In one province in particular, Nangarhar, where ISKP has the strongest presence, there has been a lot of violent competition between the Taliban and the ISKP for control. More broadly, as I said earlier, the security situation has improved in most provinces in Afghanistan, including on the borders. The Pakistani Government have fenced much of the border, which in practice has meant that cross-border human passage has been mainly through established, regular points rather than the irregular crossings that were common before.

The capability and strength of ISKP on the Afghan side in particular, concerns about which Lord Ahmad mentioned, are a threat that we take very seriously. It claimed the bombing in August at Kabul Airport while we were conducting evacuation, and we regard it still as the single biggest threat to us and to others. On the Pakistani side, there has been an uptick in TTP attacks inside Pakistan. That is a serious concern for the

Pakistani Government, as it is for us and others. They have been pushing the Taliban to put pressure on TTP fighters who are in Afghanistan, and that shines an interesting light on the dynamic and the relationship between the Pakistani Government and the Taliban now.

Lord Stirrup: Can I press the point about Ukraine and whether there have been or are likely to be any implications in the future?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We watch very carefully, and we are at the forefront of what happened in the United Nations. The 141 voting in support of the Ukrainian resolution was no small feat. If you look back in history to 2014 and the Crimea annexation, there were 100 nations. Subsequently, when there was a resolution on Ukraine last year, only 65 nations of the General Assembly voted for the Ukrainian position.

This is encouraging and very strong. When you look not only at the list of countries that voted for Russia but at the list of countries that abstained, it was encouraging to see the likes of Cuba abstain and not support the Russian position.

Specific to India and Pakistan, you will know of India's long-standing relationship with Russia, but it has sought to play a constructive role and there is engagement at the highest level with India and Pakistan. The purpose of my call to Foreign Minister Qureshi not last weekend but the weekend before was very much to make sure at a very senior level that he knew that we had expected Pakistan to be supportive of the position in Ukraine. For any country that has abstained—and this should apply across the piece—the issue of territorial sovereignty is important to everyone. The issue of the integrity of a nation's sovereignty is important to everyone.

What has happened in Ukraine is a direct challenge to the very foundations of the post-Second World War system, the UN charter, and a direct attack on the very foundations and principles of the United Nations, and that is something that we have been highlighting in all our diplomatic engagement. I firmly believe that the likes of India have an important role in whatever emerges because of the strength of their own engagement in the region and indeed with Russia.

Coming back to the specifics of both countries' role in Afghanistan, we have discussed Pakistan but India is also important to what emerges in the Afghanistan of the future, and we are engaging at very senior levels on this issue. I have had discussions with Foreign Minister Jaishankar on the very issue of Afghanistan and its future.

Q8 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** I want to go back to the issue that Lord Teverson raised. We all appreciate, of course—or broadly support, I am sure—the conditionality that you talked about, particularly with respect to security and the observance of human rights. On the other hand, we all also know, and I am sure you all know as people who work on this every day, that the only people who probably win by the isolation and the brokenness of Afghanistan are the Taliban, so there is a dilemma here.

Under what conditions would the UK Government be more prepared to play a part in the rebuilding of the state and economy of Afghanistan? In particular, I wonder whether there is provisional work going on in international financial institutions that the UK is taking part in, in thinking about rebuilding an economic infrastructure for Afghanistan down the line in the way the World Bank and the IMF have done for other countries in situations that are not similar but have similarly catastrophic recent histories.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The short answer to the second question is yes. I think we have already indicated that we have gradually sought to support financially and understand that just allowing for humanitarian support, for example, will not allow for the next level to be achieved. I think it is right that we approach it cautiously but in a structured and systematic way.

Andy McCoubrey talked about what we did with the Asian Development Bank, and our current and ongoing discussions on the release of additional finance from the World Bank are indicative of the very approach that you have outlined. At the same time, though, it is about striking the right balance. It is not to say, "Right, it's now happened. Let us move on". There are two priorities for the Taliban. One is cash flow and the second is recognition. They are the main levers which the international community has collectively on influencing what kind of Afghanistan emerges under Taliban control.

Issues of governance remain key. Lord Stirrup asked about the Haqqani Network. What is very clear on the ground is that different networks, of which the Haqqani is one, have influence, and the key players in that continue to have a key role in key positions in the interim Government set up by the Taliban. It is a question that is important not just to us but collectively. The way to move forward on those important issues of recognition and additional financial support is on a collective basis. We are working well to date, and, as I said, notwithstanding the diversity of opinion and view—the fact that no country has suddenly said that it recognises the Taliban as the legitimate Government—there has been a big diplomatic effort to ensure that that happens. We are looking at this very carefully. In my mind, it has to be very clear and systematic. We must hold the issue of accountability true to the delivery on issues of human rights.

