

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Promoting dialogue and preventing atrocities: the UK government approach, HC 149

Tuesday 24 May 2022

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mr Richard Bacon; Theo Clarke; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger; Nigel Mills; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 44 - 115

Witnesses

I: Matthew Field, Her Majesty's Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina; and Pete Vowles, Chargé D'Affaires ad interim, British Embassy Yangon, Myanmar.

II: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South and Central Asia, North Africa, the United Nations and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; and Leigh Stubblefield, Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Matthew Field and Pete Vowles.

[This evidence was taken by video conference]

Q44 Chair: I will start this session of the International Development Select Committee's inquiry into promoting dialogue and preventing atrocities. We have two panels today. In our first panel we are joined by the Ambassador for Her Majesty's Government to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Matthew Field, and head of mission, Pete Vowles, for the British Embassy at Myanmar. Please introduce yourselves and give us a little bit of background about atrocity prevention in the countries that you are speaking to us from. Ambassador, I will start with you.

Matthew Field: Thank you very much, Sarah, and to all your colleagues there as well. I have been the ambassador here in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina for just coming up to four years. I am approaching the end of my time here.

As I think many of your members saw during their visit here very recently, Bosnia and Herzegovina is in many ways an interesting study case. You have the conflict from 1992 to 1995 and the terrible atrocities that were committed then. This was a conflict that introduced the term "ethnic cleansing". We saw two international courts give verdicts of genocide in the case of Srebrenica, the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war, 100,000 dead, and the UK in particular playing a role in maintaining or delivering the peace and 59 UK soldiers paid with their lives.

I think that the headline is that the Dayton agreement did bring peace. We have not seen a return to conflict in 26 years, but it has been a frozen peace. We are dealing with many of the legacy issues of the very divided, complicated, ethnically-defined agreement that was reached. We continue to see many of those challenges today and I can elaborate a bit more in some of your questions.

The UK continues to play an active and activist role here. I will say sincerely my thanks to all of you for the visit you made in February, which was part of an increasing engagement and was incredibly helpful for us here, and we continue to receive great feedback. I am happy to elaborate a bit more, but that is just a starting point to set us up.

Q45 Chair: Thank you. Could you tell us a little bit more? You have been in post for nearly four years now. How has the national context changed in that time? Do you see that part of your role is maintaining stability in that country?

Matthew Field: Yes, absolutely. Over that time—and these four years come on the back of a career that has been in and out of the western Balkans in different areas and with different responsibilities—we have seen a continued nature that is stable but frozen, so not making



progress. We have seen many of the legacy issues not make progress. We see increases, if anything, of denialism of genocide and other war crimes. We have seen, particularly in the last 12 months, an increased use of hate speech, particular language that is intended to divide communities to focus on the past. We have seen a particularly sustained assault in the period recently on the post-Dayton structures: the judiciary, the armed forces, the single economic space. This is focused on an agenda that is driven by maintaining entrenched beliefs and frustrating progress, particularly progress towards the Euro-Atlantic institutions. The result of that, unfortunately, is that we have seen a real increase in the outflow of the talented and mostly young people of this country. For me, that is a genuine sense of crisis that the country is facing.

In that period, particularly in the last six months, it went for us beyond crisis as usual. I think I judged that there was such a heightened level of division and rhetoric being used, combined with practical steps against these major institutions, that it merited particular concern. As I escalated those concerns and talked more with London, with partners in the UK, in other posts and around the region—because the regional concept is always very important here in Bosnia—we took a number of steps to try to reverse that course.

Access to the expertise represented by the Committee, and in particular by Dr Kate Ferguson, was a big part of that. Also I have to give full credit to my colleague Pete, on the line, and his team. We benefited from the way systematically that they were approaching prevention work in Myanmar. Again, I am happy to elaborate a bit more on all of that, Sarah.

Q46 Chair: Thank you. Yes, we will want to pick away at some of those topics that you have raised, but the obvious escalation, as you say, in division and rhetoric is the reason why we have made Bosnia and Herzegovina our case study to look at how the country is dealing with that.

Pete, I will turn to you. Give us a little bit of the national context that you are working within. I am aware that you took up your appointment six months after the military coup in Myanmar. Could you tell us a little about how that has impacted on your work?

Pete Vowles: Thank you very much. Thanks to you and to the rest of the Committee for inviting me today. I am Pete Vowles. I have been the head of mission in Myanmar since late July last year, which as you say is about six months after the military coup in February 2021.

I think that it is always important to contextualise Myanmar and where we are today within the 70 years of conflict that has been happening one way or another across the country, the 50 years of military rule and the deep social divisions that we see across the country.



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Our latest conflict analysis looks at it as a conflict system with three interconnecting and overlapping conflicts happening at once. There is the obvious one that we see here—the civilian and military conflict. There is a second subnational conflict between the ethnic organisations and their fight for autonomy or federalism. There is a third identity-based conflict that is linked to religious and social identity. We saw that play out most brutally in the Rohingya crisis in 2017.

The context of these three conflicts all happening at the same time, all overlapping, makes it incredibly complicated to understand and to engage in and for the UK Government, as an outsider in Myanmar, to find the best response. In 2017, we saw this play out brutally with the attacks on the Rohingya community and the fleeing across to Bangladesh. Then we saw it again most recently in February 2021 with the military coup. We have seen over the course of the last 15 months or so things sadly get worse and worse. Over 1,700 people have been killed in protesting. We have seen the increasing escalation of the use of violence by the military armed forces in the burning down of villages, sexual violence as a weapon, indiscriminate attacks and airstrikes on communities across the country.

We have particularly seen the changing nature of the conflict from one that perhaps pre-coup was limited or restricted to the border areas of Myanmar and now we are seeing that within the Bamar heartlands as well. There are changing conflict dynamics and dimensions.

We are also seeing the inability of the military armed forces to steward or to run the economy. We saw a contraction of 18% in the economy last year; it is growing at maybe 1% now but with huge inflation. We see in major cities real struggles to do the very basic functions of state: sustaining power supply, fuel provision, cash in ATMs. There has not been an ATM working. It is the general impact on the country as a whole as a result of the coup. I can talk a lot about how that carries on and the conflict happening in different places in different ways ongoing as we speak.

Chair: Thank you very much. It is not an accident that the two of you are here. We are constantly hearing the two of you and your teams being cited as groups that are very aware of atrocity prevention, of the broader context and also helping colleagues across the FCDO to address this in their own patches. Thank you and please thank your teams for all you are doing on this topic.

Q47 Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger: Within your jobs, how much is it your responsibility to uphold the UK's commitment to prevent atrocities in the countries you work in? I suppose that moves on to ask whether you have a dedicated person within the embassy, or does the buck stop with you?

Matthew Field: I will give you some thoughts on that, because I think it is a very important question. Ultimately, personally I feel that the buck does stop with me. I think I have a responsibility for all of what Her



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Majesty's Government is doing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That includes on the diplomacy side, defence and development. That all comes together within an embassy team, which is not huge but is very integrated. I have the ability to look across in particular when it comes to prevention work, especially the responsibility to understand how the different levers can co-operate and interact, because none of these problems can be tackled with one lever. That is my job where it comes together.

I feel supported and directed by FCDO. I have had in recent months a huge amount of ministerial and senior official support throughout this period, but I feel that the buck stops with me. I think that sense of responsibility ultimately is the right way. I feel I should be the one who has the oversight and accountability.

On dedicated resources we have not had particular people carved out working separately on prevention. One asset we have had, which has been incredibly useful, is a conflict adviser embedded initially in the programme team but someone with experience of working with conflict prevention more broadly, based in the embassy, covering the region. That has been one of the most important assets that we have had, and I am very glad that that resource continues. I think it is especially relevant in the western Balkans and I know in other regions as well.

I think it is about that responsibility, combined with access to colleagues back in London but I will say again in other networks as well. Although Bosnia is uniquely complicated, many of the things we are talking about are entirely consistent with what is being faced in Uganda, Sudan, Myanmar, Colombia and other places as well.

Pete Vowles: I completely agree with Ambassador Field. I feel that the responsibility and accountability lies with me as the head of mission for Myanmar and the buck stops with me for work on prevention in Myanmar. I think that the key change from previously—we were, perhaps unlike Ambassador Field's office, quite a large combined DFID and FCO team and we have merged that completely through the course of the last two years. I genuinely think that that has changed our capability. We have a dedicated human rights and atrocity prevention officer who sits within one of our teams, a fully integrated team, but works across in a matrix, working with our conflict team. We are thinking about atrocity prevention within conflict and outside of the conflict as absolutely integral to everybody's work, whether you are a humanitarian adviser or whether you are thinking about sanctions in the economics team. It is built in across the whole embassy, and I genuinely think that is a key benefit of how we have merged the two former Departments in Myanmar.

It is not just about what we do in Myanmar, of course. A significant part of our work is about what happens in New York. We have convened the UN Security Council five times since the coup. That is done by our mission in New York. We have also led at the Human Rights Council and we have issued 10 rounds of sanctions, which happens from the sanctions



team within our headquarters. I am not directly accountable for those, but our country plan looks at the whole range of tools and policy instruments that HMG has and brings them in. I am sure we will want to talk about some of those as we go on.

- Q48 **Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger:** To follow on from that, part of the strategy is to allow ambassadors to have more leeway on how they deal with this. The British have always had a fairly firm line on atrocities and the way we deal with atrocities. If ambassadors had more leeway, do you think that this may, or maybe not, cause inconsistencies in what we are trying to do as UK plc?

Pete Vowles: I don't think so, personally. I have a very clear country plan, which we are redrafting at the moment for this period, that I am accountable for, and I feel a direct connection between that and ministerial direction. Then I work really closely—we have a very capable Myanmar team in headquarters and so we work as a team on those issues. I do not have direct influence over our sanctions policy or what we exactly say in New York, but we do that as a team and I think that works very well at the moment. I do not think that I am missing any scope that I would do differently with more accountability than I am doing today. I do not feel constrained by any lack of empowerment or lack of space from where I sit.

- Q49 **Chair:** Pete, could I push you a little bit on this? Who writes the country strategy plan?

Pete Vowles: We do, with my colleagues in—we have been working on it for a couple of months now. We have been building the evidence base. Ultimately it will be signed off in headquarters and we are working through it with our colleagues in the Myanmar unit in London and the Ministers will sign that off. But very much we own it and I feel accountable for it.

- Q50 **Chair:** That is what I find interesting. Reading your biogs, you both come from a development background, and I wonder if it is coincidence that both of you understand atrocity prevention and the broader context and the importance of civil society, for example, because you come from a development background. I think Ian was asking if it is possible that ambassadors might be subjective in prioritising atrocity prevention depending on what their emphasis is, or is there anything built into the system currently to make sure you are all on a level playing field for things like that? Is atrocity prevention in your plan?

Pete Vowles: It is certainly within our plan. Yes, it is true that I come from a previous development background. That said, I have learnt a huge amount from our atrocity prevention lead and from the online training that we had as FCDO about the international system. I came into this not having full experience of the international architecture on sanctions or on UN Security Council products and I have learnt masses about that. I think



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you come with an advantage but also you learn from the team, and we have a great team that does that.

The nature of our understanding and the country development guide has the understanding of context, which I hope across the world we think through what the risks are and what our plans are as an embassy wherever we are. I would like to think that there is not a binding constraint from anywhere else. There will clearly be a debate about the context and the priorities, but I think that there is the ability to use the country planning process to understand that context. I don't think that is because I have a former development background.

