

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, HC 1087

Tuesday 21 February 2023

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mr Richard Bacon; Theo Clarke; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; David Mundell; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 52 - 103

Witnesses

[I](#): Sir Hugh Bayley, Commissioner, Independent Commission for Aid Impact; and Nigel Thornton, Review Team Leader, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, and Director, Agulhas.

[II](#): Lord Ahmad, Minister for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the United Nations, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; and Andrew McCoubrey, Acting Director Afghanistan and Pakistan, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Hugh Bayley and Nigel Thornton.

Q52 **Chair:** I would like to open this second session of the International Development Committee's short inquiry into Afghanistan, looking particularly at the current situation for women and girls over there. I am very glad to have Sir Hugh Bayley and Nigel Thornton from ICAI in front of us. You did a very influential report, looking retrospectively at UK aid to Afghanistan. That report covered, if I am correct, from 2014 to 2022. Based on what you have seen, how has the current situation in Afghanistan affected the projects that UK aid contributed to over that review period?

Sir Hugh Bayley: May I make a very brief statement to declare a couple of interests? Although I know that members of the Committee know this already, I think I need to put on the public record that, when I was an MP, up to 2015, I supported the UK's presence in Afghanistan. I visited the country on seven occasions, either as a member of the International Development Committee or as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I am also a trustee and board member of the International Rescue Committee, which receives funding from the British Government and many others, and the British public too, for humanitarian work in Afghanistan.

I would like to pay tribute to the British service personnel and civilians who served in Afghanistan, their locally recruited staff and the staff of the UK's implementing partners delivering aid in Afghanistan, especially, of course, those who were killed or injured while there. It is hard for those who are involved, including politicians who made or supported the decisions to intervene, to acknowledge that the mission failed in its primary purpose: to build a legitimate and viable state capable of suppressing terrorism in order to provide a better future for the Afghan people. Our review emphasises that we need to accept that mistakes were made and to learn from them in order to avoid them in the future.

I know you do not normally take statements, so I am grateful to you for allowing me to do so. To answer your question, the humanitarian needs currently are huge and increasing. There have been two years of drought and the long-range weather forecasts predict a further year of drought this year. The war in Ukraine and floods in Pakistan have driven up commodity prices, including, of course, food prices, and the actions of the Taliban, including the decree issued on 24 December, which you are inquiring into, have made a bad situation worse.

Last year, according to OCHA and the WHO, 24.3 million people received humanitarian assistance, and this year they predict it will rise by a further 16% to 28.3 million people. The need for humanitarian assistance is great and growing.

Q53 **Chair:** I agree. Could I ask you to give your reflections on the current



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impact on the projects we had been supporting for a number of years, which your review covers? For example, how has the current ban on women workers impacted on those projects? How has the Taliban takeover impacted on those projects? Do you have any information about that?

Sir Hugh Bayley: Our data collection ended in the middle of last year. We published in November, so obviously that was before this particular December decree. We are keen however, as ICAI, to update the information note, annex 2 to our report, which talked about current humanitarian needs and the UK Government's use of very substantial amounts of ODA to support them.

ICAI would like to do a quick update of that information note to bring the story forward by a year, in terms of both how much UK aid has been committed and how it is being used by implementing partners—principally, but not only, UN agencies. In the course of that, we would certainly talk with the implementors in country, through remote interviews, about the impact of the ban on women delivering humanitarian assistance.

From what I know at the moment, the Taliban's interpretation is not homogenous. I know this through IRC, for instance. In parts of the country it has been possible to retain women working on health programmes. Overall, the ban has created very considerable hardship but, rather than talking second hand, we would like to update our information note and then to report back to you. I hope we would have your support and the Government's support for that.

Q54 **Chair:** We would 100% support that. Rather than just focusing on the UN, it would be particularly interesting if you could look at the INGOs, the NGOs and the local organisations that we had supported in the past, just to see whether they are still standing. We have raised quite serious concerns that projects that have chosen to pause their programmes because women are unable to work safely are now facing the risk of being shut down, even though they have been achieving. If we could get an update, that would be very helpful for this Committee.

Sir Hugh Bayley: We will dig as deeply as we can within the short timescale. We are intending to publish at the beginning of May, but we most certainly will talk with your Clerks about what Afghan NGO contacts you have and which agencies, UN agencies or international NGOs they were working for, and we will gain access, as far as we can safely—safely for them—to speak with them. We would most certainly try to do that.

Q55 **Chair:** I know that there were issues about you getting access to Afghanistan for this report. Was that resolved? Would that be a problem going forward?

Sir Hugh Bayley: I think that it will be a problem now. Frankly, we sought to go in the summer of last year. The UN agreed to host a visit on condition that the British Government supported it. Because of their security concerns and the fact that, in my current role, the Foreign Office



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has a duty of care for me, they were not prepared to authorise it at that time. There has been a continuing dialogue about the feasibility of visiting, although, in relation to this information note, I do not think we will manage to visit, because the security situation has sadly deteriorated over the last six months or so.

Q56 **Chair:** Yes. It is horrific. I wonder whether there is any positive contribution that the UK made in that time period of your review that you can point us to.

Sir Hugh Bayley: In terms of our humanitarian assistance, the UK is one of the largest donors. It is the third biggest donor. The former Prime Minister Boris Johnson committed £286 million in the year immediately after the UK evacuation and that was spent. The Government committed a similar sum for the following year. Quite how that has been disbursed and used is one of the things we will hope to reflect in the updated information note.

Q57 **Chair:** That will be really helpful. It is just that we are seeing a gap between what is pledged and what actually gets disbursed on the ground. If you are able to update the Committee on that, that would be helpful.

Sir Hugh Bayley: That most certainly is the case. In round terms, in its appeal last year the UN sought \$4 billion and received about \$1 billion less than it deemed necessary.

Q58 **David Mundell:** Are you satisfied with the Government's response to the recommendations in your review?

Sir Hugh Bayley: We are obviously pleased that they accepted two recommendations and partially accepted the third, but there are two points on which we disagree with the Government. Perhaps it makes sense to deal with each of them separately.