I am mindful that Lord Alton is to ask his question, but those fundamentals in the context of human rights are key. I gave you my view that, when this issue was announced recently, the bandwidth, the focus, of the international community was perhaps elsewhere in the world. Was it a test of the community, was it a genuine announcement, or was it a mistake? I think we want to see some sense of sustainability: are they staying true, as Nigel Casey said earlier, to the announcements that are coming up imminently? I think the next key announcement on schools is on 21 March. Let us see delivery on that. Where we see delivery, we will be encouraged and we will try to seek further support in key sectors, but we are a long way off from the kind of rebuilding and opening up of

access, financing and structural support that will allow Afghanistan to become a standalone nation. Frankly speaking, it was not much in advance of the Taliban takeover, so there is a long road ahead.

Q9 Lord Alton of Liverpool: Thank you, Minister, and your officials for the very constructive and detailed way in which you engage with this committee. When you gave evidence to us during our inquiry on Afghanistan you raised then, as you did today, the issue of ideology. Earlier this week, we heard how in Saudi Arabia 81 people were executed and that juveniles are being executed. Some pretty barbaric things are happening in a number of parts of the world, sometimes in the name of religion. You described to us during your previous evidence session some initiatives you were taking to try to tackle ideology. I wonder if there has been any progress, for instance with scholars at al-Azhar and things like that, in looking at other ways of interpreting religion and how that can be used as a driver for good rather than one that is negative.

You also mentioned in your evidence earlier the cross-departmental engagement with the MoD and the Home Office. Could I ask you a question about ARAP and ACRS, the resettlement programmes in the UK, as part of Operation Warm Welcome? The Home Office said that by the end of 2021 everyone would be resettled from the hotels in which they had been placed. This morning, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees said that there are still 12,000 people in those hotels and that some of them will not be resettled even in this calendar year. With the influx of Ukrainians now in large numbers, where will they be left, and what has happened to minorities?

During the briefing session that you and Nigel Casey addressed a few weeks ago on this, which was very welcome, I raised the issue of Hazaras with you, but the Ahmadis and other minorities, who are not even detailed in the lists of people who have been allowed to come to the United Kingdom. Could that policy be reviewed as well so that we can get some idea about ethnicity, background, orientation and minority issues that put people at particular risk when you are dealing with people like the Taliban?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: First, on the issue of ideology, the short answer is yes, we are engaging. I have made reference a few times to countries across the region standing up. Equally, there are a number of Ministers in key countries who are very much focused on this, ensuring that they deliver the kinds of messages that are required. To name one or two specifically, Indonesia has been very constructive, and Retno Marsudi, the Foreign Minister, shared with me her first meeting with the Taliban in Doha. There was a long narrative from the Taliban about how women cannot hold senior roles, and she said, "I sat there, Tariq, and listened very carefully, and after their 20 minutes or so, I then responded by saying, 'I am clearly a woman. I am also Muslim. Thirdly, I am Foreign Minister of the biggest Muslim country in the world', and there was a kind of silence to that".

Before we get on to scholars, I think there is a message in that we have some exceptional women leaders across the world and in the Islamic world. The second most senior person in the UN framework is of course Amina Mohammed, who heads up the development area. What we need to do collectively is ensure that—I hate this phrase—the voices of women are heard. They have voices; women are already here and present. This is about ensuring that we make that a key priority in engagement with the Taliban, because that has address the narrative head on.

Secondly, on the point about the scholars, absolutely, they are in neighbouring countries. I myself have engaged, but more importantly I have also engaged through the IOC. We have talked directly to the leadership there about the importance of the correct Islamic narrative in this case. But the challenge, in my mind, must come from the Islamic world, the Muslim world, in saying that when you talk about rights and minorities and protections, you could allude to the Medina charter as a fundamental example of protection of minority rights. There is work to be done in this area, but I reassure you that that is part of our engagement.

On the issue of how we are working with minorities, it is a key concern. On the Hazaras, yes, there have been some who have come through other parts and borders. The situation with the Ahmadis is very, very serious in Afghanistan. Without going into specific detail, we are engaging, but the issues are extremely sensitive. These particular communities, religious minorities, are particularly vulnerable.

On the qualification for settlement, when the ACRS was announced, one of the key categories mentioned was of course vulnerable religious minorities. As the scheme evolves, certainly it is my intention—and I continue to make those representations to our colleagues in the Home Office—to ensure that these communities are also provided with sanctuary.

