

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector: next steps, HC 605

Thursday 19 November 2020

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Theo Clarke; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Mrs Pauline Latham; Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger; Navendu Mishra; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 290 - 309

Witnesses

I: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, and Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Katy Ransome, Head of the Gender Equality Unit, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; James Kariuki, Multilateral Policy Director, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Katy Ransome and James Kariuki.

Q290 **Chair:** I would like to start this session of the International Development Select Committee's inquiry into ICAI's review of the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative and sexual exploitation and abuse by international peacekeepers. This will feed into our overarching report looking at sexual abuse and exploitation within the aid sector.

Welcome, Lord Ahmad. We are very grateful to have you here as the Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth and the Prime Minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what that role encompasses and introduce your colleagues whom you have brought with you today.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Good morning, Chair, and thank you to your colleagues for joining. I know this is an important issue for many of us. If I may start with the introductions, I am delighted that I am joined by James Kariuki, director of the multilateral policy directorate, who also deals with many areas concerning the UN, and Katy Ransome, head of the gender equality unit within the new FCDO, where PSVI currently sits and is part and parcel of our programming.

Thank you for the opportunity to introduce today's discussion and to set the scene. As many of you will know, this is an area that the United Kingdom has consistently retained a priority on. I pay tribute to former Foreign Secretary William Hague, now Lord Hague, who set this initiative up with the UN special representative Angelina Jolie. Back in 2014, as many people will recall, and I certainly do, they held an international conference, which really put this issue on the world stage. Much has been achieved over a number of years and I am sure that, through the questions we have today, I will be able to highlight that.

In summary form, the fact that I continue to be known by one of my titles as the Prime Minister's special representative on PSVI demonstrates the commitment at the heart of Government and, indeed, the top of Government on this issue. When you look at initiatives that have happened over a number of years, not just under the current Administration or previous ones, it is a real reflection of HMG's commitment that this remains a high priority. I am now the third PM's special representative after Lord Hague and Baroness Anelay took on this role. I took on this role when I joined as a Minister of State at the FCO. We have had engagement at the highest level, and ministerial engagement and leadership on this continues.

Over this time, the UK has committed over £46 million since 2012, supporting over 85 PSVI projects across 29 countries. The issue of survivors that I know was central to ICAI's reporting is very central to our thinking, planning and, indeed, programmes. The UK supports all survivors. Some examples of that include the launching of the principles



for global action on tackling stigma at the UN General Assembly in 2017; the funding of the Mukwege Foundation, Nadia's Initiative and the Global Survivors Fund; and the appointment, which I made in 2019, of the UK's first PSVI survivor champions to ensure that our policy and programmes are directly reflective of the priorities of survivors.

The UK has also focused on justice and accountability, with the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict. The first edition was in 2014, with a revised edition in 2017, which looks into specific issues of sexual violence, particularly against children, and male victims.

As some colleagues may know, one of the current live initiatives is the Declaration of Humanity, which I launched earlier this week. It brings together world faith leaders in condemning, putting aside and tackling the stigma that is often attached to victims of sexual violence in conflict and, indeed, children born of such acts, including rape. It is utterly wrong that women, girls and men who have gone through this, and, indeed, children born of such circumstances, not only have to go through the initial ordeal but then have to suffer the stigma through rejection of communities. The declaration makes very clear that it is not a narrative of Government. It is faith and belief leaders coming forward in condemning that and saying that what is required are compassion and support, not stigma. I hope we will focus on that a bit later on.

We also work through the UN. We have been key in the current investigative reporting and the group set up by the UN in Iraq, for example. The UK was instrumental in the resolution that was passed, which set up that particular commission. Indeed, we have a UK QC who leads the investigative team on the ground in Iraq and we have been very strong on the lobbying of that.

Finally, we look to other opportunities, whether through our working with G8 and G7 Foreign Ministers or through the Commonwealth, to ensure that this agenda remains at the forefront of other countries. Reflecting that, in the UN, we had 156 member states endorse the UK-launched commitment to end sexual violence back in 2013, which preceded the global summit. The film festival, which was held a couple of years ago in 2018, keeps the issue at the forefront of people's minds.

Chair: Thank you for that summary. We really appreciate the commitment that you are personally taking in this role. We can now dig down into the detail and look at what the commitments are going forward.

Q291 Kate Osamor: Welcome, Lord Ahmad. I hope you are well. I just want to kick off and ask this question. The Government said in response to ICAI's review that PSVI remains a top priority. Why then has funding and staffing for the initiative dramatically decreased since 2014?



Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On the issue of 2014, as many will recognise, when you organise international events, you resource upwards. I am Minister for the Commonwealth, and the same happened with the Commonwealth team. We did the media freedom conference last year. Again, the team, in its core, is smaller than it was when we did the conference. When you look at staffing levels since the conference, there were five core staff at the conference and we then surged the staff to deliver the conference, so it went up by another 29. After the conference, we came back to a core team of five, and that has continued consistently. We have a resourcing level of four people in the team in the current year.