Q51 Chair: Ambassador, you mentioned the conflict adviser. How did you get that post? Was that given to you, did you request it or was there a series of flags that went up that qualified you to get one?

Matthew Field: I think that that is one of the areas where the presence of ODA in a post makes quite a significant difference. This is looking back pre the merger of our two Departments. We were spending UK taxpayer money in an environment in which there are conflict legacies running through effectively everything that we do. The adviser position came with the money. That is as it was presented and, frankly, I bit their hand off because it is such an incredibly useful resource.

On the scrutiny point, speaking to the question about the degree to which ambassadors have leeway, I think that I have a great degree of autonomy and responsibility, but I am scrutinised. That scrutiny is not only days like today, but it is when I set out the country plan to London and I get asked the tough questions about why I am trying to deliver particular things, whether I have the right resources and so on. This is where with some of the development background—not only mine but now we have FCDO and people asking, "What is the theory of change? What are we trying to effect in a way that is slightly more long term and systematic in its approach?"—I have felt that benefit. I still think that we get those benefits even in a post like ours that did not have DfID at the time of the merger, and that is the good news.

Q52 Mr Virendra Sharma: To perform well, you need quite a lot of training and support. What training and support do you get from the Foreign Office to do your job and in what context have you made use of it?

Pete Vowles: I think that there is a huge amount of support to be an ambassador or training to be an ambassador. Before I went to Myanmar last summer, I had a couple of months of communications, leadership, finance and audit training, and general training about being a head of mission. We do that every time we go and it is a great way to reconnect. It is also a great way to have a network of people starting at the same time. I have a WhatsApp group of eight of us who all started at the same time and some are very seasoned, experienced ambassadors and some are on their first head of mission role, like me.



Specifically on atrocity, as I said earlier there is a very good training module that has videos and podcasts on the intranet that I went through from Myanmar. The support comes from within the team. That is a view of leadership that it is not that I have all the answers, but ultimately that the answers come from the expertise in the team. We have a fantastic conflict team. We have a great atrocity prevention officer who, as I said earlier, I learn a lot from daily, but I think we also learn a lot from our partners.

Following the response to the Rohingya crisis, we looked quite hard at ourselves to think, "Do we have enough in our understanding and analysis?" We have broadened out our analytical products to look at patterns to see how it works, to look at the changing conflict dynamics, to look at the military and what they are doing and how they are moving, the military strategy and the people. I have to be careful of hubris, but I get a huge amount of technical support from accessing that and from talking to our experts about what is happening on the ground. This comes into the personal support as the head of mission, but also our early warning triggers that we will come on to.

Matthew Field: I agree with all of that. One of the points that I have understood, particularly during the last six months of the heightened crisis that we have been through, is the enormous amount of resource that we have in our teams, particularly among the country-based staff—our local hires. There are people working in the embassy in Sarajevo who have been here for 20 years, who have lived through conflict and atrocities and have found ways of delivering sustainable, long-term change, alongside local partners. When I come in, it absolutely has to be with a sense of humility that even with that training under my belt and my experience in the region, I really need to come in and be ready to learn from those colleagues. I think that the offer has greatly improved in this area in recent years.

The new modules that Pete mentioned have been incredibly helpful. One of my lessons—and this is something that I will certainly pass on to my successor—is that it is very difficult to make time for the learning in the midst of a crisis. With hindsight I would have front-loaded maybe a bit more of that work. Of course you don't know a crisis is coming, but I think particularly coming into a country like Bosnia and Herzegovina, where this clearly will be a major focus, I would do things differently in that way, but I think that the overall offer and support has been very good. For me it is about openness, particularly to engaging with professionals, whether they are in the academic or the civil society community. There is an awful lot of expertise out there, and if we are willing to listen there is a huge amount to improve.

Q53 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** You both briefly touched on my next question, but I still feel that there is room to elaborate on it. Can you always access what you need? Would you ever consider bringing in external teams in crisis situations?



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Matthew Field: It is probably my turn to go first, so let me jump in, and then I would very much like to hear from Pete on this one as well.

I think that the balance we have and the more that I reflect on my time here in Bosnia and the experience of the heightened crisis we have been through is that you need a combination of subject expertise on conflict atrocity prevention, absolutely the benefit of looking at that holistically across different environments, but you really need the in-country expertise at the same time. There is a real added value, and I think it comes primarily from the embassy team, to having people who understand in detail, not just what is happening today but what happened five years ago and the trajectory that we are on for the next five years.

My answer to the question is that I feel that I have the in-country resources I need, but I need the ability to draw on the expertise that is external. We have FCDO crisis teams that can surge capacity, not only on consular but on different aspects—political and other types of crises—but I have not felt the need to draw on those during the last six months because I don't think that has been the kind of crisis that we have had here. We have had one where it is primarily about drawing on the expertise and making sure that we are doing the best that we can with the in-country resources. I think that Pete's context has been slightly different, but that is my take at least.

Pete Vowles: I think it is worth saying, and perhaps stating the obvious, that in Myanmar it has been an incredibly difficult two years for our embassy and for embassies around the world. The Covid restrictions meant that we were severely constrained with people doing four to six weeks mandatory quarantine to get in and out of Myanmar, if they could get in and out. The coup has changed the nature of the posting as a place to live for international staff. We have had to draw down families, partners and children, so it has been extremely difficult. I pay huge credit to everybody who has stuck with it and continued to work and the public service that they have shown working for HMG in Myanmar, and our country-based staff similarly who have seen their entire country reversed and go back into really dark times. I give huge credit for everything they do daily.

Within that context we have what we need. There is a bit of turnover that comes as a result of the challenges, but we have succeeded—and again credit to the team—in keeping the networks and relationships alive during this really difficult time and keeping the partnerships with think tanks and people who have spent their lives working on Myanmar from within the region or from within Myanmar who really understand the complexity. Every day I am blown away by the people who have spent 20, 30 years learning about and understanding the complexities of it. They are an amazing resource to be able to turn to in understanding what is happening and how it is shaped by the history and by today. Whether that is trying to understand how patronage networks have changed, who



the potential influencers are of the military—all of that has come from the relationships we have had outside of HMG that have been able to provide us with the real knowledge that we need to do our jobs.

It is about making sure that we keep connected to the latest evidence with our colleagues in the UK, making sure that we are thinking through the different approaches to prevention, so we are not stuck but we are thinking about where the evidence is globally. For instance, something we have done this year that I think is brilliant is the Myanmar Witness work, which is using tech and data to verify human rights abuse atrocity cases. That has been fantastic and we have done that in a year, again learning from examples around the world.

I am happy to talk about that, but I think we get the support that we need. It doesn't mean we have the answers because it is incredibly difficult, but I think we have the support we need to do what we are doing.

Q54 Theo Clarke: Mr Vowles, you just mentioned about using technology and data. I understand that the FCDO suggested that the embassy in Myanmar should draw on lessons from atrocities committed against the Rohingya to develop an atrocity monitoring and early warning system. Can you tell the Committee a bit more about that particular system and specifically any lessons that led from it?

Pete Vowles: You are right: after the Foreign Affairs Committee report into the Rohingya, there was a number of lessons for us, including looking at what our early warning system was and making sure that we are detailing our monitoring. There is not a computer system that flashes red or green, but we have a range of tools at our disposal that are constantly monitoring what is happening across the country. Some of those tools are understanding troop movements, understanding conflict dynamics and what is happening, and connecting to political movements in conversations we are having. We have a third party that looks at open source reporting of who is talking to who, what they are doing, what they are saying and where they are.

I think that combines to give us good evidence of what is happening that we are able to then trigger into a response. A good example might be in December when we heard from our humanitarian partners in Karen State about rumours of imminent attacks in Karen State. That triggered our antennae to say, "What is this?" and we did a bit of work to look at it. We looked at where the troop movements were and conversations that were happening. Several days later, just before Christmas, there were the attacks, the airstrikes, but because we were concerned that there was something happening, we had been able to pivot our humanitarian response and alert our humanitarian partners and make sure that they had the resources so that 200,000 people were able to get lifesaving assistance almost immediately. We didn't prevent it, and let's be honest about the UK's influence, but we were able to understand what was happening and to mitigate the worst impacts for the people who were



affected by it. I think we have some good examples in the course of the past year, but I am being very careful about overclaiming in preventing things.

The other thing we have built since the Foreign Affairs Committee report is the Myanmar Witness example. We have this partnership where our witnesses are identifying and documenting atrocities and then reporting and recording them so that they can be used for ultimate criminal justice. We can talk more about that, but that is a great example of us being able to verify reports and rumours. Myanmar is such a land of social media rumours that it is very hard to know the facts sometimes, but I think that the Myanmar Witness has been a brilliant invention following the coup where we have been able to very clearly identify and have some confidence in knowing that something is a verified incident. We have a chain of how we use that, either making statements ourselves or taking it to the UN Security Council. It flows through the whole chain of our prevention approach.

Q55 Chair: It is very interesting to hear about that early warning system. Is that specific to your country or is this quite a typical system that is now rolled out in embassies across the world, or are you the example of best practice?

Pete Vowles: It is a good question. I am not sure that I know the answer to that. I may have to defer but I can see Matt wants to come in.

Theo Clarke: I can see Ambassador Field wants to jump in.

Matthew Field: I can tell you that one of the posts that has borrowed extensively from this great practice is ours. We looked around and we asked who was doing exactly this kind of risk tracking well and that has given us a structure. The challenge for us, and the point that has been made, is that there is an enormous flow of information, even in a relatively small country, a mass of information or disinformation, particularly in heightened periods of tension. We took some of those structures, adapted them slightly and now have a tool that we can use to track the risks in different areas—political, rhetorical, military, paramilitary, proxy. That has given me a structure in which to parse the information that is coming through and it has been super helpful for us.

I will add that the UK is not the only one doing this. We need to be working with partners to share information, but also to take advantage of a much greater deployment of assets in many cases. The OSCE is a good example for me here. It has literally 10 times the number of staff in-country, and so it only makes sense for me to try to tap into their mapping of hate speech, say, or into community incidents and to take advantage of that, rather than trying to replicate everything ourselves.

Q56 Theo Clarke: Thank you. Mr Vowles, could you tell us a bit more about the joint analysis of conflict and stability and specifically how it is being used to inform the UK's policy towards Myanmar?



Pete Vowles: Yes. We are harmonising an update of the JACS—joint analysis of conflict and stability—at the moment. I think that it shows us the point I made in my opening remark about the nature of this conflict system. I think it is very easy, although perhaps not for this Committee, for outsiders to look at Myanmar and see it is quite binary as a conflict between the civilians and the military or perhaps to see it from 2017 as purely around the Rohingya, horrific though it was. To understand the conflict system and the underlying causes of conflict is much deeper and much more multifaceted.

That is how I was trying to describe the three interlocking conflicts that have come out of our JACS analysis to understand the one about the civil conflict, the conflict subnationally between the ethnic organisations and the social autonomy and the Bamar land, and then the identity and societal conflict. In any part of the country, the JACS is teasing out how they interlock and overlay with each other and how dangerous it is to see just one part of that.

A really difficult message right now in Myanmar, where the key raw emotion of the country—and rightly so—is about the military's illegal coup, is trying to understand that there are so many other parts of this conflict that stem from 70 years back and we have to ensure that what we do in our response understands that complexity and does not try to resolve just one bit of it. There are the conversations we have, for instance, with the democratic opposition about the 1982 citizenship law, what it is they are prepared to resolve in terms of some of the issues that affect the Rohingya community particularly. Obviously you need to see the whole country in the round and see the deeper underlying causes in the round.