First, we disagree with the Government's statement in response to our second recommendation. The Government said that UK ODA did not pay for paramilitary operations by the Afghan national police. The UK disbursed £252 million of ODA for police salaries through a trust fund managed by the UNDP. We received multiple sources of evidence, including from the UK's own police advisers, confirming that the Afghan national police worked primarily on conducting paramilitary operations. Indeed, 90% of police training was on military skills and things such as weapons handling and countering IEDs—improvised explosive devices. In fact, this Committee saw that police training in 2014, when I was a member. We visited the police training school in Lashkargah and a British military man was the manager and leader of the training.

We do not believe it is credible to say that spending money on police salaries did not support paramilitary operations when the primary purpose of the Afghan national police was to use paramilitary tactics to control the insurgency. It is an uncomfortable truth, but it is one of the lessons that we think must be learned by the British Government and not repeated.



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I should perhaps say that we, as ICAI, are not saying that it was wrong for the UK to use resources to counter the insurgency. That is a matter for the Government. We are saying that it was wrong to use ODA for those purposes. We believe that it was an inappropriate use of aid.

Q59 **David Mundell:** Do you think that is why there is a disconnect? It is around that interpretation, because it cannot be a factual disconnect.

Sir Hugh Bayley: This is something you must pursue with the Minister. How is it possible to pay the salaries of people conducting paramilitary operations without financially supporting those operations? I hope that is something the Government would reflect on a bit more. A lesson to be learned is that it is not the role of ODA to support paramilitary operations. If the UK wants to support such operations in the future, military assistance would be the route to go down.

Q60 **Chair:** We are having an ongoing dispute at the moment over the use of ODA, which can be technically acceptable within the terms but morally less so. Would you say that this falls into one of those areas?

Sir Hugh Bayley: It is even possible to say that it conflicts with the ODA rules. The OECD DAC was asked by the Hungarian Government to rule on the appropriateness of funding the Afghan national police. It ruled that it was appropriate, so long as it was for regular and civilian policing operations. The regulations specifically exclude—Nigel may be able to help me on this—using such money for countering insurgency, using ballistic force and using military weapons.

Nigel Thornton: The wording specifically is that training in countersubversion methods, suppression of political dissidence, intelligence gathering and political activities, activities to combat terrorism through kinetic activities and the use of force, and support for armed response or combat operations, whether by military or civilian police, are all specifically excluded, so kinetic operations are specifically excluded under the definitions by OECD DAC.

Q61 **Chair:** Why was it accepted, then?

Sir Hugh Bayley: This is something you must discuss with the next panel of witnesses—with the Minister.

Chair: We will.

Q62 **Mr Sharma:** You found that, over the review period, there was limited investment in building Afghanistan's resilience to humanitarian crises. How well equipped is Afghanistan to withstand and respond to crises now? Is it better or worse than in 2014?

Sir Hugh Bayley: In our review, we found that the UK was slow to invest in building resilience. Generally speaking, it was reactive rather than proactive. Certainly, the UK funded a number of initiatives to build state capacity to respond to crises, but they delivered little, and funding was ended in 2018 for these initiatives and then in 2019 for another such initiative.



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However, long-term UK investment in the United Nations disaster response capability has paid dividends and it is being used to deliver humanitarian assistance in very difficult circumstances today. It is impossible to overstate the magnitude of humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and it has worsened considerably since 2021. At \$4.6 billion in the current year, the UN's humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan is the world's largest. Some 20 million people are acutely food insecure and 6 million of those are on the brink of famine or famine-like conditions. The Government are right to give high priority to humanitarian assistance, despite the budget pressures that they face.

Q63 Mr Sharma: Can you expand on how UK aid contributed to building resilience?

Sir Hugh Bayley: The attempt to build resilience through Afghan Government institutions frankly failed and, because it was failing, the Government stopped funding it. Over the long term, UK assistance and assistance from other donors has built the capacity of OCHA, the UN's Afghanistan mission, UNICEF and other agencies that are currently funded by the British Government to deliver humanitarian relief. These were not particularly Afghan resilience-building initiatives, but the investment in the capabilities of the World Food Programme and others to deliver assistance is vital to the delivery of humanitarian assistance now.

Q64 Chair: Something that keeps rattling in my head is that the international community funded the structures that we believe create good states. We did less to support civil society—the organisations that, in democracies, hold those institutions to account—so when one fell, there was nothing on the ground to try to hold society together. Would that be a fair criticism?

Sir Hugh Bayley: It is a very valid criticism. Funnily enough, this morning I went back and looked at this Committee's reports on Afghanistan in 2012 and 2014, when I was still a member of the Committee. Even then, the Committee was arguing that state building was not delivering the results that were expected. There were some gains—for instance, increased revenue collection—but, overall, a viable and competent state was not being built, to a large extent because it was undermined so heavily by corruption. The IDC, in those two reports, recommended withdrawing some ODA from state building and redirecting it towards the provision of services to the Afghan people, emphasising in both reports the importance of further supporting women and girls.

Chair: How painful that that was not listened to.

Q65 Mrs Latham: In your review, you quoted an expert who said that the UK's approach to Afghanistan was to align with the United States through thick and thin. What implications did you see that this approach had for the UK's aid and spending during that review period?

Sir Hugh Bayley: The United States is the UK's most important ally, and UK strategy for Afghanistan was determined by the National Security Council during the period we are talking about—the period of our review, 2014 to 2021. That NSC strategy directed our foreign policy, our defence



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policy and our development policy. The strategy gave primacy to the transatlantic relationship. It is not within my current remit to comment on that as an ICAI commissioner.

Senior officials—FCDO directors and ambassadors—made it quite clear to us that the development strategy had to fit within the overall National Security Council strategy. That UK alignment with the United States limited the operations that could be pursued through aid. There were examples put to us by senior officials of strategic choices that the UK would have liked the international alliance to make, but that were not supported at that time by the United States and therefore could not be pursued.

It is worth recalling, of course, that the United States contributed by far the most military and civilian assistance. To have allies that did not work hand in glove with the United States in those circumstances would have been counterproductive.

Q66 Mrs Latham: What were the drawbacks to the UK's approach?