On your second question about hotels, we are obviously very much at the behest of the Home Office. What is very clear is that the settlement of those people in hotels continues. Last week, Victoria Atkins handed over to our new Minister, Lord Harrington, who will be in House of Lords. I am sure there will be opportunities to pose questions to him. I heard his dulcet tones this morning on various radio channels. I know Richard. He worked tremendously hard during the Syrian settlement, and I do not think there was anyone more capable or with the right experience to deploy in this instance. In paying tribute to Victoria Atkins's work, last week we met with some of the women who have now settled here to hear quite directly from them about how they were finding it and what their current issues were. Victoria wrote a very good summary letter of what has been achieved so far on resettlement. With the Chair's permission, and with Victoria's permission—I hope she will not mind me speaking for her—I will circulate it to members of the committee as well.

Lord Alton of Liverpool: Do you think that with 82 million displaced people or refugees worldwide it is time for the United Kingdom Government to take a global initiative, not unlike COP 26, to bring

together nations to examine the scale of this issue and to put something together like the Marshall aid programme after the Second World War so that we can start tackling this issue at root? Otherwise, there will be migrants coming in their millions over the years to countries that will not want to welcome them.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: It is an idea. We are going from one crisis to the next—the situation in Ukraine. Even going back two years there were concerns—the committee report on Afghanistan was very clear at that time—but I do not think anyone could have imagined the scale of what we are seeing currently engulfing Europe. While being mindful of global solutions to issues of migration and settlement, the challenge that will remain, in my view, is one of internal displacement. We see that in Afghanistan, we see it in Ukraine and, sadly and tragically, we see it in other conflicts, such as the continuing situation in Tigray on all fronts. While the world's focus is currently and rightly on Ukraine, we are very keen not to lose sight of these other issues.

That is where the institutions of the UN have a key role to play. Although they need reform and at times urgency in relation to them, my main concern in the current crisis is that a world order emerges that substantially strengthens the institutions of the UN. We have debates about the most effective support in the form of the distribution of aid, but the crisis in Afghanistan and indeed the crisis in Ukraine have shown that often the first people on the ground who have access, who are able to leverage some of these humanitarian corridors, be it in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan or Ukraine, are the key UN agencies.

The Chair: Minister, thank you. Before I turn to Lord Campbell, I would like to welcome the delegation from Zambia, who are able to be with us. You are most welcome. It is such a pleasure now that in our move away from some of the restrictions that Covid has imposed upon the operation of the committee we are now permitted to have members in the room who are not members of the committee, so you are extremely welcome.

Q10 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: I must begin by declaring an interest. As I think you have heard me say on many occasions, I am an ambassador for the Halo Trust, which is a charity engaged in mine clearance and clearance of improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan.

Can I raise two issues, to some extent trying to tease out the attitude of the Taliban? When, for example, reports of the sale of children, particularly female children, emerged, was there any sense that the Taliban took any responsibility for the circumstances that gave rise to that? Was there any comment about it, or did it feature at all in any of our discussions with them?

The other issue, of course, which I think has been referred to in passing, is the fact of the safe haven being allowed for terrorist groups in the past. I know that an undertaking has been given. Are we satisfied with that? Is there any evidence? Do we keep our eyes open to see whether, contrary to the undertaking, something of that kind is taking place? So far as we know, do the Taliban continue to have relationships with some of the

same terrorist organisations that previously found a safe haven?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I will again ask Nigel to come in. I just have a couple of points to make. First, when we saw those images of the children being sold, particularly young girls, some as young as five or six, without any idea of what was happening to them, it was abhorrent; it was stomach churning and sickening. Whatever words we use are not enough. That is why it is important in our development and our support that we continue to focus on support in healthcare provision and education. Certainly that has been an area of focus in the engagement we have had with the Taliban, and I would also say that it is consistent with all our partners, irrespective of which part of the world they are in, in their engagement in ensuring that the Taliban realises that what is happening to these girls in particular goes against the grain in any part of any community. Equally, we need to keep emphasising and be very vigilant about this. I always become concerned as crises engulf us that these issues do not suddenly become accepted as the norm—

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Fall off the table.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Absolutely. I think we retain that very much as a priority. On the issue of security, some of the narratives we hear—and Nigel has already mentioned this—have not moved forward effectively enough on this key element. Let us not forget why all this unravelled—images of 9/11 and the issues that arise from that. We need to recognise that this issue is not just about their assurances, but about specific delivery. Somewhat ironically, we have heard back from them on issues: “We will move forward on girls’ and women’s rights, but if we move too quickly, some of our own people may think that the Taliban are not strong enough on this issue, so is there an appeal from other radicalised groups in the country?” That does not wash with us, of course; I am just sharing with you the kind of narrative that is sometimes presented as a defence in being slower in its movement.