I think that the JACS is fundamental for us. When I say it now it sounds obvious, but it is trying to think through how that shapes what we have to do in the coming years and that everything we do in Myanmar has to be informed by that understanding.

Q57 **Chair:** Pete, could I ask a follow-up on that? Is the JACS something that London will say to all missions, "We want you to do one"? Does it come from London when there is an awareness of conflict, or is it something that in-country you would say, "Excuse me, I think we might have a problem and we need to do one"?

Pete Vowles: To be honest, I am not sure there is an obvious simple answer.

Chair: What are the triggers?

Pete Vowles: For us, in this case we have done a JACS. I was a regional director for the DfID for this area before and I recall we had a JACS some years ago. It was not me who suggested it this time. It was our conflict team who suggested that following the coup—following the change in the conflict map of Myanmar—we should update and relook at it. That was



driven from within the embassy with a view that we needed to understand better how everything changed in Myanmar on 1 February 2021.

It is a very much a local initiative, but with full support from colleagues in London. We had an external consultant lead it, but we ran it with colleagues in London as part of that process, did it as a joint exercise very much shaping that, and we have talked about how we will share that with external partners. My director in London chairs a small group of like-minded partners and asks questions about how we share that analysis with international partners.

Forgive my ignorance of not knowing whether there is a formal timeframe for when a JACS needs to be updated or not, but certainly for us thinking through our country, our context, it is something that we wanted to do.

Q58 Chair: Thank you. I think it is quite an in-depth piece of work. Is there a light-touch early intervention document that you can use and circulate? What I am trying to get at is at what point would hate crime, othering, an increase in violence or government policy shifting reach a threshold that it would come on a broader radar than just people in-country saying that this is a shift that is quite interesting?

Pete Vowles: I am not sure I have a very good answer, Chair, as to what the thresholds would be. As a regional director, I would have expected leaders to be making a set of judgments together about the changing context and what is bubbling up. Certainly in Myanmar in parallel to this we have a pretty comprehensive risk framework that sets it out, and I agree my risk appetite with my director and say my level of risk appetite for safeguarding risks and operational risks. I write to my director every quarter setting out where we are on those risks. That is the kind of thing that would come up if we were seeing a change in hate speech or a particular shift. I would expect us in the country board that I chair to identify that in our risk framework and for me to report that to my director in London to say this is a change—a rising risk in our risk framework.

That prompts the conversation and the insight about what we do about it. It might well be that we say, “We need some more analysis on this”, or it may be we say we need a full-blown JACS, but I think that is a way of personally making the iterative understanding of the shifts in context. Sometimes they change without you necessarily knowing, if you have been there four years. That is the kind of discipline that I think works very well between an embassy and a team in the UK.

Chair: Thank you. The reason I am pushing on this, and it goes back to Ian Liddell-Grainger’s earlier question, is about removing the subjectivity so that there is a system, whether that is in France, for example, or Myanmar, that the same early warning signs are being investigated and an analysis done. Thank you.



Q59 Chris Law: Matt, I have a couple of questions for you. By the way, it is a pleasure to see you since our visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I hope you and your team are well. I wish you all the best in the very near future for your ongoing journey.

I want to ask a couple of questions. Over the last year there has been a number of threats, somewhat increasing, coming from different areas, to the peace and stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina. What lessons have you been able to take away from Myanmar? I know you have mentioned about risk tracking, but have there been lessons from your counterparts in Myanmar for setting up a monitoring and warning system?

Matthew Field: It is a good question, Chris. The visit of the IDC and the opportunity to sit down and discuss with you, Dr Ferguson and the Committee members left us with quite a to-do list of things to follow up on.

We have done a good job on risk tracking. I think we have done well in making a bit of a shift, partly based on your visit and partly based also on conversations with the embassy team from Myanmar, to stop looking at atrocities particularly in the context of conflict. Clearly there is significant overlap, they are interlinked and interdependent, but there are things that can happen, particularly in the preparation for atrocities, that are not necessarily in the context of conflict. That is one of the mindset shifts that we have been able to make over the last few months and that absolutely is partly drawing on the work of the Myanmar team.

The monitoring work we are doing is not at the same scale as the Myanmar embassy. I don't think we have the same data-driven approach and that is a conversation that Pete and I had last week about what we might do to learn from them and systematise a bit more how we deal with this. I think that we are doing better in some areas. There is still a bit more to do, and working with the new and really impressive data analysis colleagues that we have in FCDO I think we have a real opportunity to do more on those lines.

Q60 Chris Law: If atrocities are already being seen outwith conflict, in other words perhaps escalating in a domestic environment or behind closed doors at home, as in domestic violence for example, how do you raise the alarm with London? What sort of triggers does it give for the FCDO to start to take further action? How would you do that and what would happen if you did?

Matthew Field: That is a really good question. I will give a bit of context on the domestic violence point. During the Covid lockdown, and clearly this was a global challenge, we were contacted by shelters and partners that dealt with gender-based violence. The people who we had worked with on our preventing sexual violence in conflict work, the CRSV side of things, were reaching out to us and saying, "We are seeing an increase in demand for services or current domestic violence challenges". That was the point at which I reached back into London and asked if we could



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access some of the emergency Covid-related programme funds that were available and target them specifically towards those shelters that were, frankly, overwhelmed. We were able to do that with eight of the 10 major domestic violence shelters in the country and see them through a bridging period, combined with policy work where I would go in and essentially lobby to make sure that the local authorities took on those financial responsibilities for the increased demand for services. For me, that is a good example of where we accessed the programme funds relatively quickly. It was not huge amounts per se. We got in and we got back out again with a sustainable solution in place.

On the atrocity side, again for me it is a challenge to distinguish between the different types of problem that we are talking about here. An inter-ethnic incident in a community that is particularly divided may have the appearance of organised crime or a domestic violence issue, so sometimes it is hard to unpack exactly what we are looking at. When we started flagging this increase in rhetoric, and the use of division and denialism, we accessed more support from London. We got more ministerial engagement and more parliamentary engagement as well, which was very welcome. We got a new special envoy for the western Balkans, who has bolstered our senior engagement, and we applied sanctions. For the first time we used our UK sanctions regime for two individuals in this country who we felt were most responsible for destabilising activity. To me, that is a good example of what we were able to do. It is not sufficient in itself. We have partners that we need to continue to deliver all of this with, but to me it speaks to the response.

Sorry, this is the last point. We played a hand behind the scenes discreetly in making sure that the peacekeeping mission, Operation Althea, drew on its reserves and doubled its presence across the country to try to prevent anything further deteriorating.

Q61 Chris Law: I will ask a final question. Matt. That is really helpful. Given your departure very soon, what do you feel needs to be built on most and developed for the continued success of what has been done in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Matthew Field: I will stress that this a whole of mission approach. This is absolutely not driven by one person, whether that is the person at the top or the person who is doing the day-to-day work of compiling statistics or tracking down data. It is a whole of mission approach and it has to be. I am very confident that when I step out in a few weeks' time the mission will continue to follow up on all of this work.

One of my takeaways is the conversation that I am already having with my successor about ensuring that he is clear-sighted on the centrality of what we are doing here. I am encouraging him to do some of the training opportunities that I mentioned, the ones that I wish I had grabbed a bit earlier so I was not trying to do it in the middle of a crisis. Also, feeding back into other heads of mission training so that they themselves have the same opportunities to draw on that expertise. With the network that I



have mentioned already, it genuinely feels like colleagues are there to help each other. We sat down last week during our leadership conference with our colleagues from Kampala, Khartoum and others who are going through different but related challenges. I think that that is one of the best things we can do.

Chris Law: Thank you, Matt.

Q62 **Kate Osamor:** Hi, Matt. It is really good to see you. Welcome and thank you for your hospitality when we came over. We appreciate that and we learnt a lot.

I want to start off by asking the same question, but I will start with Pete. You spoke briefly about working on the country plan. Is it possible for you provide the Committee with what your objectives and priorities are?

Pete Vowles: Yes, absolutely. Our country plan has four components to it. The first is about pushing for a de-escalation of violence to make space for a political resolution, so it is our political work. The second is sustaining efforts to support civil society and ensure a plurality of voices, which includes some of the work we have been doing with the Security Council, making sure that democratic voices are heard and are able to shape and build a common and inclusive future vision for that. The third is mitigating the worst impacts of the coup and the violence through our humanitarian programme. The fourth is supporting progress towards criminal accountability and broader justice, and in particular that includes recording human rights abuses, supporting the IIMM mechanism.

Those are the four key headline objectives of the country plan.

Q63 **Kate Osamor:** Thank you. Can you tell us what challenges the embassy is facing in preventing atrocities while also working on these objectives and priorities?

Pete Vowles: There is an operational challenge that I referred to earlier that I should not understate, given the challenge of operating in Myanmar now, the challenge of getting in and out and so on, so the operational side and certainly the challenge of getting visas and getting people in there. There is a link to that that extends out to our wider partnerships too, given the pressure that much of civil society is under from the regime, in their own status and user agreements. That ranges all the way from the UN through to a small organisation. We have got round that in many ways through our localisation and working with local partners as best we can. That is a set of operational challenges.

There is a wider set of being out and about in Myanmar. It is extremely difficult to travel right now, although we try to get out, but much of our authority to operate is in Yangon. Being able to travel around to some of the more conflict-affected areas is very difficult, as it is in any conflict-affected states. That is very hard too.



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The elephant in the room is that the military regime has shown no intent to interact or to engage with civil society or even with any kind of meaningful conversation about dialogue. That makes it incredibly difficult when there is a military that is basically bent on, in its language, eradicating huge parts of the population. That makes for an extremely difficult context. Again being very honest, our levers are limited in much of that.

I have talked a bit already about the intelligence gathering and the evidence analysis, understanding what is happening. I have talked a bit about calling it out and we do a public calling it out in statements at the UN Security Council. We do a more private calling it out with regional partners, our ASEAN partners and neighbours, who may well have more traction than we would.

Q64 **Kate Osamor:** Thank you, Pete. Matt, as you are coming to the end of your job in Bosnia, what would you pass on to the person who is taking over? What would you say will be one of their biggest challenges or what should they look out for?

Matthew Field: Thanks, Kate, and again thanks for the visit from all of you, because it was incredibly useful and it really did have an impact. I will stress that what happens and is said in our Parliament is absolutely tracked and followed and has an impact here on the ground. It is part of the overall approach, as I see it.

On the big challenge here, again this is a complicated country but actually we can make it quite simple. For a very long time Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a consequence-free environment in which whether you use hate speech or you abuse your position for corrupt benefit, and there were no consequences, essentially. I think that the overall objective of the UK's interest here is to create an environment in which there start to be consequences. Those could be external consequences—we have mentioned sanctions, and internal finance is a big lever—but even more important I think are the domestic consequences, the domestic court process and elections. That is how people should be removed from office. That is the mechanism, so investing in those tools and processes is the best thing that we can do.

Overall, as I come to the end of my four years, I am still relatively optimistic about this country, because the people are enormously capable and successful wherever they go. We are just trying to give them the opportunity to be successful at home. I think that is the kind of legacy that the UK benefits from, and UK taxpayers get value for money when we all pull in that direction.