Sir Hugh Bayley: Even before our review period, before 2014, way back in the noughties—the first decade of the 21st century—the UK took the view that, to build a secure future for Afghanistan, you needed a viable political settlement. You needed a broader-based Government than was created with a winner-takes-all presidency, where you had a powerful President from one ethnic group in an ethnically diverse country. That was not the view of the United States. The view of the United States was that it was necessary first to defeat the Taliban and then to address those issues of governance. That was one difference of approach.

Since the UK made state building its primary development objective, it was seeking to build a state that it felt was likely to lack the legitimacy to command the level of support from the Afghan people that was necessary to make as much progress as possible with the other parts of the development agenda—for instance, education, health, and the building of livelihoods.

Q67 Mr Bacon: You mentioned corruption earlier, Sir Hugh. During the review period, what evidence did you find of corruption in and around the Afghan Government?

Sir Hugh Bayley: We received evidence of a continuing problem of there being ghost police officers—police people for whom salaries were being paid through British aid who did not exist and the salaries were being pocketed by others. We saw a strong reaction from the UK Government to that and the numbers of ghost police officers declined significantly, but that is one example of corruption. We received evidence of bribe taking by Government officials as well as by police officers.

Q68 Mr Bacon: Do you think UK officials were aware of the extent of the corruption?

Sir Hugh Bayley: Yes, I do. I think the Government were very much alive to the problem. DFID's internal audit department deemed the risk of



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aid diversion—to use its words—as severe. That is the highest possible level of risk. UK anti-corruption officials were deployed to Kabul to address these issues.

It goes back, to some extent, to Mrs Latham's question. Senior officials and Ministers accepted that operations in Afghanistan were high risk but should not be abandoned because of the overarching political imperative to play a constructive part as an ally in Afghanistan.

The other thing I would say about corruption is this. Although UK aid delivered some very significant verifiable benefits for the public, in terms of health, education and livelihoods, the state-building project failed because of the volume of aid that the UK and other donors sought to pass through the Government of Afghanistan. I could say more about that if you want.

Q69 Mr Bacon: Yes, please do. There was a time, I remember, when DFID's Kabul office was widely touted as its biggest mission overseas by a very long way. It was not for a lack of people or resources going in but, empirically, it was a dramatic failure.

Sir Hugh Bayley: It was a failure. If I am trying to encapsulate what went wrong, one key thing was that the timescale for the military campaign and the timescale for the development campaign were widely different. Military campaigns expect results quickly and you cannot have a 10 or 20-year military engagement. The World Bank, for instance, advised that it would take 35 years at least for Afghanistan to build a viable state that could raise revenues of its own, so there was a mismatch there.

Because the donors tried to move to build the capacity of the state more quickly than it had the capacity to absorb aid, large volumes of aid were diverted. A political culture was created whereby Afghan political leaders would seek office in order to gain the benefit of controlling donors' money.

Mr Bacon: That is a bit like the 18th century here.

Sir Hugh Bayley: Our research did not go back to the 18th century.

Mr Bacon: No, but you get my point.

Sir Hugh Bayley: I do get your point. The levels of corruption weakened public faith in the Government of Afghanistan and, frankly, tarnished the reputation of the international community. We were seen as providing money that went astray and not doing much about it. Actually, quite a lot was being done, but that was the impression created.

Q70 Mr Bacon: Was there a fundamental mistake made in trying to put it through the centre? Many years ago, Michael Scheuer wrote a book, *Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*, in which he said, quite specifically, that Afghanistan has only ever worked when it has a weak centre. I will not use the phrase "warlordism", because it is tendentious. He made the point that it has only ever worked when it is weak at the centre and



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strong in the provinces, if you like. We completely ignored that, did we not?

Sir Hugh Bayley: I do not think the UK completely ignored that. Possibly it was one difference between the UK approach and the United States approach. Certainly in the first decade, there were attempts—this is before our review period; I am speaking from previous knowledge—to build viable provincial assemblies and give powers to provincial governors. In a multi-ethnic country such as Afghanistan, to centralise all power with a central Government and, frankly, with one person, a President, who could appoint or dismiss members of his Government, did not build the inclusiveness that was necessary for the Government to maintain over time legitimacy and support from the Afghan people.

Mr Bacon: Mr Thornton, you were nodding vigorously. Do you want to add anything to that?

Nigel Thornton: Sir Hugh has summed it up extremely well. What is interesting about what Sir Hugh has just said is that there was a lot of guidance within the UK Government around how to do this. We know how to do this really well from many years' experience. If one compares what happened in Afghanistan with the guidance that was already written on paper, you can see that there is a significant difference.

Q71 **Theo Clarke:** International support, including aid, accounted for about half of Afghanistan's national budget in 2020. Specifically, what steps do you think the UK Government took to reduce Afghanistan's dependency on aid?

Sir Hugh Bayley: Welcome back; it is very good to see you and I hope all is well at home with your growing family. Yes, you are right: Afghanistan was extremely aid dependent. As you say, 50% of Government expenditure was funded by foreign aid, as was 75% of all public expenditure. The scale of support to the Afghan state certainly distorted political processes and weakened institutions, as we have just been discussing.

The UK understood the problem. During our review period, it removed resources. It reallocated some resources from funding streams through the Government of Afghanistan towards multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank, to reduce the scope for the corrupt diversion of aid within the Government of Afghanistan. A lesson was learned and implemented but, frankly, the UK could and should have avoided, in the first place, overfunding weak state institutions in the process of being created.

Q72 **David Mundell:** Your information note outlines the scale of the humanitarian need in Afghanistan. Is the UK providing sufficient support now to Afghanistan to match that level of need?

Sir Hugh Bayley: As we heard earlier through our conversation, the UN's 2022 appeal, which was for \$4.44 billion, was underfunded by 27%, or \$1.2 billion. The simple answer is that humanitarian needs are not being met. It is not for the UK alone to make up that difference. We are one, of course, of many donors. The UK provided 11.5% of the total last



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year—\$373 million. We are talking dollars here because this is UN accounting. That made us the third largest donor, less than the United States and Germany but bigger than any other donor, so the UK is a very major donor. In addition to Government resources, the UK contributed a further £52 million through the Disasters Emergency Committee—in other words, through citizen giving.