To give you a reflection in terms of people, last year I spent 18 months in the planning of the next conference, which was due in 2019. We again surged the numbers, so we brought in another six to eight people and there would have been more, had we had to deliver the conference, but that had to be postponed. It was a hard decision for me because the general election was called and I did not think it was right to hold it during the middle of an election campaign. Our plans to hold the conference earlier this year, of course, like many things, were impacted by the Covid pandemic and we had to postpone. I am hoping that we will be able to deliver on the ambition for that international conference in 2022. 2021 is getting highly congested because of COP and other conferences.

In terms of funding, you are quite right that there was a higher level of funding, circa £20 million, in 2014. Again, we have seen a consistent level of funding over the period. For example, to compare certain years, in 2017-18, it was about £2.7 million; in the current year, it is £2.8 million. That has been consistent with the programmes we have been running. Where we have seen a surge in spending, it has been where we have led on international conferences, in terms of personnel and money spent in the budget, which is reflective of the fact that, at the moment, there is no conference planned but we retain and sustain more or less the core team that was there when this initiative was first launched.

Q292 **Kate Osamor:** Thank you for your answer, but our evidence suggests that, since Lord Hague left the role as Foreign Secretary, PSVI has lost its way, being regarded as his priority rather than a UK priority. Plainly, Cabinet-level backing for any initiative has huge advantages. Do you agree that PSVI is now one of many rather than first among equals?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: It is an interesting description. I am inclined to think of books and films now when you use that second term. Within my role, I am not just Minister of State with responsibility for it; I am the Prime Minister's special representative. That was the role that William had. You are quite right that he was Foreign Secretary. I am not the Foreign Secretary; I am Minister of State. At the same time, I would not be doing this role without the Prime Minister's endorsement because I am his special representative. All tribute to Lord Hague on the launch of the initiative, and there are now senior Cabinet members who are



advocates for this, not least the current Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Secretary and First Secretary of State, Dominic Raab.

I remember, when I was first appointed Minister of State at the Foreign Office, the current Prime Minister was the Foreign Secretary. He continued to not only sustain the initiative but also green-lighted the planning for the next conference. He is now Prime Minister and, in him, we have someone who knows the initiative well, as well as his core team at No. 10. The current Foreign Secretary, and Jeremy Hunt, the previous Foreign Secretary, to whom I pay tribute, sustained Cabinet-level engagement on this important issue. Had the conference gone ahead in 2019, it would have been delivered under the current Foreign Secretary.

In addition, before the merger of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the DFID Secretary, and successive DFID Secretaries, prioritised this in our cross-working. The Defence Secretary had also lent strong support. When Mr Williamson was leading the charge at the Ministry of Defence, it was very much a key priority for him. While I accept that the Prime Minister's representative is not a Cabinet Minister, the fact is that this role would not be possible or, indeed, the title would not be reflective unless it was a priority at the highest levels of Government.

While the personnel have changed, I assure you of my commitment to this. The fact that this is still sustained as a Government priority is a tribute to the officials who work on this initiative, as well as the importance that we attach to this, both politically within the country and internationally. Our advocacy in that respect has been clear in our leadership on this role.

ICAI has put forward certain practical suggestions. As someone who spent 20 years in business, I assure you that, if an independent assessor asks you to look at something, you should never rest on your laurels. Our ambition remains to do much more in this area.

Q293 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Good morning, Minister. What has been done since 2014 to translate the PSVI global summit pledges into practical and measurable steps or an action plan?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Various things were stated at the summit. To give you a summary, I alluded in my opening remarks to strengthening justice for survivors of sexual violence. I will not repeat the steps we have taken, focused on raising the bar around how evidence is collected and making sure survivors are central to our thinking and policy planning.

We have also been investing quite heavily in training. We have had field missions that we have sent into countries. We still have a core team of 34 to 35 people whom we draw on in certain countries. Again, I summarised those in my opening statement. We also have a very structured approach at the moment. I am in the process of putting in what I hope will be—and



it is work in progress—a three-year strategy, where we will really make this part and parcel of our policy programme.

There are certain live initiatives. I alluded to the faith declaration recently. We worked very closely with Nadia Murad, who is a survivor of sexual violence from Iraq, in the development of the draft Murad code. This really raises the bar. There were two things that struck me, on one of my visits to Iraq and a visit that I made to Bangladesh, where I met with Rohingya refugees. The threshold for evidence-gathering to allow for a successful prosecution is very low and it is not consistent. The Murad code, a current live initiative, is intending to ensure that all well-meaning NGOs that go in to help survivors of sexual violence adhere to a strict code of training and ask the pertinent questions that will eventually allow for a successful prosecution.

We work very closely, again in support of survivors, with the likes of Denis Mukwege and, last year, we gave another £1 million to his survivors' fund.¹ Many who are involved with this will know that the wheels of justice are often slow, but survivors need help there and then, so we have continued to both lobby and contribute to funds that help survivors slowly start rebuilding their immediate lives.

A whole range of things have been done over a number of years, as I alluded to in my summary at the start, alongside the practical live initiatives that we are currently undertaking. My own view on this is very clear: we need an integrated strategy, which is at the core of our work within the FCDO, that can deliver, irrespective of personnel or change of personnel, upon what we have set down. That, to my mind, through established KPIs, will allow us to assess progress, next time I am in front of you, on delivering specific things against targets. Equally, it sets in stone what we are planning to do as policy rather than having a change of personnel, which then means that we have to relook at this.