Q65 **Chair:** Thank you, gentlemen. Please say to your teams how enormously impressed we are with the work that they are doing. As I said earlier, it is not a coincidence that you are here. The reason that we felt empowered to hold this whole inquiry is because we have seen the difference that your work is making in your countries. We strongly believe that around



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the world the FCDO has amazing local and London teams, and we think that there is a huge role for us to be the world's canary for early intervention with atrocity prevention.

We will be publishing a report. In an ideal world, what would you like to see in that report? What are the top recommendations that you hope we pick up on for atrocity prevention? Pete, I will ask you, if that is okay.

Pete Vowles: Goodness. Other than trying to demand that the military step back in Myanmar and return the elected government, but that may be beyond the IDC's influence—

Chair: We would try, but even for us that might be a little too much. Rather than focusing on your country, what would be a general recommendation? I have to say that we are a very stubborn lot and we may or may not take forward what you are recommending.

Pete Vowles: I think one of the interesting things is how we systematise the learning on using digital and data. Not that we have an all-singing, all-dancing thing that the light flashes green or red, but the stuff we have been doing—and I take no credit for it, it was the team before me—on the setting up of Myanmar Witness I think is a really interesting model and it came from a context. I wonder how we could scale that up as a model that we use elsewhere. It may be that we think about how we use that model and build it out as something we can use in multiple countries, with being able to recognise the need to be context specific, or is it something that we could replicate? It came from a set of circumstances and a set of people and set of partners. How could we make that a more strategic choice given the ability we have with tech and data today? I think that we would benefit across HMG.

Matthew Field: The first thing is the message of recognition is incredibly important, especially for our country-based staff. We have fantastic diplomatic and development staff, but our country-based staff continue to make an enormous contribution. Thank you already for the recognition of them that you made.

I think that there is the message that a country like Bosnia and Herzegovina has friends and ones that will continue to pay attention to what is happening here and will not allow it to slide backwards.

The third one—and this is not only inspired by the ribbon that you are wearing—when we look at what is happening in Ukraine for many people here it is incredibly painful to watch, because the footage looks almost exactly the same as it did from 1992 to 1995. We have the same rhetoric and the same techniques of misinformation and many other things. I very much hope that we will learn the lessons that we have learnt here. I think we are already showing that. There is a great deal still to be done. I am very happy to see survivors of sexual violence here reaching out to organisations inside Ukraine themselves, and the Srebrenica memorial centre is helping to advise on the ways to document atrocities.



I think that we have the opportunity to get a lot of things right this time round that maybe we did not get right before. That would be a great contribution to make in the terrible scenes that we are seeing.

Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you, gentlemen, and please thank your teams. We will now pause this session while we get our second panel of witnesses in.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and Leigh Stubblefield.

Q66 **Chair:** I will start with our second panel in our inquiry into promoting dialogue and preventing atrocities. We are very lucky to be joined by Lord Ahmad and Leigh Stubblefield. Lord Ahmad, could you tell us your job title and your remit, because it is ever expanding, and then introduce your colleague, please?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, it is a pleasure to be back here and I look forward to our discussions this afternoon as well as the lead up to some of the events later this year, which have a direct relevance to the subject we are discussing here.

My job title is Minister of State for South and Central Asia, North Africa, United Nations and the Commonwealth. Within that context, I also cover off issues of human rights and I am the Prime Minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. There is a raft of other responsibilities as well, but that is it for the official title. I will let Leigh introduce herself.

Leigh Stubblefield: Good afternoon, I am Leigh Stubblefield. I am the deputy director from the Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office's Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation. My Department has the lead on atrocity prevention.

Q67 **Chair:** Thank you both for making the time today. Lord Ahmad, this is not meant to be a silly question, but what do you think atrocity prevention is?

Lord Ahmad: Simply put, it is an intervention that prevents issues of conflict escalating in a given country but, most importantly, protecting citizens irrespective of who they are, what gender they are or what faith they belong to—it is about protecting those innocent civilians in a given situation.

Of course atrocities can take place, as the majority of cases do—in two-thirds of situations—within conflict zones, and there is undoubtedly a focus on that. But equally we are very cognisant of the fact, and there are many country situations reflective of that, that they can take place in non-conflict zones as well. We need to be vigilant to that as well.

Q68 **Chair:** For clarity, do you accept that given the responsibility to protect,



the UK must act to prevent crimes against humanity, genocide and ethnic cleansing, even if these happen outside of conflict?

Lord Ahmad: Yes. As someone who has at my core all my responsibilities that I explained, the issue of human rights is close to my heart and probably the most challenging part of my portfolio. Equally, I think the interventions, whether we do them through the United Nations on conflict zones or on non-conflict zones, it is important also that we act with key partners in our interventions, but ultimately there is a duty to protect. In the responsibility to protect, the criteria laid out through the three pillars of intervention are very clear and we certainly abide by those in what we do and how we act.

Chair: That is very reassuring to hear.

Q69 **Chris Law:** It is interesting to hear your response. It is a pleasure to see you again. Only today we had a UQ on a shoot to kill policy in Xinjiang. The UK Government are one of the few governments now that still say that they cannot commit to calling it genocide when other developed countries are, which is why it was interesting to hear what your position is.

But the question I want to ask you is that the FCDO stated in November last year it does not believe it is necessary to have a cross-departmental strategy to prevent mass atrocities. Can you tell me if that is still the Government position, if that has changed and, if so, why?

Lord Ahmad: On a strategy specific—and I am sure we will come on to that because I know there is a recommendation from the IDC for an atrocity prevention strategy—as the Minister responsible I do not dismiss that in any shape or form. We have to evolve and learn. I have read some of the background of the visits you have done.

Equally, it is important to act in conjunction with other Departments. If I can use the very live example of Ukraine, there we have a very clear example of how we have the Attorney General, ourselves as the FCDO, the MoD, the Ministry of Justice, as well as other Departments, working in a cross-government fashion in different elements because different parts of Government have different responsibilities. My experience of Government over the last 10 years lends itself to that. When we work together, not just as international partners but cross-government, that lends itself to a much better outcome.

Q70 **Chris Law:** Do you agree, therefore, that you need a coherent strategy for that to happen?

Lord Ahmad: The issue is that we have a framework that is—Leigh, I am sure, will speak to that—within the framework of this new specialist unit that we have and we will be announcing the working of that framework document. But as I said, I am not answering yes or no. What I am saying is that I am keen, from the outcomes of your particular inquiry, to determine whether going forward we need specific elements of a strategy.



Taking a step back to look at key components of atrocity prevention—let's take issues of religious persecution around the world—freedom of religion or belief is a key priority. We have a conference later this year. We are developing a full-scale response to the Bishop of Truro report but also ensuring we have key focus in strategy and action. As I said in my introduction, I am the Prime Minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence and conflict. I am in the midst of crossing the "t"s and dotting the "i"s on our PSVI strategy, which will embed for three years irrespective of who is doing what role. It is a focused strategy. Strategies in my mind are important, because they are cross-government, as you have said yourself, but equally they allow for a much more medium and long-term focus on key priorities.

People change but at the same time by having a strategy it keeps the Government on the specific direction. I am not saying no, but at the moment we are working through a framework. I am keen, as I said, to see the outcomes of your inquiry to see how that lends itself to consideration for a strategy in this area.

Q71 Chris Law: How did the lack of a strategy affect the Government's ability to foresee, prepare for, and respond to the campaign of crimes against humanity and war crimes that are now unfolding in Ukraine?

Lord Ahmad: I think that there were lessons learned from recent issues and challenges we had, including in Afghanistan. It is the ability, coming back to what the Chair said right at the start, to work together as Departments. I think we were very coherent in our approach. We were very much on the front foot when it came to responding to the crisis in Ukraine. Relationships matter. Diplomacy is a key part of atrocity prevention and our relationships with President Zelensky, in my case with Foreign Minister Kuleba, as with the Foreign Secretary, were very key to determining what are the key priorities and what interventions are required.

Recently, as you may be aware during our presidency of the UN Security Council, even in a multilateral sphere we were very specific in ensuring that multilateral focus and action continues, notwithstanding the fact that this aggression, this war on Ukraine, is by a P5 member.

I think we have been prepared. I have a briefing tomorrow, which you may be attending, on the humanitarian elements of our strategy in Ukraine. We have been seeking, and again learning from the Afghanistan crisis, to ensure that there is regular briefing to colleagues across Parliament to ensure we can show what we are doing and engaging diplomatically, humanitarian-wise and also in the military support we are extending to Ukraine, and it is cross-government.

Q72 Chair: Could I clarify one point? Is the PSVI strategy a cross-departmental strategy?



Lord Ahmad: Yes, while the lead is us, as FCDO, on a raft of different areas—again, and I know you and I have talked about this—I am very keen to see the application of this when it comes to domestic issues. When we look at war criminals, for example, who may come to the UK, we have a structured approach in the UK Government, including with the Home Office, to ensure that there is a coherent approach to that. Again, a strategy is there. I am very keen to scope with that and certainly to share with you an early version to get your feedback on that.

We have, if I can use this opportunity, the PSVI conference, which is now scheduled for the end of November. In the lead up to that I am very keen to engage with the Committee in terms of the input into the strategy and specific outcomes for the conference itself.

Chair: Thank you, we appreciate that, Minister. As you know, it is something this Committee has taken a keen interest in for many years, not least being led by Pauline Latham.

Q73 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** How does the UK decide whether to prioritise its atrocity prevention work?

Lord Ahmad: I have already alluded to the fact we have focus on various countries where there are conflict situations and also countries where perhaps by definition there are non-conflict associations, but there is a humanitarian crisis unfolding. Earlier today you met with two of our ambassadors from Myanmar and Bosnia, and I am very aware of the Committee's strong engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina. If I can take that as an example of technically what would have been described as a non-conflict zone, you cannot take your eye off the ball. It is very important that we sustain and retain our focus, particularly with civil society organisations, to ensure issues of sustaining peace where there are differences or differing perspectives can be addressed early on to prevent an atrocity occurring.

However, on our intervention, particularly on conflict zones as I articulated earlier, the responsibility to protect this very clear intervention, first and foremost the security or conflict prevention is with a sovereign state. That is obvious within the chapter 6 and 8 interventions I believe you can make under Pillar 2, where there is a humanitarian requirement of an intervention. Certainly we see even within the context of the UN key corridors, although it is very challenging, for example, in Syria where one would argue perhaps the immediate conflict has ended but the humanitarian crisis continues, that those humanitarian corridors continue.

The third instance, of course, is where countries can act hopefully with the endorsement to mandate the UN Security Council to intervene to ensure that atrocities can be prevented.

Q74 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** Who is overseeing atrocity prevention in Whitehall and what is the grade of that postholder?



Lord Ahmad: The grade is at Cabinet level—it is my boss, the Foreign Secretary, and I, as the Minister responsible within the FCDO. Ultimately on interventions internationally the lead is by the Foreign Secretary and, as I have already indicated in my response to—and he will not mind me—Chrisji, because I am going to refer to you as “Virendraji”, it is appropriate that we act together. In this instance, in collaboration most importantly with the Ministry of Defence and the Secretary of State for Defence as well.

Q75 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** What consequences will the ongoing restructure within the Department have on the new Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation in its staff numbers and areas of work?