The Government's future funding intentions are obviously something you have to address in your next session with the Minister. We have been a big donor and the needs are huge and not fully met.

Q73 David Mundell: What would you say are the main lessons that the UK Government should take from their experience delivering aid in Afghanistan in that 2014-to-2020 period? How should those lessons be applied to the current situation?

Sir Hugh Bayley: There is a lesson, which we have discussed: do not move too far too quickly with state building. State building takes time and you need to get the balance of funding between multilateral institutions that we have more control over, such as the World Bank and UN agencies. That is one takeaway. The lesson on using aid to fund paramilitary police force needs to be taken away and learned.

In our first recommendation, we urged the Government not to devote large-scale resources to state building where the state did not hold wide legitimacy. The Government only partially accept that recommendation, I think for quite good reasons. They say that there are circumstances when things are not ideal and you have to do the best you can in difficult circumstances.

The point that brings us together—or would bring us together—is to define what we mean by large-scale resources. Sometimes you have to work with people who have state power but do not have legitimacy, but one should be careful to limit resource in a way that does not create the problems that were created in Afghanistan of political factionalism, continuing violence and corruption.

Q74 Chris Law: Following on from that, because I was thinking about it myself, how much do you think we contributed to Afghanistan ending up where it is, with the Taliban coming into control, by the amount of resources we put into statecraft?

Sir Hugh Bayley: It would be wrong to attribute the failure in Afghanistan wholly to the aid programme. One needs to look at the entire foreign and security policy, which goes way beyond the brief that I have.

Q75 Chris Law: Let me just interject there. Maybe I am not being very clear. I am trying to find out, in that development statecraft, how much of it was used to build bridges and relationships, particularly in rural communities, where the Taliban was having ever-increasing control. The rapid collapse towards the end seemed like a bit of a surprise, given the amount of aid that was used in Afghanistan, particularly with the national Government and through paramilitary police and others. I am wondering



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whether there is a contributing factor within that that actually led to the demise, rather than the construction, of a secure state, in that there was a disenfranchisement among many people who felt that the Taliban represented them more.

Sir Hugh Bayley: The level of corruption that we were discussing earlier certainly was used by the Taliban as a reason for winning support—hearts and minds—so that is one thing.

The other point I would make is this. Although the Government started, from 2016 onwards, planning for the contingency that things would not work out in the way that we wanted, we saw an optimism bias. This is something that the Defence Committee identified in its recent inquiry. We saw an optimism bias that militated against British officials recognising that circumstances had changed to the point that programming ought to change. We think there is a lesson there. Do the scenario planning but face reality and use the scenario planning to redirect aid when circumstances change in an unfavourable direction.

Q76 **Chair:** That is a very good moment to end and a very strong lesson that I hope has been heard loud and clear not just in this country but around the world. It is very clear in Afghanistan that it is the general population who are suffering as a consequence of all of this mess. We have the Minister joining us now, so we will follow up on the questions you raised. Thank you very much. We really look forward to that follow-on note. I think it will be very helpful and a lot of people will be interested in seeing that follow-on note as well.

Sir Hugh Bayley: Thank you very much. We will need help of course from the Foreign Office—releasing documents and so on, and promptly—if we are going to produce it promptly.

Chair: We will try to shoehorn that into this next session as well. Thank you both very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad and Andrew McCoubrey.

Chair: We are now starting with our second panel: Lord Ahmad, who is the Minister for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the United Nations in FCDO; and Andrew McCoubrey, who is the acting Afghanistan and Pakistan director in FCDO. Thank you very much for joining us today. Let us jump straight in.

Q77 **Mrs Latham:** Hi, Minister. In response to the ICAI review, you set out how UK aid supported people in Afghanistan and the outcomes it achieved. What steps is the UK taking now to ensure that this progress is not undone following the Taliban takeover in 2021?

Lord Ahmad: That is a very pertinent question. The short answer to that is that the Taliban, from what we have seen demonstrated since their takeover, first and foremost have not lived up to their own assurances.



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Secondly, and more importantly and tragically, we have seen that being implemented on the ground. In relation to women and girls, there are the regressive policies the Taliban have adopted on girls' education and, more recently, the situation of the supply chain of female workers within distributing humanitarian support.

To come to what we have been doing, from the start of the takeover of the Taliban and in advance of that, I have been before the Committee several times on the issue of Afghanistan. I was very clear—to a certain extent this has been proven—and have always maintained that the ideological base of the Taliban, and the ones in control now, as opposed to 20 years ago, has not changed. That has been demonstrated. Their attitude towards women and girls is abhorrent, frankly.

What we have seen change, though, is Afghan society. We have seen many investments being made. I pay tribute to all our military and others who worked on the ground in terms of the support of how Afghan society changed. However, where we are now is that that is all very much in danger of being pushed back.

We are working very closely with the United Nations. Most recently, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Amina Mohammed, together with Sima Bahous, the head of UN Women, visited Kabul. They also went to Kandahar and a couple of other places. Right from the start of the Taliban takeover, I have been very much a strong advocate to Amina Mohammed that her presence on the ground there immediately addresses the erroneous narrative of the Taliban that Islam does not allow women to hold power and that women cannot have a role. She is articulate, outstanding and the second most senior person in the multilateral system, who is Muslim by faith and hijab wearing. Her sheer presence, without even saying something, negates the erroneous narrative of the Taliban.

We are continuing to work with key NGOs on the ground as well, UNICEF being one of the UN agencies, and other people, such as the Aga Khan Development Network, who have specific operations. To a certain extent and in certain provinces—about eight or nine—they have continued to be able to operate in the fields of education and health when it comes to girls' education and, particularly, women's health.

Q78 Mrs Latham: That is interesting. Given that the UK no longer gives aid money to the Afghan Government, how are you able to support those basic services of healthcare and education?

Lord Ahmad: The key point is that there are bodies that have access—and I have been dealing with them over a number of years, not just in Afghanistan but in other places—and have their own established networks with local NGOs and local partners. We have been very clear that we are not handing money to the Taliban Administration in Afghanistan. We are working, as I said, with key partners who have established networks and who continue to operate in some regions, in particular, unhindered.