It has been a campaign for a long time, in terms of raising the bar and the work we have done. We have been very successful, for example, under the German presidency. Last year was the first time we had a UN Security Council—and I know ICAI reported on this—where survivors were central to a UN resolution. That was down to our lobbying.

I mentioned earlier the situation in Iraq and the current team there. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister when he was Foreign Secretary. He was at the forefront of establishing the resolution and seeing it through, which led to the creation, in practical terms, of the team on the ground currently operating under the UN mandate in gathering evidence. You need the evidence to allow for a successful prosecution. I fully accept the premise that this has been a campaign, but I am very clear that it needs

¹ Witness correction: "HMG made a £1.3m contribution to the Global Survivors Fund in 2019, rather than £1m."



to be integrated into a specific strategy, which I hope I will be able to share with you in the not-too-distant future.

Q294 Brendan Clarke-Smith: You mentioned rescheduling the follow-up summit because it was cancelled during the general election. In terms of the strategy and the initiative that you mentioned, when will the Government produce this and is there a timetable in place for it?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I am certainly committed. I am in the process of looking at this very closely. I have spent a fair bit of time over the last few weeks and months. You should never quite give the commitment because you do not know when the final approvals will come through, but I am confident that the core piece of work around the strategy has been done. If I may take the privilege of saying this, as soon as it is, I assure you, through Sarah's good offices, I will be writing to you.

I also put on the table that, once it is there, as I have said to the Chair, I do not see this as a politically divisive issue in any way. The Committee's commitment is clear. I really want to work closely with those who want to champion PSVI. I have already spoken to, for example, the chair of the APPG, Anthony Mangnall, who is very passionate about this. I said exactly the same to him as I have said to Sarah: that I want to seek and get views. If it can be approved and evolved, then so be it, because we want to do deliver the best product and, most importantly, the best thing we can do in terms of strategy for survivors.

Within that strategy, we appointed two survivor champions last year, who are also directing policy in this regard. I have a regular group that meets with me, where survivors and other advocates meet, including NGOs, who advise directly on policy and programmes.

Q295 Theo Clarke: Previously, how was the partnership between DFID, the MOD and the FCO working in practice? Is there a shared understanding of the problem and how to tackle it across Government Departments?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I call this my third reincarnation as a Minister. I joined as a Minister of State at the FCO, then I became a double-hatted Minister across DFID and the FCO, and now I am a merged Minister for the FCDO.

On a lighter note, when it comes to what was DFID and FCO, does it make it easier? Yes, because I am not writing notes to other people. I can look at myself in the mirror and frankly ask, "Tariq, do you agree with this?" because I control both the development side and the diplomacy side on this important agenda.

In a more serious sense, the merger of the FCDO lends itself to strengthening both our advocacy and support for programming, including funding for this important initiative. As I said earlier, we work very closely with the Ministry of Defence on the importance of this agenda.



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Broadening this into the important area of women, peace and security, speaking very practically, one of the most powerful programmes I have seen delivered across Government in the context of our international policy is not just our ambition but our action plans on the WPS agenda. I believe that has been successful for various reasons, but it is also down to the fact that you have what were the FCO and DFID, and now the FCDO, working hand in glove with the MOD. That is a practical example of how programmes and co-ordination work. I honestly believe that, with the advocacy we have at the Cabinet level, as well as from the Prime Minister and, indeed, with me as the Minister responsible, now with development responsibilities, we can further strengthen our programme when it comes to PSVI.

Q296 Theo Clarke: I am pleased to hear that there will be improved co-ordination across Departments on this initiative. I also have a question about the Gender Equality Unit and its role in co-ordinating all PSVI work across Government and in country offices. Could you comment on that?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: That remains very important. One thing you will have followed through recently, with the creation of FCDO, which I think is the right thing, is that we have also empowered our high commissioners and ambassadors. Programmes in-country are co-ordinated not through, say, a head of DFID and the ambassador or high commissioner separately; they are now co-ordinated through a single individual. That lends to the strength of co-ordination within the network.

At the centre, in one of the people I introduced at the start, Katy, we have an individual who has both insight and experience. She co-ordinates not only the initiative within PSVI, but I have mentioned WPS. Sarah, in her opening comments, also mentioned SEA. All these issues around the gender agenda are extremely important. That is why a role like Katy's is essential, in my view, to make sure that those different strands are interconnected.

Mrs Latham: Thank you, Minister, for coming in front of us. We have a plethora of Ministers at the moment, having had a dearth of Ministers, so thank you very much.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I put it down to your advocacy, Pauline. Once I got that email, I had to act.

Q297 Mrs Latham: Thank you very much. I am slightly confused, before I go into my main questions. You talked at the beginning about the PSVI champions. Then you talked about survivor champions. You talked about this Declaration of Humanity that you have just launched. You have talked about 156 countries signing a declaration to end sexual violence. Are the PSVI champions and the survivors one and the same? How many are there? Who are they and when were they appointed? If 156 countries have signed a declaration, why on earth is it still happening in such a terrible way?



Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: To start with your last question, when countries sign declarations it is a statement of intent, which is a good first step. Having been involved as the UN Minister, there is equally a dearth of resolutions that gain the support of different countries. It is important, as a first step, to recognise that the issue exists and, secondly, to have a commitment at the highest level from Heads of Government that they wish not only to recognise it but to act on it, so that is a good step.

Specific to your question, when I talked about PSVI champions, those were in the context of partner countries. I alluded to Germany as one, but others have identified and regard this as a key priority. For example, in practical terms, we will be working very closely with countries such as Australia as well. We have partner countries where there has been a challenge and a focus, specifically on the issues arising domestically, such as Iraq and the DRC. They will also be part of the countries that we will work with. The PSVI champions per se allude to the countries.

The survivor champions are exactly what it says: these are people who have been through the worst ordeal imaginable against their person. They have not only survived that particular ordeal but have come through and become advocates for it. In 2019, I centrally appointed two people to advise directly on this particular issue, and they work with me very closely in terms of policy and programming. You may have dealt with or come across Nadine and Kolbassia, but both are very central to our planning and programme. Indeed, to Brendan's earlier question about the strategy that we are hoping to bring about, they are central to our thinking. I hope that clarifies the difference between a PSVI champion, which is a reference country, and a survivor champion, which is exactly what they are: survivors.

Q298 **Mrs Latham:** If we could go back to ICAI's recommendations that the initiative is not sufficiently gathering and learning from the evidence on what works to prevent sexual violence in conflict, how are you going to implement their recommendations?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: First and foremost, I was slightly disappointed, if I can be very open with you, with the fact that the one person that ICAI did not talk to when pulling this together was me, so there is a learning in there, whatever the reasoning. When the report came out and, in advance of the report, I had made it clear that I thought I was an obvious person to talk to, irrespective of who is doing the job. I hope that will be looked into for future reports.

Secondly, there is a whole raft of recommendations that ICAI has put forward. I assure you that we have looked at them to see how we can strengthen the strategy that I have alluded to. I have already talked to one major challenge that we have repeatedly faced over a number of years since the launch of this initiative. It has been run more as a campaign rather than as a structured programme or integrated strategy. I hope that, with the establishment of this strategy, we will be able to address many, if not all, of the issues of concern.



There were issues of resourcing in terms of finance and people. I talked earlier, when Kate asked me questions, about the consistency and the support we get for this, but we have retained that core team. The merger of the two Departments that have now created FCDO will also lend us to address some of the issues. I fully acknowledge that, when you have two separate Departments, it is that much more difficult to bring different strands together, but this will allow us to ensure that silos do not operate. Where there is an overlap on specific key issues, which may not be sexual violence in conflict but may be gender-based violence, we can start bringing support and funding consistent with each programme rather than running as totally independent streams.

I hope that, in the coming months and in the years ahead, you will see that the specifics of much of what ICAI raised, in terms of resourcing, money, people and programming, will be addressed. The merger of the FCDO strongly lends itself to achieving that.

Q299 Mrs Latham: Earlier this year, you introduced the Murad code. How are you planning to promote its adoption and implementation by other countries?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I am sure that Nadia Murad is known to everyone. She is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Anyone who has met Nadia will be inspired by her. She has one of the most tragic tales. Often, maybe there is not enough focus on that. I am proud of the fact that the UN initiative I talked about in Iraq, which set up the evidence-gathering team, is led by Karim Khan QC—a Brit as well. There was a very poignant moment recently, where they went back to Nadia's town, and Nadia was present, as they started exhuming the mass graves of victims of sexual violence.

When people ask me, "Tariq, have you put survivors at the heart of it?" I tell them about this and say, "It is not our achievement. It is theirs", but we have been able to lend support to their cause. Nadia is one example of many. When we thought about this code, it was inspired by the fact that the different levels in the way evidence is gathered are not structured. They do not allow for evidence-gathering to be done in a way that then sustains that evidence, gathers the evidence and allows that evidence to be used going forward. Having Nadia's endorsement and working with her initiative directly makes sure that there is a survivor focus on it.

Fast-forwarding to the second part of your question on how we promote it, she is working with us very centrally. We have a whole range of countries. We put out a draft code first, which we have consulted on with a range of stakeholders, including survivors, most importantly, as well as other countries. We will be producing the final code over the next couple of months, which will reflect the input we have received.

Coming back to your first question about survivor champions and PSVI champions, there is a raft of PSVI champion countries that we are



working very closely with. My own view on this is very clear and the strategy will integrate it: I want to make things such as the Murad code instrumental and part and parcel of how NGOs and countries operate. Tragically, we have seen sexual violence as a tool that is weaponised by some. How do we address the core issue? By doing so, it will also mean that, when we have tragedies—and we could talk of the Rohingya in Myanmar as a practical, live example—and when people go in, they adhere, sign up to and are trained in the code.

We will ensure—and it is my ambition to get as many NGOs that we work with as well as international partners to also engage and advocate on this—that everyone signs up to it. We are working very closely with SRSG Pramila Patten, the UN Secretary-General's special representative on conflict-related sexual violence. She and I meet quite regularly and we work very closely to ensure that any initiative we are announcing or working on is intertwined with the efforts of the UN as well.