Lord Ahmad: If I can take a step back, in my professional life I went through one takeover, one merger. Here the merger created the FCDO with the FCO and DfID, which were two very different organisations in culture and practices. But most importantly, what determines a successful coming together is the people. We have retained a lot of our key expertise. Pete Vowles, who you met earlier today, was one of our leading development professionals and is now in a key post in Myanmar. What the merger has allowed us to do is bring together the expertise in diplomacy and development and also ensure that we have a structured and co-ordinated approach within country.

I went through three reincarnations as a Minister, first at the FCO, then as a joint Minister and now as a Minister in the combined FCDO. Certainly from a decision-making perspective—we were talking about PSVI earlier—when it comes to key funding situations it is easier, because you can often have that conversation directly with yourself rather than going to another Minister. But in all seriousness, I think with any coming together of two different cultures it is important that people are kept at the forefront.

There is still work to be done. It is never easy bringing two organisations together but I feel it is the right approach because it allows us to have a very integrated approach, particularly throughout our network.

Q76 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** Do you consider atrocity prevention relevant to areas beyond development programming, such as diplomacy, sanctions and intelligence?

Lord Ahmad: Absolutely. I say that again using a practical example of Ukraine where what we do is a co-ordinated approach. There is a humanitarian dimension and therefore this new unit that Leigh represents as well sits within the director general who looks after humanitarian and development issues. Humanitarian issues arise when there are atrocities. The people who suffer the most are the most vulnerable. Often it is women. Often it is minorities and they are targeted. That is where the atrocities begin. It is important that we co-ordinate what we do from a humanitarian angle in addressing issues of conflict and instability.



Equally important is that the outcomes within that are thought through very carefully through our own conflict observers that we have. We have 90 specialists around the world who have specialist expertise, who are dotted around the world to look at the horizon to see how perhaps where we can, we predict conflicts that may arise. But also when conflict situations arise, as they are currently unfolding in Tigray—again, I know the IDC takes a very close interest on that—we see that we are ready with the outcomes.

Had we not had that horizon, for example, the recent—thankfully they are now continuing—humanitarian corridors that have opened up, where about 40% to 45% of the humanitarian trucks going through almost daily to parts of Tigray are overseen and provided for by the UK, could not have been done. That would not have happened if we did not have an understanding both through our multilateral work with the UN but through our conflict advisers as well on the ground.

Q77 Chair: The 90 conflict advisers that you have, how do you decide where they are dropped on a map?

Lord Ahmad: First, it is the lay of the land in the situations as we see them. We have human rights extending and broadening the issue of specialist advisers. We have people in, for example, Serbia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Geneva importantly, and in New York, who act with our key partners.

Of course as those conflicts arise—I have mentioned Tigray and Ukraine—and situations unravel, we are able to despatch specialists as per requirements. Again taking Ukraine as an example, I was delighted that we secured the appointment of Sir Howard Morrison who, as you know, was a judge at the ICC. But also that underlined the good cross-government working with the Attorney General's office. We had a specialist when it came to issues of criminality through the ICC who we were able to then dispatch as part of the UK offering to work on the ground in Ukraine.

We can identify specialists, and recently we have gone, for example on PSVI, through a refresh to ensure that where we have legal experts, we have refreshed legal experts who are able and eager and have the expertise to act. It is the same when it comes to humanitarian specialists. It is about determining what is the requirement and then despatching appropriately.

Q78 Chair: The fact that they are called conflict advisers, or conflict specialists, implies that it is where there is a conflict bubbling. I am thinking, for example, would we have people now going to the Horn of Africa because we know that extreme poverty is a driver of potential atrocities or, for example, what is happening in Sri Lanka? Is it in our interest and a conflict towards us that we are looking for, or is it about creating stability in countries around the world?



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Lord Ahmad: I think it is both. I will ask Leigh to come in on this as well specific to the workings. In my view, it is very clear that there is—I was in Sri Lanka not so long ago. I am a banker by profession. What was very obvious to me was that there was a need for an intervention and those were the quite specific and quite blunt conversations that we had, along with issues around human rights, but you could foresee some of these.

I did not go there as a conflict prevention expert, I went there in my responsibilities as a Minister where it is about identifying early on. Ultimately, it is my very strong view that where you can prevent an atrocity from occurring, it is in the best interest not just of the country but of us all.

Leigh Stubblefield: To clarify, we have 90 conflict advisers that are permanent members of the FCDO staff. We have a roster of experts with about 500 specialists that we draw down on and that is, for example, the PSVI specialists that the Minister was referring to.

Q79 **Chair:** Is that when there is a crisis, or is that for early intervention?

Leigh Stubblefield: It can be across. OCSM would be seen as a full spectrum department, looking at prevention, at conflict management and resolution as well. It depends on the state of the context and what expertise they require.

Q80 **Chair:** If I could direct this question to both of you, we have been trying for six months—nine months—to bottom out what exactly the Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation is. It has gone through various different name changes, which foxed us but we kept on going. We are delighted that you are here. Could you give us a bit more detail about literally what it is, how many people it is, what grades they are at, if they are a physical resource or someone that is identified in different Departments and thematic areas, because we are struggling?

Lord Ahmad: I will ask Leigh and then I will come in as well.

Leigh Stubblefield: We are a directorate.

Chair: Is it a thing?

Leigh Stubblefield: It is a thing.

Lord Ahmad: Yes, it is an actual thing.

Leigh Stubblefield: My apologies that we have not been able to talk to you. We have a date in the diary though, I hope.

Chair: We have.

Leigh Stubblefield: We will come and speak with you very soon and explain in much more detail what OCSM does. But, yes, it is a thing. We have just come through the restructure. We are about 100 people and we are split across four thematic areas: conflict and atrocity prevention,



gender and conflict, security and stability, and mediation and peace processes.

Q81 **Chair:** What are the numbers of staff and grades?

Leigh Stubblefield: We are about 100 across the board, so from SCS2 down to EO grades. We could give you an organogram but we are literally coming off the back of the restructure that the Minister spoke of, so we are finalising the final structure of the directorate.

Chair: If it could identify how many people are in post and how many are about to be appointed, that will be useful. We love a diagram.

Q82 **Theo Clarke:** The Foreign Secretary came last week to speak to this Committee and she told us that preventing mass atrocities was absolutely in the UK strategic interest. Can I ask what the strategic risks would be to the UK of not preventing mass atrocities?

Lord Ahmad: The first is something I have alluded to already, which is the physical human cost. There is a cost of lives. For every life you save there is a value, in my mind, which is very clear. It is in our interests and it is in the interests of the country. It is fundamentally the right thing to do. If that intervention means that we do so in partnership—again taking Ukraine as a working example—with the country that is directly being impacted it is better. It is more effective because it links in directly with the responsibility to protect engagement criteria.

Equally, where the situation is getting to a point—Syria is again a practical example—where the government itself of that country is committing the atrocities, it is important we gain early intervention through collaborative approaches, in this case through the United Nations, to ensure the key elements of the conflict can be addressed before they become impactful.

On the wider question you had: why is it in the UK interest? The classic example is the Ukrainian conflict; 400 million people were fed through the grain that the Ukraine provided through the world. The Chair talked about a very expanding portfolio; in north Africa, when I visited Egypt during Ramadan, the issue of food security more than energy security was prevalent. In every challenge maybe there is an opportunity. I think there are countries now in Africa, for example—and I think it is an extremely good idea—who are looking at the conflict and their dependency on certain parts of the world and are now looking domestically or within the continent to see how they can leverage underutilised lands, where we can perhaps also focus our support on issues of, for example, irrigation, so that we can address the issue of food insecurity.

The Chair mentioned the issue of drivers of conflict. Yes, there can be issues that can be caused by famine. Again, early intervention is important. Climate change—although there are those within the UN Security Council, including Russia, who try to block every time we have a



debate on climate—you only need to look at the situation around Lake Chad, for example, and you can see how that has been a driver not just for the environmental challenges on the ground but for conflicts. There are other areas as well, such as some of the conflicts in Nigeria, where you have the herdsman and the farmers. Sometimes it is presented as a clash between two religions or two communities, but the underlying driver is often driven by land and food insecurity.

It is not just in our best interests but in our development support, our long-term partnerships, including intervention through multilateral organisations, that we act and we act early. That is why the creation of this department—notwithstanding, Chair, what you have said, and we will provide you with the clarity—is important so we see what the horizon is but also, as I said to Virendraji earlier, that we do not lose sight of areas, including countries such as Bosnia, where the situation is still very much fragile and we need to keep a focus on those as well.

Q83 Theo Clarke: Who specifically is responsible for atrocity prevention on the National Security Council?

Lord Ahmad: I am guessing it is collaborative, but I will write to you specifically. I am assuming it is the Foreign Secretary from an international perspective, but I will be specific on that.

Q84 Theo Clarke: That is very helpful. Considering there is no stand-alone Cabinet Minister specifically dedicated to development on the National Security Council, how do you ensure that the Government have a joined-up approach to preventing atrocities?

Lord Ahmad: Again I flagged it slightly earlier, but the workings of bringing together diplomacy and development were key. There were countries I used to visit as a Foreign Office Minister where I saw real detachment from, for example, priorities I wanted to achieve on human rights. But you would not get the traction because they did not believe you to be, or indeed the ambassador or the high commissioner, the most effective interlocutor, because they felt that relationship was with DfID.

What happens now with the Foreign Secretary as our senior and primary diplomat is her ability to bring together two key dimensions of the United Kingdom's strengths, which I absolutely believe in—the strength of our diplomatic network but also the strength of a core ability of our development experts. That in itself is quite a unique but strengthened approach in how we address issues. I do not think it is a dilution. On the contrary, I think it is a strength.

Q85 Theo Clarke: How do you measure success in whether the UK's atrocity prevention efforts are working?

Lord Ahmad: Some of it is tangible and you can measure, but how do you measure through early intervention if a conflict does not happen or the cost of conflict? It is very difficult. I deploy a very basic measure, driven, I suppose, partly by my own faith, that in every intervention if



you can save the life of a single individual or you can prevent an atrocity from happening—rather than costs or estimate the costs, I think the focus should be on early intervention. That is in itself success. If you can ensure collaborative international action, as we are doing in Ukraine, it is perhaps, I would argue, that being effective in preventing further atrocities and interventions by Russia through the support we were able to give, working on quite strict parameters particularly because of the situation with NATO intervention.

Other times I think it is important to work on learning from interventions of the past. I have mentioned Bosnia, Afghanistan. From all of these situations, strategic decisions have an impact and those strategic decisions have an impact on what the result is in a given country or a given region. We have to ensure that is fed in to our approach to future conflicts.

Chair: Lord Ahmad, you wisely referred to how you measure something that does not happen, and it is always the argument for prevention and early intervention. I think we need to rewrite what our targets and objectives are so that we are able to measure them because it is usually cheaper and it usually has a better longer-term outcome.

Lord Ahmad: I totally agree.

Q86 **Kate Osamor:** What more can you tell the Committee about the new conflict and atrocity prevention hub announced in the international development strategy last week? For example, what is it for? What gaps is it intending to fill?

Lord Ahmad: If I go to Leigh first, and then again I will come back to you on that.

Leigh Stubblefield: The hub is essentially my department; it is at the core of that. The aim will be piloting approaches to conflict and atrocity prevention in a number of priority countries and also working on developing a new conflict and early warning system. Matt and Pete spoke earlier about what is happening in countries. We would say more about that in how we could systemise that across the organisation. I can talk a bit more about that, if that is helpful, and go into detail or we can cover that in our specific session on the OCSM.