However, you will also know, Pauline, that we had to recently stop the



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operations, and that was universal because of the announcement they made on workers within the supply chain. That has now been reviewed, and the international donor community have moved together as one. We are in an assessment period to see whether their new reassurances on allowing women to work within the international NGO sector are upheld. I personally—and I stress that point—am not holding my breath, but let us see.

The important thing is that we have continued, in what have been really challenging circumstances, to support humanitarian efforts in the first instance, which was key. We worked very closely with, for example, the World Food Programme, and its network, again, is well established in the country.

Q79 Mrs Latham: Is the UK's priority now to meet that immediate humanitarian need instead of building stability in the long term?

Lord Ahmad: If you go back to the time that NATO forces went in and then the subsequent support, yes, first and foremost it was to prevent Afghanistan again being used as a base for terror. That was replicated in the UN resolution that was passed after the Taliban took over, and remains a key condition.

However, the first priority when it comes to our support should always be humanitarian. We ensured, during two winter periods, that that humanitarian support continued. But we are providing support in what I would call the category of "humanitarian plus", where we are looking at what facilities can be provided in terms of basic health and education, particularly at a primary school level. Where we can see that that support has continued, we are seeking to work with those agencies.

The other thing about why we stopped was that about 48% of all distribution within Afghanistan involved women in the supply chain, so it was fundamentally flawed against everything that we were doing. I think it was right to pause. The jury is out on whether this assessment period will deliver what we want. But let's be very clear: I am constantly engaging with women leaders who have arrived here and I engage directly with the APPG, to which I pay tribute for what has been set up there, to ensure that what we are doing now, particularly under the Taliban rule, is informed directly by Afghan women, who are guiding us on both local NGOs—I cannot name them here; some are sensitive and have to be protected—and international NGOs. Again, I am not going to name them, but some international NGOs have come to see me in private to also say that they are now being quite specifically targeted because there is a hard-line element. The Taliban is not a homogenous group. There are eight or nine factions and then there is the ISKP. Anyone who shows a sense of moderation—the definition meaning inclusivity of some kind to women—is perceived as a liberal by their standard. We have to be robust in what we do but part of this exercise is to ensure that we work together as an international community.

Andrew McCoubrey: In the last part of 2021, through our G7 presidency we convened many of the donors and reorientated the World Bank's programming to support basic services, particularly health,



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education and livelihoods. Through several interventions at the ADB board and the World Bank board, we released approximately £1.4 billion for basic services and support to NGOs, as the Minister says, in Afghanistan.

Although it is a basic health service, the health service has continued. Education has continued where possible. Since the ban, we have pressured the Taliban very hard, through our office in Doha and, as the Minister says, through the UN and other regional actors, not only to get girls back into school but to have carve-outs from the ban, particularly in the health sector. There are now carve-outs for the health sector, for some basic humanitarian issues and, in education, for women teachers. It is not enough but that pressure, not only from us but from our regional partners too, has made some benefit.

Basic services are being provided and women are participating in the provision of those services right the way across the country, both at the basic level and through the ICRC, which is funding around 33 tertiary level hospitals.

Q80 Chair: Minister, you mentioned the pause in some programmes. I know a number of NGOs have expressed concern that, where they have paused programmes because of safety concerns around their women or just the programmes not being deliverable under the current situation in some areas, the pause might lead to a permanent cut of funding to them. Is there any truth in their anxiety?

Lord Ahmad: It is understandable to ask what the implications are when you pause a programme. I understand their anxieties, but there was a decision taken by all international donors and member states, as well as bodies such as the UN and the ICRC, which all agreed that they needed to review their operations. I am quite clear, again, with those who hold out hope that the Taliban will somehow reform and change their edict: that will not happen. That is against their grain and against their thinking. What will happen—and we will see that increasingly in certain regions—is a carve-out: “Yes, we will allow these health facilities and these educators.” That is where we have to work very closely with our partners. If there are agencies that come directly to yourself to identify these concerns, please let us know. I would be quite happy to meet with them directly, with the team, to allay those concerns. But we were principled in our stand that we needed to allow for this pause to make an assessment, most importantly, by the NGOs themselves.

Chair: That is reassuring, thank you.

Q81 Theo Clarke: To pick up on this point about the ban of women working for NGOs in Afghanistan, you mentioned, Andrew, the pressure that the UK is putting on to change it. You have just given us an example about teachers, but I wondered whether you could give us any more examples about positive action where UK influence is changing their position. Minister, are you optimistic at all about the prospect of this ban being reversed, either wholly or partially? I would love to hear your thoughts.

Andrew McCoubrey: As the Minister said, on the ban itself, it is very



unlikely that we will see it reversed completely. The pause, as the Minister said, for political purposes, had three benefits. The first was time to get the international community together. As you know, the announcement took place just over the Christmas period and that has meant all the main donors, but also regional countries as well, coming out and having a unified approach to how to tackle the Taliban's edict.

The second is the diplomatic efforts, as I have said, to pressure the Taliban to reverse it and, if that is not possible, to look at these carve-outs. The health sector is one and education is another. I understand that, as of today, the number of provinces where there is an effective carve-out on the ban is now up to 12 across Afghanistan, so there is a geographical element to that as well.

It has also helped us to work with our partners to listen, as the Minister has said, to the NGOs and others as to how to work against a core set of principles to deliver aid. We are now at a working level between the donors and many of the NGOs of having an agreed set of principles about how to proceed. We will be putting those to Ministers in the coming days and then hoping to agree them formally. As you would expect, the UK has been at the forefront of some of those discussions, albeit with our fellow donor colleagues.

Lord Ahmad: I never give up hope. That is why we adopted a quite strategic working relationship with the Islamic world. I have been out to the IOC, specifically, and we have seen delegations of both Islamic scholars as well as Foreign Ministers from Islamic countries. The narrative they challenge is the erroneous narrative of the Taliban that this is somehow perversely justified under a religion that they claim to follow—on the contrary. That head-on challenge, and our advocacy and support for the work they are doing on the ground, has also assisted.

But let us be very clear. With all the factions, the word of the actual faction or the emir who sits in Kandahar is taken as read. You could have 99%, as was clear from the early indications we had on girls' education, who were giving reassurances that there would be no change, and then at the 11th hour this changed, and it came because there was an edict from the highest authority, according to the Taliban.