Q300 Mrs Latham: You have talked about survivors and the fact that they are very important and at the centre of things. Why does ICAI feel that they are not at the centre of it and that they were not informed, after the summit that we had in London, of the way their evidence was going to be used? Can you explain why this was the case and whether you have any plans not only to tackle the perception but to make sure that they really are embedded in the centre and the core of any initiatives that you launch?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: As I said earlier, I fully respect ICAI's principal assessment that we should learn. If I was to sit back and say everything is perfect and there is nothing more to do, that would be not naïve but plainly and simply wrong. There are improvements to be made in this respect.

Reflecting on the points you have raised, had we had that discussion between me and ICAI, I would have been able to illustrate, perhaps, how survivors are very central in everything I have talked about. For example, Nadia Murad, who we are working with, is a survivor. It is that code that we are promoting, supporting and advocating for. I mentioned Denis Mukwege, another Nobel laureate, who does some incredible work in the DRC with survivors of sexual violence. It is his survivors' fund that we are also lending funding to.

You talked about how we have addressed the issue that survivors perhaps were not as well informed as they could be. There is always room for us to strengthen our communications, whether it is between me and ICAI, or the workings of FCDO in terms of how we communicate the strength of what we are doing, which I feel we have made good progress on but there is more to be achieved.

The third element of what you said, Pauline, is survivors. Since the initiative was launched by William Hague, and certainly post the conference, there was a PSVI steering board, which has NGOs and other



partners but also survivors. They have been present on that. I still felt there was more to be done, which is why, as I said earlier, we have Nadine Tunasi and Kolbassia Haoussou, who are direct survivors, one a woman and one a man. What is perhaps not talked about as much is that, tragically, there are also male victims of sexual violence. After careful consideration, we decided that we would appoint two champions and they both work very closely with me in that.

In terms of communication and how we work with them, we can do better. In the work, policy and programmes we take forward, having two survivor champions at the heart of policy-making will lend itself to strengthening and addressing the criticisms that were made in the ICAI report.

Q301 Navendu Mishra: Lord Ahmad, my question is about the PSVI team of experts. Could you tell us a bit more about the current structure when it comes to the size, funding and numbers? What are the strategic objectives that determine where and when they get deployed?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: This started off, as has been acknowledged by many, in 2012. It is a group of independent experts who are deployed as per need to help support work both nationally and internationally. Since this launched, we have deployed experts over 90 times to different parts to provide specialist expertise on PSVI priorities. This is a group of experts hosted within the civilian stabilisation group, a cross-Government stabilisation unit with over 500 people.

Specifically on your question, the current numbers deployed this year are 33 working specifically with specialist skills.² They will cover, in terms of areas that you have asked me about, issues of gender-based violence. They have expertise there. They are criminal lawyers. As many recognise, some of our survivors whom I have already mentioned by name work very closely with human rights lawyers in this respect. Amal Clooney is a good example and she works very closely with Nadia Murad. They also include psychosocial experts and social workers.

I must admit that, as a Minister, if I can put it this bluntly, there were two shocking moments in my life. One was during a visit to the Rohingya. The sheer scale of the suffering of humanity hits you. When you see that particularly young women and girls have had to go through the worst horrific kind of violation, we need psychosocial experts and support. We have, for example, deployed to the Rohingya community within Cox's Bazar.

Also, I visited Iraq. Perhaps we will come on to the faith declaration, but the reason that happened, simply put, was what I heard and experienced when I met Yazidi survivors. I heard harrowing stories about the dehumanisation of women and girls to the extent that, as one of them

² Witness correction: "There are 33 people currently on the Team of Experts roster, HMG has not deployed 33 people."



said to me, they were then regarded as less than an ant. At some point, perhaps not for here, the explicit and candid nature in which they recounted some of their testimonies was horrifying. I would never think that, in the current world we live in, that happens, but it did through Daesh atrocities. The support of psychosocial experts and social workers is important.

We have sexual offences examiners who are trained and specific to that. We have international investigating officers. As I alluded to, part of the Murad code is the training. We have training experts as well. We have continued to deploy this but current deployments include Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Malawi.

Q302 **Navendu Mishra:** You made very important points but you did not address the issue around funding. Could you tell us a bit more about funding? Looking at the future, will you continue to deploy these experts? Are the Government committed to investing more resources into this project and measuring the impact? The Committee would appreciate learning a bit more about the funding that is going in now but also in the future.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On the funding specific to PSVI, I have talked about how we have sustained it. Of course, during the conference, funding did go up. I have accepted that as a premise; I think it was Kate who asked the original question. That did go up during the initial stages of the launch. To give you an example, about £20 million comes through different funds that we operate within the Foreign Office. Perhaps in the interests of time, I can tell you about the different funds in writing. We have about six or seven different types of funds that have PSVI initiatives to them, which then collectively provide the base level of our funding.

This has changed as the funds have either been amalgamated or changed between 2014 and 2020. In the current year, as I said, our spending is in the region of just under £3 million, but that reflects how we have been somewhat limited because of Covid and we did not hold an international conference. To give you an idea, last year we were in the planning phase. I alluded earlier to resourcing, but specifically on your question on funding, last year's funding was £4.14 million, which reflects how we were building up ambition, both in delivering the conference and in focusing on some of the initiatives I have talked to.