The idea is that we would then have across the FCDO mandate that drives a bit more of a coherent and co-ordinated approach to atrocity risks and through partnerships and diplomatic influence and use of funds, so it is a more coherent place.

It is interesting because we would then see the hub sitting within OCSM but, as the Minister has suggested, there is other work happening. There is the accountability work that sits in another part, and there is the legal work and the humanitarian work. We would aim to draw that together



and provide a coherent way of outward facing to countries as to what they wanted from us and let that shape what we want.

Then there would be elements of international work. We know, for example, that our partners, the United States, are developing a strategy on atrocity prevention, and we know that the UN is obviously a key partner in this as well. As Pete mentioned, we are not going to do this alone. I would mention that also. We will look to work with our international partners and share experience and the metrics will be part of that.

Q87 Chair: Where does your influence come from? If you saw a Department that was not playing ball, how could you shove them in the right direction?

Leigh Stubblefield: We have a very embryonic early warning system now. What we base that on is obviously the—it spoke to the question around systemising and prioritising. There is the annual publication of the countries at risk of instability reporting. That is one element that feeds in. If we see countries, whether new conflicts or existing conflicts, are getting worse, we can flag that up through the internal system within the FCDO to the management board, and we do that every two months.

If you are in one of those countries and we see those indicators getting worse, we would get in touch with the country team and say, “Would you like some support? How do you want to work on these things?”

Chair: What are you looking at to be able to say that? You can talk broadly if it is sensitive.

Leigh Stubblefield: We have what we call a stability tracker. That includes some of the elements that Pete and Matt spoke to earlier. It depends on the context. Forgive me if I am going into too much detail. For example, in Russia and Ukraine we are helping them to develop a stability tracker. That looks at prices that we have seen and at military movements. It tracks elements of social media and what is happening on hate speech, for example. It depends and it would be context-specific. This is new so as we learn what we are doing we can systemise that and make that a more systematic offer. At the moment we are working across a range of countries to see what will work and what evidence we can build.

Lord Ahmad: Part of it is creating a specialist core. It is not that these things were not there—Kate hit the nail on the head about where gaps are and how sometimes you can have different silos working in different ways. The essence of this is, yes, it is new because it brings together these different core elements. There can be drivers to conflict, which I have already signalled. The Chair talked about Sri Lanka. Thankfully, touch wood, we can defer that, but you can see what is happening is that it is driven by energy shortage and food shortages, and that could lead to communal conflict. There is a historic legacy there.



How can we intervene and work with key partners—in this case, yes, we are liaising with key regional partners such as India—to ensure that there are interventions that can perhaps prevent? But at the same time, coming back to a point I made earlier, high commissioners or our ambassadors also act as the early signals. You can have a humanitarian driver, a climate change driver, a communal driver; it is how we avert that but have it in a specialist area.

Secondly, it is also about conflict and non-conflict. I said two-thirds of atrocities occur in conflict zones. One third, which is 33%, occur in non-conflict zones. What are those atrocities? Those could be specialist issues. Let's take the issue of freedom of religion. You can have a religious person. Do we have a conflict? One could argue both ways for Afghanistan. What is very clear is you have religious minorities, such as the Hazaras, who are directly being targeted. We need to be ensuring that through diplomacy when we are engaging with our key partners, but also operationally at official level with the Taliban. They know that this is on our agenda and this is not something, as much as they desire recognition and support, we will move away from.

Also in my area of preventing sexual violence in conflict, there is a key component in that, which is the word "preventing" rather than calling it conflict related to sexual violence. I think when William Hague set this up, the idea was on prevention, and that is why I think you need to have—and I look forward to the feedback you have on the strategy. Up until now it has been initiative driven. We have a situation here, we have experts, let's deploy them here, let's call this out in this. How do we structure our different initiatives? How do we ensure that a young girl or woman who has been repeatedly raped, who has gone through the most horrific acts of violence against them, is protected in a conflict zone?

For example, I was at the UN last month with Nadia Murad, herself an incredible survivor, who I am sure the Committee knows. We launched this Murad Code. What is it? It is a tool within this hub, within our approach on our strategy on PSVI, to ensure that a victim of sexual violence is able to provide their testimony in a way that is valid, sustained, credible and, most importantly, allows for a prosecution to take place. Where we have not seen real delivery is that ultimately, yes, there are a lot of strategies, a lot of instruments, but we still see that once those atrocities are committed the people who committed them are not being held to account. Therefore, the idea and the notion behind the hub and the creation of this Department is to bring those strands together in a co-ordinated fashion.

Q88 Chair: It would be helpful for us if we could see a copy of the stability tracker—even if it is blank one, even if it is in confidence—because we would be particularly interested to see the headings that you are focused on. It would also us to be able to unpick what there is that is outside of a conflict situation.

Lord Ahmad: Do we have a date for the briefing on the unit yet?



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Leigh Stubblefield: I think it is in June, and we can bring that there. My team would be absolutely delighted to run you through the projects.

Chair: That would be helpful, thank you.

Q89 **Kate Osamor:** It is a very important topic, as you can see, and the Committee wants to get as much information as possible. Can you tell us what resources the hub will have? You have told us about the workforce, as in the number of advisers, and you also have the roster with 500 people on it. What else will it have and can you tell us how much money it will have?

Leigh Stubblefield: We are waiting to finalise budgets. We do not have that but we can bring that to the meeting when we come in June. Hopefully we will have been able to finalise that.

Q90 **Chair:** The hub is a separate thing from the Office of Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation? Is it the same staff or is it different staff?

Leigh Stubblefield: It sits within.

Lord Ahmad: A component part of.

Leigh Stubblefield: A component part of the OCSM. It is one department within.

Chair: It will be a team within the broader—

Leigh Stubblefield: Exactly.

Q91 **Kate Osamor:** Nick Dyer suggested last week that the new atrocity prevention hub is mainly focusing on preventing sexual violence in conflict. Does it not focus on other areas? You have kind of said it does but can you just be clear as to what it will focus on?

Lord Ahmad: The way I understood Nick's point it was about its current priority that it is looking at immediately. We have this big conference that is coming up. Earlier today, for example, I convened a meeting of about 20-odd countries who are champion countries on PSVI, so we can share their insights very quickly. What Nick was referring to is the immediate priority but, yes, it has a broad mandate.

It is new, as has been said, and we have been very open about that. But we think it is the right approach because it brings together, as I said, different strands of work that we have been doing effectively in certain respects, I would argue, but this allows us to be much more specialist and engaged. One hopes also, having early warning signals, for want of a better term, will allow us to intervene and intervene earlier rather than later.

Q92 **Kate Osamor:** Lord Ahmad, you spoke about the imminent release of the new strategy on preventing sexual violence in conflict. Can you tell us why it is necessary?



Lord Ahmad: I have been doing this for five years now. This is where I sit back and talk about my reflections on life. But in all seriousness this has been learning for me. When I was appointed as the Prime Minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence it was a new responsibility, but it also struck me, "What are the drivers?"

What we have done over the years, what I have seen is different initiatives. I talked about the Murad Code, which is now translated into several languages. It is also in Ukrainian now. That comes as a direct consequence. I was at the UN Security Council chairing the meeting and I turned round to our ambassador and said, "Barbara, we need to get this translated and it needs to be dynamic". What the strategy does is bring together all these different strands of work we have been doing. When I was the FoRB envoy, we launched something called the Declaration of Humanity. That will be part of the strategy as well with again the drivers of what was causing conflict.

When I was in Mosul, I sat down with some Yazidi survivors. This particular woman had been repeatedly raped and tortured to the extent that she was almost devoid of emotion in how she was expressing herself. Some of the testimony she gave was beyond any kind of humanly—some of the victimisation and the atrocities against her children. She said, "Minister, we were reduced to a worth less than an ant for those fighters", so you can imagine what they did to her. However, what she then said really left an impression, which was, "After I left, I went back to my community. I survived the ordeal, I went back to my family and then they rejected me." Stigmatisation; they rejected her child. It was very clear that you need an intervention not just on the prevention but on what happens subsequently. That is what drove the Declaration of Humanity. We have over 50-plus faith leaders now who have signed up to it saying that no faith or belief sanctions the rejection. On the contrary, it should be compassion towards such survivors.

There is also the whole issue of children born of sexual violence. I launched a call to action in November. The Foreign Secretary has called for a new convention that brings again—there are lots of different instruments but they are not in a coherent way. Ultimately, what is the purpose of a strategy? It is to bring things together. It is to ensure it becomes embedded, which it now has. PSVI is very much embedded as part of our policy and programming. It is there for the medium and long term.

I do not know how long I will be in position but, to my mind, my role is to establish something that can be sustainable. That is the principal idea about bringing together all these different initiatives into a coherent strategy, and I think that was lacking.

Q93 **Kate Osamor:** PSVI is an important example of a gender lens being applied to atrocity prevention work, as you rightfully spoke about. Do you have any examples of how you are striving to make atrocity prevention



inclusive to a range of minority groups?

Lord Ahmad: I have alluded to issues of religious minorities already. Every conflict or situation or prevention of an atrocity is focused on a particular community or a particular group. It is tragic consequence, as I said, if you generalise but you do look at it. First, in any conflict zone, the people who suffer are the vulnerable, and often the people who are targeted are young girls, young women, minorities, whoever they may be. You can look at situations in Afghanistan where that is true. You can look at the situation in Tigray and the historic situation. I am sure Matt talked about it in Bosnia. Those in control will target them because they have command and control of a particular situation.

The short answer is absolutely, but it is feeding in those issues. For example, the first thing you will see is discrimination. Then you will see persecution. Then that persecution will lead to violence and much worse. Our intervention should be at the early signs of discriminatory practice. We are already seeing in Afghanistan the appalling nature of marginalising girls, the fact that there are coercive attitudes hijacking religion to somehow justify the means to an end on this issue of veils. Islam does not state that women have to be face veiled, and so on, and Islam's own history provides examples of that, and we need to challenge these things. Therefore, we need to invest very heavily, coming back to a key part of atrocity prevention, which is diplomatic intervention.

I have been very candid with the Islamic world. I have been over in Jeddah, to the OIC. I have talked head on. It is not about a British Minister sitting in London or travelling the world. It is for the world and the region to take full account and say, "This is being done in the name of a religion", which I follow as an individual, but it is collectively for these countries. They must challenge it head on. That is how you will then start getting into the sphere of preventing atrocities from occurring.

It is very easy for a lot of these countries just to sit back and wait until we, at the UN or another country of a like-minded nature, have raised these issues. But it is important we use the current conflicts that we see, the current situations that we see, whether it is a defined conflict zone or not, to call it out early. Early intervention will prevent atrocities. It is a very simple fact.

Q94 **Chair:** Earlier, our ambassador for Bosnia, when asked to give an example of early intervention work, focused on the dramatic rise in domestic violence during the pandemic and how we used our foreign aid money to support the refugees in a transition until the local authorities were able to take that work on. Thinking back to the stability tracker, would something like domestic violence be flagged when you are doing your two-month oversight?

Lord Ahmad: I think again the whole idea of it is being informed in the processes. My short answer is yes, whatever the driver is to ensure that is fed back. I think the learnings that we have, as I said of conflicts or



situations of the past, or indeed conflicts of today, feed into how we will respond most effectively. As Matt will have said about drivers to conflict, you are already seeing that. I am sure you saw it in February when you visited. I think you went there with the Armed Forces APPG. I went with Baroness Goldie, who is the Minister of State for Defence, because there was a message we were sending very strongly. Coming back to a point Chris raised as well about Government Departments acting together, it is ensuring that a message is received.