We are seeing what Andrew has just described more and more. It started off with four provinces, then six and then, as we have heard, 12, where local commanders are in operation and have quite diverse communities, and they see the direct benefit of humanitarian support and then the added element that girls' support in education and healthcare is providing. We need to be focused on those agencies that do revert back to us, and we are working closely with them, but also to be strategic in continuing our support with the IOC and the wider Islamic world in ensuring that the narrative is directly challenged by them.

Q82 Theo Clarke: What steps are the UK Government taking to ensure that female-headed households, who have completely lost their source of income as a result of the ban, now have enough money to survive with day-to-day spending?



Lord Ahmad: Again, that is where the local NGOs are playing a key role for us. In some of the meetings I have mentioned that I have been having with leaders from Afghanistan who are now present here, or we meet on the international stage, I have made it very clear to them to advise us of key NGOs exactly in those sectors where we can then work with our international partners to identify them so we can channel the funding appropriately.

In terms of specific figures and assessments, we have seen in what were six, then eight, an increasing amount of localised support for women-led industries. But the concept of the mahram, which is this male guardian concept that is applied, makes it very difficult for women-led households in terms of the wider application, not just in relation to livelihood but even being able to leave their homes without a male guardian. Those are quite obvious but clear barriers that we are currently facing. The way around this is to ensure that we find the right channels to support these discreet NGOs on the ground, who are beginning to make inroads.

Andrew McCoubrey: Our partners in the UN and NGOs are looking to target those who are most vulnerable. As you know, female-headed households tend to have 30% less income than male-headed households. That targeting is taking place. As the Minister said, we are working as hard as we can to support NGOs, particularly those working on women's issues, through the World Bank money that I mentioned earlier. We have made a modest allocation to make sure that NGOs supporting these issues are funded.

Lord Ahmad: Just as an aside on this issue of women who fall victim to sexual violence, which I know is of interest to Pauline, to you, Sarah, and to others, we have also had programmes with just shy of £30,000 of direct support—and we have identified just under half a million women we have supported over the period—which were focused exactly on this issue of access to finance to allow them to establish their own very small businesses as well.

We are seeing how best we can scope that. For example, the former Minister for Women has been helpful in suggesting some names. I do not want to paint in any sense that this is somehow going to alleviate the plight of women in Afghanistan; we are far from that and the situation remains very dire.

Q83 **Mr Sharma:** Hi, Minister. Can you reassure us that the UK Government remain committed to supporting the people of Afghanistan and that the UK would not use the ban as an opportunity to reduce their support?

Lord Ahmad: In recent times, since the takeover of the Taliban, we have been resolute. We have given over half a billion pounds in the last two years to support exactly the priorities that I have just highlighted. That demonstrates what we have delivered and continued to stand by. In terms of ODA going forward and our support, we are in the rounds at the moment and we are discussing that. But we have to be realistic to see how much of that money, once allocated, can be effectively distributed with the mitigations we want to set in place.



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We have achieved, for example, 50%, which was the target set, of our support going into women and girls. Notwithstanding the challenge over the last two years, that has been a reflection of something that our own reviews and assessments, as well as those of international partners and agencies on the ground, have demonstrated, which is that we have achieved that objective. But the situation is getting more challenging, not easier.

Frankly speaking, why am I painting this picture? The Taliban's ideological base is that the more they are challenged, the more they perceive it as a test from up above. They do not perceive it as, "We had better get our act together and start accommodating it." They present that narrative, particularly to their most ardent supporters, as a means of testing their perseverance.

So yes, we stay committed to Afghanistan. We are involved with all the key bodies. As I said to you, we are working very closely with the United Nations and other key agencies. I have not mentioned the near neighbours to Afghanistan. Pakistan, notwithstanding its own internal challenges and economic challenges, including the floods, still continues to be a very strong supporter to the United Kingdom for our efforts and what we are trying to achieve. Only this morning, I was reading some reports that there has been an exchange of crossfire between Pakistan and some of the Taliban forces in the north of the country, so the situation remains very fluid.

Q84 Mr Sharma: What decisions, if any, have you made about the future funding for partners who have paused some of their operations in Afghanistan because of the ban?

Andrew McCoubrey: For those who have had to pause, like other donors, we have said that we would continue to fund, particularly the staff—female staff—until the end of this financial year. We have made that commitment to those organisations. We had disbursed well over 80% of our funding by the end of last year—by the end of 2022—so that funding is already ongoing, has been disbursed, is under action and is having an effect.

In terms of next year, the Minister might wish to come in but, as soon as we have our budget, we will be able to make a clearer assessment of what we are able to support and where.

Lord Ahmad: Just to pick up on that track, when I am looking at support and making the case for my patch in the wider mix, it is exactly that point: where is the funding continuing to ensure that we keep the expertise that we have and can support women's livelihoods and those who are working with us? I remember the challenge we faced during the covid crisis when we continued, for example, to fund teacher salaries, even though the schools themselves were not operational, to ensure that we kept that intellectual capacity. I have said this to this Committee before. Overall, when it comes to support and funding going forward, instinctively that is the first place we should go. How can we ensure that we keep the capacity of the expertise we have, which allows us to scale up once, one hopes—God willing—funding is at previous levels and there



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is a return to 0.7%? That is one for the future. What we need to do in any programme, not just in Afghanistan, is to keep that sense of expertise.

Q85 Mr Sharma: What assurances have you given to NGOs that are concerned that their programmes in Afghanistan will be closed? Have you been able to provide them with any certainty about their funding?

Lord Ahmad: Andrew has already talked about some of the assurances, based on the pause, that we have been able to give until such time an assessment was made that the pause would be lifted, which it has been. We have now gone into this assessment period to see whether the reassurances that we have been given when it comes to the support of our funding are also assured through the women in the system.

Beyond that, some agencies have made a decision themselves and they stopped funding their programmes almost immediately because they physically could not operate without women having the access they need. Frankly, there are some factions within the Taliban who also recognise that there is certain assistance that cannot be provided to Afghan women without women. We are in that space at the moment where that assessment will be made. There is a mild degree of encouragement that we are seeing this number of states and regions within Afghanistan opening up now in double digits.