I have mentioned the Murad code, the faith declaration and the Mukwege fund. I was absolutely gutted that we could not hold the conference, because it would have had profile. It comes back to a point Pauline made: how are you advocating and raising the profile? To my mind, that would have been an ideal platform, but I had two choices: do we just hold and hope, and wait for the Covid crisis to end, to hold the conference, or do we get on with it? I took the view that we get on with it, and that is why we made these announcements in terms of funding.



I alluded earlier to the £1.1 million that we have provided to the Mukwege fund.³ We have lent support and some of the current financing goes into supporting the Murad code and the faith declaration. Sometimes initiatives are nothing more than persistence and bringing people together. The faith initiative did not really cost us anything, apart from the costs of launching the meeting and bringing people together, and the resource of people's time. In terms of actual costs, it was just drawing together different things that we can deliver. It is not just about pounds and pence; sometimes it is also about persistence and perseverance, and we are delivering on that.

Coming back to your point about what lies ahead, that is why I am keen on having a specific strategy, because it will allow us, notwithstanding the challenges we have in each spending round, to reflect on our ambitions. In terms of the conference, I have already said that it is my view that it should be held in the early part of 2022. I hope that that is the case. You will see, with the conference planning, a ramping up of funding and resourcing in that respect.

Navendu Mishra: Thank you, Lord Ahmad. All MPs will be watching quite closely what happens with the spending review, but particularly members of this Committee. There are reports in the media of cuts to the 0.7% commitment to foreign aid, so we appreciate your answer and I am sure we will be in touch with you again very soon.

Q303 **Chair:** We spoke to Minister Cleverly at the beginning of the week. I am interested in VAWG, violence against women and girls, which all of this encapsulates, the split between your two roles and whether it would be more helpful for it all to be in one portfolio.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: That is an interesting question. They say that institutional knowledge is a good thing. There was a time, he says perhaps with rose-tinted glasses, where I did all three, but that was the nature of what was the FCO specifically. With the merger that we have seen with FCDO, it is right to allow for specific focus of ministerial time on each of these important initiatives. I would not say it is a splitting of portfolios. First and foremost, James and I are friends and we like each other. That is an important starting point. Baroness Sugg leads on important issues of girls' education. In all of this, it is a team approach.

When a particular Minister is given specific responsibility, it allows for more detailed analysis and a deep-dive into particular initiatives. The fact that we have three Ministers across this agenda—me, Minister Cleverly and Baroness Sugg—allows us to bring our own perspectives and insights. Equally, I assure you that we work very much as a team. You can never work in silos on these things. Inevitably, there will be an overlap somewhere and it is about working together.

³ Witness correction: "HMG made a £1.3m contribution to the Global Survivors Fund in 2019, rather than £1.1m."



Coming back to issues on strategy, for example on PSVI and the next steps in terms of survivors, had the conference that I was organising gone ahead—William’s label was “time to act”—its theme, which I wear on my lanyard, which I will show you when we meet in person, was to be “time for justice, putting survivors first”. That is a reflection. However, looking ahead, if the conference goes ahead in 2022, it is very important that I work with the likes of Baroness Sugg, who looks at girls’ education.

For me, it is about rebuilding lives as well. You and I know, as do other colleagues, how horrific it is that girls as young as six or seven, or younger, I would hasten to add—and I have certainly met those six and seven year-olds in places like Iraq, who were raped in places like Mosul—had to go through these horrendous consequences. I talked about the team of experts and, as we are rebuilding their lives, the crossover to Baroness Sugg’s area is important.

That investment, which is the Prime Minister’s priority of 12 years of quality education for every girl, is an important way in which, as we look to the 2022 conference, we can bring the two initiatives together. I hope that that answers your question. I am open to ideas, but I assure you that, at ministerial level and at official level—this is why the role of people like Katy Ransome is important, in that she can dovetail these different initiatives together—we work on a joint agenda when it comes to this.

Q304 Mr Sharma: Good morning, Minister. In your experience as Minister for the UN, why is progress so slow to translate UN policies into actual change in the prevention of SEA in peacekeeping missions?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Part of the challenge is about the practicalities and how countries then act. As I said in response to an earlier question from Pauline, you have to first get countries into the right mindset and a recognition that the problem exists. At the UN, SEA is now recognised at the highest level. UN Secretary-General António Guterres leads on this. I have worked very closely with him on the agenda of PSVI. He respects and acknowledges UK leadership on this. Recognising that it is happening in our backyard is an important first step forward.

In that regard, over the last two or three years, we have seen a recognition from the Secretary-General, which is the UK is fully supportive of, that this happens among peacekeepers within the UN teams. A lot of countries within the developing world also lend high levels of troops to peacekeeping operations, so they are troop-contributing countries. The United Kingdom has a sizable number that we provide as well. What is missing and where work needs to be done in getting countries to act is to ensure that every troop person and every deployment is aware of the fact that they will be held to account, not as a collective but as an individual. There has been a lot more practical work done in this regard and we have been doing our work in supporting it.