It is very clear to me, for example, in the situation in Bosnia, that there are certain drivers. Matt alluded to that and you can also see that our work is not done. There are still victims of sexual violence, victims of the atrocities that took place, the aftermath of denial of the Srebrenica massacre that took place, which are still embedded. When I was there with Baroness Goldie it was concerning that as part of the tripartite, Mr Dodik made it known that he would not be attending a meeting. Not only that, he made it known that he was on his way to Moscow and I think a few days thereafter there was this big celebration of Republika Srpska, where there was a real statement being sent of this independence.

These were quite apparent and visual signals, but it is still important and coming back to when Virendra asked me about the situation about how you act, the fact that we sanctioned Mr Dodik sent a very strong signal to others, as well as the President of Republika Srpska, that this is not just comments or statements, but, where we have the instruments that we now have, we will also act.

Q95 Chair: On our visit over there in February we met a mother from Srebrenica where all the males in her family were massacred in the genocide. Her one piece of advice to us on prevention was to follow the people—so when people are being displaced or choosing to leave that is a very clear indicator. Can I ask the same question? For example, we know in Bosnia and Herzegovina now that a lot of the young people are leaving. Is that another trigger that the stability tracker would flag?

Lord Ahmad: Again, they are early signals, so the short answer is yes. What is the driver? It may be an emerging conflict. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I think there is also the issue of economic opportunities and wider issues of long-term employment. We also must recognise, as I am sure Matt listed, and we will be happy to send that, we have a raft of programmes.

Chair: That is why we want to see it, Minister, to get into the detail.

Lord Ahmad: You will, and I will send you through the details. For example, on conflict prevention—and I again use the example of faith communities—we had the Orthodox community, the Jewish community, the Muslim community, as well as the Catholic community. One of the things that we have been driving and supporting is their engagement, their ability to stand in a mosque, a church, a synagogue and to use their opportunity, their engagement with communities to send a consistent



message. We have been investing in relationships. I am a great exponent and believer in civil society empowerment, and that is why at the UN we have been one of the countries, and I have been at the forefront with our ambassador, making sure that civil society has a role.

In Afghanistan currently, there is a plethora of women's organisations and civil society that is still operational, and in our approach we are discreet. We are working with a lot of the women leaders who have arrived here. I meet with them very regularly to be informed in our policy going forward, and again it is to try to avert further atrocities. It depends on the nature of it. The short answer is yes, but I think we need to also look at what the key drivers are for people leaving a particular area or a particular country.

Q96 Mr Richard Bacon: I have only one point, and it reflects something you were saying about going to talk to the OIC and the work that you have done in various Muslim countries. In February, I went to the UAE, and we had a tour of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, which is an extremely impressive structure and cultural centre. Built into the warp and weft of it is an idea about tolerance and peaceful coexistence and they very much celebrates the fact that churches have been built and synagogues have been built. You were making an intra-Muslim point, but of course much of the work that they are doing, as others are doing elsewhere, is interfaith. Are you optimistic about the opportunities for both interfaith work and intra-Muslim work to make the kinds of difference that you would like to see?

Lord Ahmad: I have visited that mosque and it is quite incredible. I was there on a private visit. On a slightly lighter note, I remember suddenly someone picking up very quickly that I was there, and this buggy appeared and we all went on it. My daughter, who is now 16 and doing her GCSEs, and good luck to her, said, "Sometimes it would be nice to be normal" at which point I asked the driver to stop the buggy and told her to get on the travelator. I leave it to you whether she did, but she looked at me with great indignation.

That aside, the engagement must move beyond tolerance between faiths. It is about respect. The United Kingdom, for all the challenges that we have, I often give the argument and I believe passionately that we as a country evolved in our human rights and our respect for faith in communities. Along with the rich tapestry in the UK of cathedrals and churches, we have mosques and gurdwaras and mundas and synagogues. We have over 3,000 mosques in the UK, but the inherent structure of the country in the laws is that if you get targeted because you are Jewish or because you are Sikh, the law is there to protect you. I am not saying anti-Semitism does not exist. It does, and Islamophobia or any kind of prejudice is still there, but the structures of the system, the structures of our justice and our laws are made and provide the protection for every citizen. That is a learning we can take elsewhere. It raises the bar from not just saying, "I am sitting in here and all of you



are just tolerating my presence". One hopes that when I leave the room you will say, "Yes, he is a decent enough chap and we respect what he is saying".

Mr Richard Bacon: We are very liberal on this Committee.

Lord Ahmad: I am sure that is the case. It is just raising the bar, Richard. In saying that, the engagement—are they effective? I think they are important steps forward, but there is a lot of work still to be done, that you can celebrate your difference of your religion. That is what we do in this country. The FoRB conference that we have in July will be focused on the fact that you can be of a different faith or belief, but inherent to each faith or belief is the respect for the faith or belief of another.

I always quote the best man at my wedding, Steve, who quite famously said, "I began life as an atheist. Through knowing Tariq over two decades I became agnostic and over time he has tried to, I am sure, influence me to his religion of Islam, and I have tried to influence him to my religion of beer and rugby". Neither has succeeded, but we have respect for each other and I think that is what is important.

Q97 **Chris Law:** I want to turn a bit towards supporting training for UK missions. In the last session we heard about Myanmar and Bosnia and Herzegovina and the lessons they are learning from each other. Are you confident that the geographical teams can assess the expertise they need to develop good policy on atrocity risks in their countries and regions?

Lord Ahmad: The academy that we have and the modules that we are developing within that are being informed by our very posts. I have a very practical example of someone who is working in my private office who went over to Ethiopia and we ensure that they are versed with the drivers to a particular conflict in advance of them being deployed to a particular region.

The same applies to other issues of sensitivity, including religious intolerance, that prior to going to a particular country that person is versed, any of our diplomats, any of our development experts. By the time they get to a particular country they are also trained through various modules that are evolving through this academy to ensure that they are well versed.

There used to be the argument: is this limited to our diplomats? Now with our development experts it is inclusive, but in my view, it should also be inclusive to anyone we despatch across government. It comes back to a point that we talked about earlier, that for example if you are a defence attaché to a particular country—let us take Sri Lanka—and you are not fully versed with the history of the legacy of the conflict, you are at a disadvantage. We want to internationalise to see how we can scope this particular diplomatic training.



We are exploring other ideas, for example within the Commonwealth context. We are keen to explore ideas on how we can leverage our experience of the Commonwealth family in working with other countries and perhaps bringing diplomats of different countries together, experts from different countries together within the context of the Commonwealth to have the concept of a shared academy, but that is early planning at the moment. I think it is a credible idea.

Q98 Chris Law: I think it is a very good idea. Are you suggesting that this academy will be open to all other Departments, for example the Home Office, DIT and so on?

Lord Ahmad: I do not see why it should not be. Too often it is silo working. If you have an expertise, take this hub, the whole idea of a hub and if the hub model of what this hub is can be part and parcel of the deployment of an individual and they are going there because they have been deployed through the NCA or a Home Office individual to a country, it can only help them when they land in a given country and the role they are doing, through understanding the nature and the context of the country they are in.

Q99 Chris Law: In a nutshell, what stage is it at now?

Lord Ahmad: It is inclusive to our diplomats as they go. It is inclusive to our development professionals. We are certainly in discussions with other Departments. Is it incumbent on anyone who is despatched across Government to be part of a particular module of training? It is not a coercive approach but is a more inclusive approach to ask people to be deployed into that. My view is very clear. As both the hub idea and the academy develop beyond what we currently offer, it should be on offer to anyone going from any part of HMG. As I said, I have ambition to do more within the Commonwealth context. I know that there are other Commonwealth partners who share that ambition.

Q100 Chris Law: Whose responsibility is it to prevent atrocities within UK posts abroad?

Lord Ahmad: Ultimately the responsibility is with the ambassador or the high commissioner, who are the primary representatives of HMG on the ground.

Q101 Chris Law: Which officials and embassies would typically have this in their job description? You mentioned the ambassador, but would it be a conflict adviser, would there be support around the ambassador? The ambassador has a lot of roles these days and a lot of hats to wear.

Lord Ahmad: Again, certain countries, as I alluded to earlier, like Serbia and Pakistan, we have human rights advisers, so there would be roles, embedded specialists to that particular role. If not, if it is on the diplomatic side, the political counsellor will have a level of engagement. There will be other lead officials who will be responsible for engagement with civil society organisations. It depends on the nature of the country



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we are operating in, but ultimately there will be someone who has a specific responsibility in each country for those early warnings. Consolidated-wise it will come through the ambassador and the high commissioner.

Q102 **Chair:** To push the point, will the ambassador or head of mission also have training to spot the early signs of atrocity prevention?

Lord Ahmad: Going back to this issue of the hub, I was asked about Matt and Pete coming in front of the Committee. I said, "Absolutely", because I want to demonstrably show that they are part and parcel of how we are informing our decisions. I hope not only was it beneficial and of practical value, but also highlights the work in progress on how we seek to operate.

Q103 **Chair:** Absolutely, and we were very impressed and we are very impressed with the direction of travel that the Department is taking.

Leigh Stubblefield: To add one more point, Matt referred to the meeting they had last Wednesday as part of the leadership conference and our team, OCSM, convened that for them. That was getting together a leadership group within heads of mission and ambassadors who can also speak to other heads of mission and ambassadors and grow this process, because they understand the needs of each of their groups. That is a start.

Chair: A good start.

Q104 **Theo Clarke:** Minister, how do you make embassies aware of the training available on preventing atrocities?

Lord Ahmad: It is widely shared, so everyone will be aware of the different modules that are available through the diplomatic academy. We have a leadership conference every year, which we are just in week two of now, which also allows us to profile success stories for specific countries. That is exactly how we also highlight sharing of good practice. That has been a driver on creating specialist hubs, as we seek to do, to ensure that information is centrally shared with everyone. All our high commissioners and ambassadors are fully aware of the different modules, and it should be ever-evolving. As soon as we say, "Oh, yes, we have the perfect offer" I think we will stop progressing, because we must evolve and be dynamic to the different requirements of our network.

Q105 **Theo Clarke:** To clarify, you mentioned the different modules. Is it mandatory for heads of mission and other embassy officials to specifically do atrocity prevention training in their posts?

Lord Ahmad: It is not currently mandatory, but there is a case to be made that if they are going into particular countries, certainly I never feel that one has to be coercive in that. I think diplomatic and gentle encouragement is the best approach. In all seriousness, it is in the best interests of the individual going to the country and of FCDO and HMG



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more widely that they avail themselves of that training. Certainly, we encourage our diplomats to do that.

Q106 **Theo Clarke:** If it is not mandatory, how many UK posts do currently have that training?

Leigh Stubblefield: To date, over 200 people have completed that training. That would be more than just the ambassadors.

Q107 **Chair:** That includes all our ambassadors and more?

Leigh Stubblefield: Yes.

Chair: Happy days.

Q108 **Theo Clarke:** Looking at specific examples, you talked a lot today, Minister, about Ukraine and we know there were intelligence warnings about the Russian invasion for several months before it took place. Was there specific atrocity prevention training and support for staff in the UK's Ukraine mission? Did they get any help before?