The assessments maybe towards the middle of this year will allow us to make a better assessment, now that the funding pause has ended, of how many agencies continue to operate effectively.

Q86 Mr Bacon: You had this 20-year period during which women were educated and it became “normal” for that to happen. Depending on what age a child was when that process started—five, six or seven years old—you now have a whole cohort of adult women who experienced that as the first thing that they knew, and that is widespread across the population. To what extent has that made, or will it be shown to have made, an unstoppable difference in how the country changes, no matter how bad things look at the moment? Is that being too optimistic?

Lord Ahmad: Time shall tell. Here we are sitting in 2023 and the Taliban probably hoped that the issue would no longer be under discussion, scrutiny or debate. Well, that is proven wrong and one of the major factors in that is the acting in unison of a broad coalition of countries, including near neighbours, who have been under a lot of pressure. We have been lobbied and we have made the case very powerfully. As I said earlier, the importance of women’s education, the importance of women’s empowerment and the pivotal role women make in progressing society is well articulated by our friends in the Islamic world, contextualising it in the language that the Taliban understands. That has to continue if we are going to see any shift or change.

There is a finite time, however long that time may be, that you can suppress 50% of your own population. There are now women leaders here in the UK and elsewhere, who you speak to, who have expressed, and are looking at, a specific desire to return to Afghanistan to play their



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part in rebuilding. The role of near-neighbouring countries in the Islamic world and our strong united support for what they are seeking to do is key.

The other thing, which Andrew alluded to earlier, is that we have not totally detached ourselves from Afghanistan. We still have a chargé who looks after things, we have accessed Afghanistan, we have spoken—

Q87 **Mr Bacon:** Is the chargé in Kabul?

Lord Ahmad: No, in Doha. We are contemplating and looking at that, when the security allows, and I am sure you will totally agree that we have to ensure that our own diplomats and people on the ground are safe and secure. Other partners have gone in; some have pulled back. We have also seen the ISKP threat coming in from the country. It has attacked specific countries that have operated in Afghanistan, and countries including the likes of China and Pakistan have been subject to those attacks. The security situation is very fragile, but that has not prevented us from acting on this.

I want to highlight one other area where we can effect change. Currently, we have the Commission on the Status of Women, which takes place every year in New York. There are two events happening. The IOC is chairing an event on women's rights and empowerment within the Islamic world, with a reference to Afghanistan and, indeed, next-door in Iran and the tragic situation we have seen there. We are also looking at supporting a UN conference within the region, again focused on the whole issue of the importance of girls' education and women's empowerment. These will be key moments that will allow a focus on Afghanistan.

I cannot give a timeline on when that change will happen but we have to be consistent and persistent in our efforts in that area.

Q88 **David Mundell:** What support is the UK providing to Afghan refugees living in neighbouring countries?

Lord Ahmad: I will ask Andrew to come in in a moment. Perhaps on personal reflection, I spent a great deal of time pre, during and post the whole Operation Pitting, to-ing and fro-ing, sometimes under the radar, for exactly that reason. We had very strong co-operation from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and, of course, Pakistan. Even though the situation has changed in Iran, if there were access routes there—again, we did not talk about this publicly, to the extent of specifics—I think there was a passage there.

In terms of the main support at the moment that is being extended, we allocated an initial £30 million of funding to near-neighbouring countries for exactly that purpose, and we worked very closely with the likes of Pakistan in terms of the support that they are providing to Afghan refugees.

To be clear, the situation for Pakistan did not start in 2021. They have had an Afghan refugee crisis for over 20 years, and that has continued to be the case because of the porous border and, indeed, for those who were seeking to avail of opportunities in Pakistan, etc. Yes, we continue



to work closely with the near neighbours.

Andrew McCoubrey: Immediately after the fall, we put in place a regional programme with support to the UN, the World Food Programme, the UNHCR and the Red Cross and Red Crescent in Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan in case of outflows, but also to support resident refugee populations. We are a member of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees in Pakistan, which is a policy group established in 2019 to work with the Pakistani Government on supporting refugees there. For those small numbers of people who are returning to Afghanistan, we are supporting the International Organization for Migration. We have provided £7 million this year to make sure that people are supported on their return to Afghanistan where they have been returned.

Q89 **David Mundell:** Do you have any evidence, or has there been any suggestion, of people being forcibly required to go back to Afghanistan when it is not safe for them to do so?

Lord Ahmad: There has been concern expressed by some about people who have appeared undocumented in near-neighbouring countries. That has come up on our radar. What we have sought to do in that instance is to provide a process whereby normalisation of their status within a given third country can be achieved. We are also working with international partners to see how they can then be facilitated and, if they are going onwards to another country, including the UK, how that can work best.

Through our diplomatic efforts, particularly with the near neighbours, we have been stressing the point you have just made: that Afghanistan is not a safe place to return to. It is not a safe place for girls, for women, for minorities and so forth. Other countries, to their credit—we do not often perhaps recognise what they have done—do not want issues on their borders. They do not want challenges, particularly of these ideologically-led individuals who are causing destabilisation in their country.

Look at Tajikistan. One of the biggest minority groups within Afghanistan is Afghans with Tajik heritage. They are very concerned about their very porous and mountainous border, which may lead to people seeking refuge there. We work very consistently with Pakistan. Their point is well respected that they do not want to be returning people to Afghanistan under the current circumstances.

Andrew McCoubrey: As the Minister says, they are already hosting over a million Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Chair: We are expecting a vote shortly, so we are going to become a little clipped in our questions, if I could ask you to do the same.

Lord Ahmad: I will be short in my answers.

Q90 **Chair:** Following on from that, we had a witness a couple of weeks ago from Afghanistan who is now over here. She was a refugee in Pakistan and had to travel to Kazakhstan to get her visa because there were no visa opportunities where she was. Where you know there are Afghani refugees in host communities, are you able to facilitate easy access for a



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visa?

Lord Ahmad: Within Islamabad, which has been the mainstay, we have had teams from Defence and the Foreign Office, but also, importantly, the Home Office, working to do exactly that—the issuance.

Q91 **Chair:** Is that still ongoing?

Lord Ahmad: Yes, that is still ongoing.