Nigel Casey: As I was saying earlier in response to Baroness Fall’s question, the starting point for conversations with the Taliban on these issues tends to be that the humanitarian situation is our fault—that we have created it, it is our responsibility to fix it, so over to us. It has been very slow to recognise that, to Lord Wood’s question, if we are to get from pure humanitarian aid back into a development relationship with Afghanistan, that requires a partnership. Andy lived this. We negotiated at great length a partnership with the Government of the Republic of Afghanistan in Geneva in 2020. It was painful, it was difficult, it was conditional. We are nowhere near that point, because they have not recognised that there is a shared responsibility for economic decision-making and that the decisions they make about who they appoint to key institutions have a direct bearing on our ability to interact and engage.

On your question about terrorism, they are directly taking on ISKP. The absence of major ISKP attacks in recent months suggests that they have had some success, but the real test will be as spring comes. Traditionally, it is easier to move and that will be the next test. It is clear that they are

in a competitive relationship with ISKP. When it comes to al-Qaeda, we have detected no sign of distancing. Of course, the Haqqani network is right at the centre of the interim Taliban Government—Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani and so on. There has been very little sign of distancing from those organisations.

- Q11 **Baroness Blackstone:** I come back to Lord Wood's question earlier on longer-term economic development. This is a country that has been on its knees—there is no other way of describing it—for very many years now, with a huge proportion of its population living in extreme poverty, with threats to people's survival as far as food is concerned and extraordinary levels of malnutrition among children. Somehow or other this has to be broken; otherwise, we will continue to provide a humanitarian aid sticking plaster for the longer term. It is completely understandable that the short term should be the focus of the Government at the moment, but I would be very sad if there were not middle to longer-term thinking. I would like to know who is doing that.

Obviously the World Bank must be involved, and maybe the Asian Development Bank too, but what role is the UK playing in the international community in discussing how this country can be developed economically so that it does not spend the next 100 years dependent on international aid for the survival of its people? In asking that question, can you say who is doing the thinking in the UK and whether any thought has been given to the potential role of China, which may well see opportunities for investment in this country, which may or may not be helpful from the point of view of its long-term development, especially in terms of its human rights?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: One thing I would say with regard to the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank is that we have representation, and I assure you, as I said to Lord Wood, that these discussions have started. I agree with you on the point of principle that, ultimately, a country has to be able to stand on its own feet, if I can put it that way, and its economy has to be sustainable through economic empowerment, but that must come for all communities and citizens. That is very much a medium to long-term part of our thinking as to what we are doing. Those discussions are taking place. We are involved with them, and I agree with you that it is the development banks that will, in the first instance, have a key role in this.

Longer term, you mentioned China. One of the concerns, which I am sure is shared by everyone in this committee, is that the infrastructure support that China often provides—not only Afghanistan but everywhere in the world—and the long-term impact and the dependency that comes from that infrastructure support are clear for everyone to see. The United Kingdom needs an infrastructure offer—I know that the Foreign Secretary is seized of this through the creation of the BII—with key partners across the world, where we can present alternative infrastructure support and long-term economic development. We are certainly working in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on that, but we are also engaging with our key allies and partners, who have the same economic

perspective that we do, so that a country is not for ever indebted to a particular nation.

Whatever emerges in Afghanistan, we need to be mindful of that, but in the first instance the short answer is yes, we are engaging on this particular issue through our direct representation at these institutions. Equally, there will need to be a long-term perspective in how we work, but I am also very minded that we will need to work with key partners. Andy, is there anything you want to add?

Andy McCoubrey: To reiterate what the Minister said, late last year we co-convened a working group of economists and financial specialists across the international community to start informally addressing some of the questions you raise. We are now asking the World Bank to take the lead on trying to convene and cohere some of the analysis and perspectives on what might be needed from a technical level. Beyond the technical perspective, of course, there are wider political considerations, which the committee has already raised.

It has not been finally agreed yet, but we are hopeful of a side event at the World Bank spring meetings in April, so next month, to start having some of these broader discussions, particularly on the commercial and banking sector, which is so important to the humanitarian response, but also potentially on some of these wider issues. Although, as the Minister said, the diversity of opinion internationally is such that we are some way off taking concrete steps on those issues at the moment.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, Mr Casey and Mr McCoubrey for your answers today. You will have gathered from my colleagues' questions that although our report was published a year ago, our interest will not wane. I am always very mindful, when I look at some of the Twitter and Facebook feeds from people who gave evidence to our committee and from people who are the left behind in Afghanistan, that their concern and hope is that, with the understandable focus on the horrific events following Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, they will not be forgotten. It is important that we are able to hear the voice of Parliament in asking questions. Thank you for answering that voice this morning.