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I am a great believer in practical things that have happened, and I know you are as well. Yes, we have hosted summits and, yes, we have invested in training, and these things are very important. For example, we directly deployed child protection advisers through the UNO Stabilization Mission in the DRC in 2018 and 2019. What was the purpose of that deployment? Within the DRC, which is a specific country of concern, the officers worked to develop clear priorities, training and measures on sexual exploitation and abuse strategies for the mission. This issue has plagued, tragically, not just some of the troop deployments but, as we have seen in recent years, also the third sector working within the NGOs. The UK specifically works with troop-contributing countries, providing training.

On the WPS and SEA agenda, we formed a core part of training, which is delivered by a specific group known as the British peace support team in Africa. Again, to give you practical information, Virendra-ji, in 2019-20, the team delivered sexual exploitation and abuse modules to over 2,700 people across 34 different training events held by that specific deployment on the ground.

There is a lot of work still to be done but, coming back to your question, the starting point has to be a recognition that this issue exists. Whether it is within the context of the UN or the NGO community, we have moved on because the first thing was recognising and not turning a blind eye to it. I praise the efforts that Secretary-General António Guterres has made specifically in bringing countries together to create that dialogue.

Q305 Mr Sharma: Thank you very much, Minister. I note that you have partly touched on this. You might have addressed part of my further questions, but I will still put them. The UK has been a leading voice in pushing for tougher policies at the UN level, but what more can the British Government do bilaterally to hold member states to account for the behaviour of their own troops and to promote effective investigations and sanctions where required?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: There are two or three things that should happen. I have already addressed the training element, and it is not just about people. For example, within the UN operational support department that looks at this, we have given around £4 million for the specific issue of training. On a practical point, we need more women on the front line, which have been sadly missing in many UN deployments. The Elsie initiative is a great initiative, which Canada leads on, through former British Army General Messenger. I pay tribute to the work he did on WPS to engage more women on the front line. We have seen some good examples in Africa. I remember visiting Ghana and the Kofi Annan peace centre there, and seeing specifically women on the front line, training various missions. That is important.

Specific to your point, yes, we are in that place now where there are investigations within the UN and bilaterally. We deliver very candid and clear messages that, where troop-contributing countries are accused by



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individuals and then do not act on reports of sexual exploitation and abuse, the ultimate sanction is that they can no longer contribute as a troop-contributing country.

I assure you that, given the money that certain countries get in that respect, they are looking at this very seriously because many of those countries rely very heavily on the support and finances they get for their troops, as well as the enhanced training that they receive when they deploy troops through UN peacekeeping missions. With lead agencies as well as the leads of the Secretary-General, we work very closely on peacekeeping missions and deployments, with a focus on the strategy, the money and the practical things that we can deliver through the UN and bilaterally.

Q306 Mr Sharma: Has the introduction of the Overseas Operations Bill been raised by your counterparts when seeking to promote the investigation and punishment of military perpetrators of sexual violence and other forms of SEA on peacekeeping missions or anywhere else?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Not specifically with me, no. That is not an issue that has been raised.

Q307 Mr Sharma: As a member of the UN Security Council, what more can the UK do to advocate for transparent and effective investigations when UN agencies receive a complaint relating to SEA, as well as better protections for whistleblowers?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On your last point there on whistleblowers, they need to be afforded anonymity. If whistleblowers come forward at some time and ask for it, there should be mechanisms to provide that. For anyone who has been accused of such actions, there needs to be a strong evidence base, so that is why it is important within UN agencies that there is a strengthening also of people who have the expertise to assess that the evidence is strong enough to then take forward to the next step.

As a UN P5 member, we can do various things. In several areas where, as you will be familiar, we are penholders, we can push those agendas when we have specific resolutions that cover these issues of conflict resolution, looking at the conduct of UN agencies and peacekeepers. The specifics can be in the detail of those resolutions to ensure greater levels of accountability. We are working with the UN on this as well.

As I said, over the last few years, we have seen a rise in the ambition and the practicalities of how we raise the bar for the standards of those countries that provide troops, so that they recognise it, but there is more work to be done on individual accountability. I put it in very simple terms. You and I talk about practical things a lot. If we are sending someone into the field and saying, "You have to do these things", let us remind them and make it not just a collective ambition but a recognition of their responsibility and obligation as an individual, when they exercise



what they are going in for, which is to keep the peace, build peace and provide security.

Yes, it may well be within the mandate of what has been suggested, which is why that training element, recognising that you need to be aware of it, you need to understand it and you will be held accountable to it, needs to be fully understood, not by every troop-contributing country alone but by every troop who forms of that. There is work to be done on that in terms of training.

Q308 Mr Sharma: In your bilateral engagement with other member states, do you get the sense that it would be possible for the UK and like-minded countries to get together to promote better arrangements, for example the establishment of a regulatory body external to the UN, providing independent oversight of all peacekeeping missions?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: That is a challenging question because anything that is independent of the UN needs the agreement of the UN. Do changes need to happen at the UN? Yes. Is the UN in need of reform in many parts of its work? Yes. However, there is no other organisation, and we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the United Nations. Its ultimate objective was to keep peace in the world and, notwithstanding conflicts we have seen, we all need to acknowledge that that has happened. I have been proud of the fact that, during my short time in the overall context of 75 years—I have not been on this earth for 75 years—the UK's leadership, participation and continued role as a P5 member has been key.