Lord Ahmad: We had been investing in Ukraine well before the situation. Whether you look at things like Project ORBITAL, for example, in the military support we were extending after the annexation of Crimea, we were very much at the forefront of ensuring that we could support our diplomatic staff.

On atrocity prevention specifically, I think that has evolved because of the crisis. I met Melinda Simmons last week and quite specifically we have an incredible ambassador in her commitment but also on seeing some of the issues. It was tragic to see the site where the Nazis committed their persecution of the Jewish communities in Ukraine. I visited that site with President Zelensky and the visiting German President, and that was not that long ago. I think that was at the back end of October last year and that site was where a Russian missile landed. Having experts who understand the fabric and nature of this, not just atrocity but coming back to my earlier point about understanding the country to which they are deployed, Melinda Simmons is a very good example of someone who does exactly that. As a visiting Minister, it is not just about a briefing in front of you. You are being informed by the practical insights you gain from the ground.

I would say this, but we have some phenomenal diplomats across the world who are often in quite challenging circumstances, but the investment in people and relationships is the key to unlocking and truly understanding, and how we can ultimately, one hopes, prevent atrocities from occurring on the ground. Those relationships matter and that means a strengthened approach with civil society operators, a strengthened approach with people on the ground but also, what we are seeking to do through the diplomatic hub and the creation of the specialist hub, which is the sharing of good practice.

Q109 **Theo Clarke:** Can I ask the same question about Afghanistan? In the



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weeks and months prior to the UK withdrawing militarily, so in summer 2021, did they also have specific training on atrocity prevention?

Lord Ahmad: Afghanistan was unravelling. For someone who was knee-deep and engaging well before the fall, I forget how many times I engaged with Afghanistan. I think the issues were that once a strategic decision was made of withdrawal, how quickly would the Taliban be taking over parts of the country? It was not just the issue of atrocity prevention, because the atrocities were, frankly, tragically taking place. I remember in the week leading up to Kabul speaking to the then Foreign Minister of Afghanistan and twice putting out statements, because it comes back to my earlier point: who was being targeted? It was young minority women who were specialists either in the health sector or in the education sector.

It was very clear that a strategic decision had been taken and whatever happened thereafter was very challenging. Our diplomats who were on the ground always did an excellent job. We invested very heavily on the importance of women representation and engaging on issues of girls' education during the Covid pandemic. We kept that very much on the front burner, including making sure that salaries were paid to teachers so that we still had that scope and expertise. The tragic consequence of our withdrawal and of course the takeover by the Taliban is there for all to see. I personally, and I cannot say this strongly enough, do not believe they have changed or will change. What has changed, and that is the glimmer, is that Afghanistan of 20 years ago compared to the Afghanistan of today is markedly different. That is why in our approach to Afghanistan it is about leveraging the opportunity that we have now with these incredible experts, particularly some of the women leaders who are right here, the likes of Hasina Safi, Fawzia Koofi, Shukria Barazkai, to inform what we do going forward.

Q110 **Chair:** It was 18 months before the withdrawal that the US made that decision. We cannot change the past. If the new department—and again I still cannot remember the name—the Office for Conflict and Stability, was in post, do you think that in that 18 months we would have been doing more on atrocity prevention? Is that potential there in the future? Would that be an example of what we could do going forward in a different country?

Lord Ahmad: It is a difficult question to answer because it is an evolving department, but the intention is very much to identify early warning signals. In Afghanistan—again, I am being very candid and open with you—the fact is: what is the philosophy of the organisation, or in this case, the so-called administration that was going to take over, which was the Taliban? What was very clear was notwithstanding the investments that we made and the challenges that the previous Government had, we were supporting the previous Afghanistan Government. What was very clear is that the philosophy of the people who took over is something that none of us would see as being in any shape or form progressive or inclusive.



The challenges are not just in identifying, but then who is the entity or organisation or administration that you are dealing with? That is why it is important even with Afghanistan, notwithstanding, as you said rightly, the history and what happened—of course, there are always things to reflect on. When I was going through 24/7, night and day, trying fundamentally to get people out, I come back to what I said right at the start—for every one person that I helped in the position that I had, and there were challenges, the challenges were right up there, that to me was an achievement and a tangible return on that investment.

Ultimately, what we need to do now is ensure that there is consistency of international approach to places like Afghanistan, so that those who are in control get a very clear message that they cannot say, “This is a divide, let us divide the international community.” Thus far, we have stuck to it, notwithstanding the near neighbours of Afghanistan and other parts of it, but what has been consistent is that there has been no international recognition by any country, and that has not been an easy feat, but it has been through diplomatic intervention that that has been achieved.

Q111 Chair: I know personally how hard and how personally you were involved in what happened and this is not meant as a criticism, but going forward and if there was a similar situation and you knew you had an 18-month window if the atrocity prevention was embedded then rather than just focusing on the Government, would you put a lot more focus on the civil society, for example? You would be looking at ways to mitigate the more extreme potential risks that were coming forward. You absolutely rightly say that you would be drawing in the international partners around. From the evidence we are getting, having a robust, deeply embedded atrocity prevention strategy would enable all those plays to come forward, as long as we captured the triggers early enough.

Lord Ahmad: Again, drawing a comparison with a totally different situation, Ukraine, when I visited Poland I met with various NGOs and civil society organisations. What was very clear were the interventions that international organisations were making and the World Food Programme, for example, just absolutely got it. By that I mean that they thought, “Right, international structures, multilateral structures are to deal with famine. They were not designed to deal with this conflict in Ukraine.” However they utilised whatever method or indeed intervention they could. In this case, it was small-scale vans going in to deliver food, whereas other agencies were more concerned with standing up structures. The World Food Programme came out, rightly so, with real credit and that is a learning.

Coming back to your point, I agree. I think that there will be component parts through those early interventions, whether it is an 18-month window or more, to ensure that you shore up civil society organisations. Even now, even in a place like Afghanistan, it is ensuring that our policy is informed. We cannot name. I have tried through the WMSs we have



put out to give as much detail as we can publicly, but I assure you that with the agencies, the civil society organisations on the ground, even notwithstanding the challenging circumstances, we are ensuring how best we can facilitate and support them.

It is important that, just because the situation with the administration currently in control is something that we cannot engage with directly, we do not lose sight of that. I agree that it is about investing early and ensuring that those civil society organisations have the structures and the resilience built in. Would we have prevented the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan? No, but for future conflicts—we are doing that in Ukraine in ensuring that organisations with Ukraine are also supported through the international agencies as well.

Q112 Chris Law: The international development strategy has a very explicit trade emphasis. How do we square the focus on trade and investment with the Government's commitment to preventing atrocities?

Lord Ahmad: Ultimately, when we look at our strategy, it must be seen in terms of how we can enable a given country in its empowerment. By investing in, for example, girls' education, we are not just investing in girls' education but are also investing in skills and training. That leads to an empowerment of an individual—a girl in a given country. What we seek to do through the international development strategy is ensure that we look at it for its full scope. It is not about the old notion of aid for trade. I do not think it is that at all, for example, for education empowerment.

It would be a great world to live in where the United Kingdom was not looking at providing aid in humanitarian support or aid in ensuring atrocity prevention, but that we were providing our support in empowerment in a given country, so a country itself can develop its economic capacity and capability. That is the ultimate intent and I think it must be an ultimate objective of what we seek to do globally.

Q113 Chris Law: Following on from that, do atrocity risks inform trade and development? For example, do atrocity risks to religious minorities in India have any bearing on a future UK-India trade deal, and are the long-term risks being considered?

Lord Ahmad: In all engagement we have, including through my role as Minister for South Asia and our relationship with India, the nature of investing in a relationship means that when you come to issues where you have different perspectives, or need to talk explicitly on issues of human rights and religious minorities, we can raise them quite directly and specifically. Ultimately you should look towards a country's setup and the context of that.

I go back in any discussion I have with any country around the world to see where its own constitutional protections lie. I alluded earlier to the fact that we in the UK enjoy freedoms because the structures—our



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system, our legal systems—protect those who are being targeted. That must be the core of any democracy and that includes our engagement with the likes of India or any other country.

Q114 Chris Law: You mentioned earlier about economic development giving the tools so that the countries themselves could develop their own strategies. As we know if we look at mass atrocities that have occurred in Ethiopia and Myanmar, these are two countries that have had the economic development, and yet atrocities happen. How will the UK ensure its future development approach is inclusive and takes account of atrocity risks facing individual groups?

Lord Ahmad: It will remain a live challenge and the situation in Myanmar—I certainly suggest and propose that in future visits to Bangladesh, for example. I have visited Cox's Bazar and I have seen the incredible tragedy unfolding on issues of preventing violence. The tragedy is that even within the camps those things occur. Equally, it is looking at how we can create opportunities when people flee conflict zones. It must start with basic investment in key services, including health, but also that should lead to issues of education and creating opportunities in employment and skills training. One hopes in time that you work through international diplomacy and that is why these different components need to come together, that there can be concerted effort and pressure, in the case of Myanmar and the authorities there, to ensure the rights of every community is protected. We are far off that. From a country that does not even use the term Rohingya to describe a particular community, it shows the immense challenge that remains. We cannot take our eye off the ball. We have invested close to £400 million over many years in our support for the Rohingya community. It cannot continue in that way. We need to ensure that the diplomatic pressure becomes immense.

God knows what will ultimately evolve from the conflict in Ukraine, but it shows where communities can act together and we use all the levers at our disposal you can have a net output and outcome, which ultimately, one hopes, protects in this case the democratically-elected president and government of a given country. I hope we can deploy the learnings in Ukraine in our engagement elsewhere.

Q115 Chris Law: The last question from me is that we have heard a lot today about the steps towards a proper strategy with UK atrocity prevention, but sadly there is no ring-fenced funding for this. The most important question, Lord Ahmad, is: will you commit to that?

Lord Ahmad: I cannot share with you the specifics on funding at the moment because, as Leigh said, they are still being finalised. What I can commit to is that the whole issue of atrocity prevention will be at the core of our policymaking thinking going forward in how we engage. I hope you have been given some degree of reassurance by our Ambassadors and by what we are creating within our structures to show that focus remains. As I said right at the start to the Chair I am not saying no to a specific strategy.



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Chris Law: You are not saying yes yet either.

Lord Ahmad: No, I am not, but at the same time it is not closing a door, because if there is merit in that—I have alluded to the fact that we do not have a PSVI strategy—that will be coming to the fore shortly. I think it is important that we see what is on the table, what comes from this and if there is a requirement for that, and if it will help us ultimately prevent atrocities, I think it will be a good thing. At the moment, as I said, I am not closing the door on it.

I said earlier I am keen to see the full outcome of your inquiry, your recommendations and suggestions and even on issues of PSVI as I have alluded to earlier, I think it must evolve. I have made it very clear to the IDC, as I do to APPGs as well, that we become better informed as a Government through the direct engagement and you should be fully versed with what our programmes and policies are. I am not saying you become representatives of a government, but I think it is helpful in your own engagements as a Committee or as all-party parliamentary groups in ensuring that countries also know where our focus and priorities are. I look forward to the report and I am sure we will engage on this issue again in the future.

Chair: Lord Ahmad, thank you very much for engaging so fully with us. I am sure this Committee would love to engage more fully with the FCDO across the board. It is always a real pleasure to have you in front of this Committee. It is not only that you know your brief, but you are also passionate about it, and that gives us confidence that you are able to embed that across the other Departments. Thank you very much. I look forward to meeting you and your team in a couple of weeks' time.