On your point specifically—and I illustrate this through our support for initiatives such as the Elsie initiative led by Canada—we should work within the context and the parameters of the UN and create those groups that can look at a greater level of women participation and a greater level of training and insights. The UK has that capacity but others do as well. We need to ensure that countries recognise that, working within the UN family, there is a role for everyone. You may be at the receiving end of the training, but you need to invest in your troops to ensure that their abilities are raised as well. I would temper your comments, and say not so much an independent authority or a regulatory authority, but we can work within the parameters of the UN and create very effective mechanisms. There are some very good examples, and one that I have mentioned specifically that we are already involved in, that are reflective of that.

Mr Sharma: Thank you, Minister, for your very properly said message to us, and thank you, Chair, for giving me the opportunity to ask questions.

Q309 Chair: Thank you, Virendra, and I echo your words. Lord Ahmad, you have been incredibly passionate and open in your answers. I wonder if I could just ask you one curveball question. Why does sexual violence occur so repeatedly in conflict situations? What are your thoughts behind that?



Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: There are various motivations. The first is vulnerability. Predominantly, we have seen through evidence that women are the targets of it. Reversing it totally, women must be involved in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The evidence has been very clear. Any peace agreement that is reached lasts 15 years or more, and the evidence is there. There is a 35% higher evidence base if women are involved. It is shocking even in the context of the UN. I have been asked the question, "Why do women need to be involved? Do we have enough women?"

Yesterday, I hosted an event on advocacy on this important agenda. I have been delighted to get the support of Her Royal Highness the Countess of Wessex, who has specifically become an advocate and is working with us on WPS as well as PSVI. We need people such as that to ensure that women are not just thought about in the next room but are central to peacekeeping.

Coming back to the earlier part of your question, why does it happen? It is weaponised. These are vulnerable targets: young girls and children, and young women, often unable to protect themselves. The gender issue is an obvious one. The other thing—and you talked about passion—is the faith initiative. When I went and met with those Yazidi women and heard their testimony, one of the causes was that you had this despicable organisation, Daesh, which took these vulnerable individuals—call them what you may—and trained them.

Also, in their minds, they instilled that these women are not women, girls or human beings, but worse than an ant. Somehow, perversely, they then hijacked a religious narrative and said, "This allows you to do it". This is hijacking of a faith and against any kind of religious narrative. We must address it at the core. That is what inspired me. After sitting in that room, I got back on the plane and said to my PS at the time, "I have to do something".

I sounded out various faith leaders. One of your Committee members—Mr Sharma, whom I know very well—knows about the motivations that lie behind it. We approached faith leaders. I pay tribute to the likes of Archbishop Angaelos, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Muslim leaders and the Hindu Council. We brought them all together and I remember sitting in a room down the corridor from here. I said, "How can it be that we allow the narrative of whatever faith, religion or belief"—because it is not just about the religion you follow—"to be hijacked by despicable organisations like Daesh and we have no counter?" It is no good you, as Chair, our parliamentary colleagues or me as a Minister saying, "This is wrong and this is what should happen". Of course, we expect that, but we need those communities not just to condemn it but to act on it.

This faith initiative and the Declaration of Humanity is, I believe, the next step forward, because faith leaders themselves have said, "Sexual violence is not a weapon of war. It should be totally and utterly



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demonised in any shape or form. No religion or belief sanctions it. Victims and survivors of sexual violence should be fully supported. We, as faith or belief leaders, will play our part on the ground in countries, as well as working with Governments and NGOs, to ensure that message is delivered”.

It is a first step. I do not know where this will go. We launched it only a week ago. It was about 16 months in the making, some incredible work went into it and it is available on the website. I hope that that addresses the fact that we have to look at the motivations that lead people. The practical example that I saw in Iraq through Daesh really was the inspiration behind why we launched that.

To those who say perhaps we do not listen to survivors, certainly in my experience of doing this role, we have been led by survivors. Had I not had that meeting, I do not know if I would have had the real passion and inspiration to lend support. I pay tribute to our officials and others in this.

As I said to you before, Chair, as these initiatives are taken, I know you have specific ideas on how we can work with other organisations within Government and with parliamentary colleagues to see how we do not lose sight of domestic issues as well on these important agendas. That is a valuable discussion going forward but I am really grateful both for the questions and for the interest of the IDC in this important issue.

I hope that, over the last hour or so, I have been able to illustrate that I, for one, and my team, who I know reflect this within the FCDO, are very passionate about not just the principle of this but doing our little bit to change the lives of survivors, who are at the centre and who are the most important people when it comes to our approach to PSVI.

Chair: Minister, I have to say that it is a real pleasure to meet someone who gets this, and all power to your elbow. I am sure that the Committee wants to help and support you as much as possible. We completely share your view that survivors always know the answers. They are the experts in this but, sadly, we so very rarely ask them and very rarely listen to them, so we appreciate the position that you are taking. I would urge you to embed your KPIs across FCDO as soon as possible, because we have seen lots of warm words and slogans over the years, but we need to see it embedded into practice going forward. Thank you for all you are doing on that and thank you for being so open with us in this session.