Q92 **Chair:** In December, you announced that you were going to be cutting £40 million from Afghanistan. I know that you have a huge commitment to this area so I cannot think that that would have been an easy decision to be backed into. Why did you decide to make the cut then?

Lord Ahmad: It was not so much cuts; it was also the recognition of what we are able to provide and support in Afghanistan. Andrew alluded to it earlier. There have been some real challenges. I was very clear to the team that I did not need a big figure. I needed a breakdown of who was being provided what and where as much as possible. You would have noticed from the written ministerial statements we made that we provided as much detail as we could. I wish we could go further so people could see how many individual NGOs we were supporting and continue to support, but that was not possible. Any funding cut and any reduction is a painful exercise—

Chair: The timing was pretty hard.

Lord Ahmad: Yes. When we provide support on the humanitarian front, people's lives literally depend on it. Therefore, I have not shied away from this, as you know, Chair, in our private conversations or here at the Committee. What we do through our support in ODA and as a country is demonstrable of who we are and what we are. People in need need our support.

Chair: They do.

Lord Ahmad: While these decisions are difficult, I accept that, with an overall budget, things are challenging. I come back to my earlier point to Virendra-ji: in any reduction we have made, we have sought to retain the expertise we have and the structure so that we can scale up once the programme funding is restored.

Q93 **Chris Law:** It is good to see you, Lord Ahmad. ICAI's review scored what has happened recently as amber/red, which is hardly good. The UK Government's own analysis described the Afghan Administration as "inherently weak, and captured by a narrow political elite who benefited from international aid flows but had little interest in supporting national development". There have been good results on basic health services and primary and secondary school enrolment, but what went wrong in terms of the narrow and close relationship with the Government in Afghanistan?

Lord Ahmad: We have responded to ICAI's review. I have previously been the Minister responsible for ICAI. The relationship is one of quite stringent scrutiny of our programmes, and it is right—I have always been supportive—that with the merger their ability to do what they do



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remains. When I look at what we have achieved—the number of girls who got into education, the number of women who were empowered and the overall support we have provided over the whole review period—that report card in itself is a positive one.

But one of the issues that was undoubtedly a challenge was the endemic corruption that continued to plague different parts of the Administration that was. While we evolved, in our response, some of the criteria and frameworks we put in place to try to mitigate that, we had some serious challenges on ensuring that the support that was intended to be provided, particularly in terms of the infrastructure of Afghanistan, was sustained in a way that would allow it to continue for its citizens to benefit.

In terms of where we are now, the security support we provided was the right thing to do. When you are creating a structure for support in a country, when it comes to development, you have to ensure that aid is distributed in a way that allows for the security of the people doing so and the continuation of the projects.

However, given the weakness of the system—one can do repeated reviews of the Administration that was and the support there was with the Taliban takeover—when the whole infrastructure folds because a leader is no longer present, it leaves little incentive for anyone else, whatever position they were in during the Taliban takeover, to continue, because there was no structure and no command. That was not as a direct consequence of our lack of support to the infrastructure present in Afghanistan; that was an inherent lack of leadership at the top, which meant that, when the President left the country, the infrastructure itself folded very quickly.

Q94 Chris Law: Going forward from that, we have some significant influence, given the amount of aid that was going into Afghanistan. Working in partnership with the US, we could have surely done an awful lot more there. Was there not a point when you thought, “This isn’t working; we need to look at the operations we are doing in Afghanistan and change direction”? It seems to me that we just let things carry on regardless and then had this rapid collapse towards the end.

There is a question that follows on from that. Did allowing or, rather, not challenging much more deeply the corruption and the other vices that were causing issues allow the Taliban to grow its support much more widely as a result? Are we not in some way complicit in the fact that the Taliban are in such a powerful position today?

Lord Ahmad: I will ask Andrew to speak to some of the details of what we put in place as mitigation. On the point of being complicit, I do not believe that to be the case. What we saw with the Taliban is their increasing takeover. Once a strategic decision was made and announced well in advance, as I have said to this Committee and others, it was an extremely challenging environment because the strategic decision had been made. Frankly, if you were a Taliban fighter or involved with their organisation, it was a case of, “Right, we just need to wait before we take control.” Their ideological base and command structure meant they were



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more effective.

Ironically, if we look at the reality on the ground today, in 2023, there are some parts of Afghanistan where the security element is now in a better place because there is not the competing rivalry between the Government that was and the Taliban forces. That element, somewhat ironically, is less of a challenge.

If I am honest enough—I think I am honest altogether, but I can take it on the chin—when you look at things, of course things could have been done better. Even in my personal reflections of living through that, was I forceful enough in that meeting? Did I make the case strongly enough? Of course, you keep challenging yourself on those issues. That is why I remain very strong in my advocacy. When the US made its decision or there were NATO decisions made—we went in as NATO and pulled out as NATO—there were always questions asked as to whether more could have been done by existing partners. That is now history.

What we are having to deal with now is a situation whereby the investments we made worked when it came to securing our support, particularly when you see the number of girls who were educated and the support we gave to the communities we assisted during that period. When the Taliban took over—sorry, I have gone on very long—that system was not robust enough to continue.

Chair: We will come back to that if we have time, but can I quickly bring Theo in?

Q95 **Theo Clarke:** Minister, you said that you were the Minister for ICAI; can I just clarify for the Committee who is currently the Minister responsible for ICAI?

Lord Ahmad: Andrew Mitchell.

Q96 **David Mundell:** One thing we wanted to clear up is this difference of view between you in the FCDO and ICAI on the funding that was paid to provide the salaries of the Afghan national police. In the response to the ICAI report, those concerns were dismissed as not being the case. Why do you take a different view from ICAI on those payments? In the previous evidence session, Sir Hugh set out the fact that that money was paid through a third-party channel in order to pay those salaries. If you were paying the salaries, how were you not funding their activities?

Lord Ahmad: Well, we were supporting. First, there are two immediate things. There was this issue of paramilitary operations. We are very clear that UK ODA funding in Afghanistan did not pay for that. I know the ICAI report was suggesting it was the case. We did ensure there was funding of police salaries.

Q97 **David Mundell:** How could you determine what part the people were doing whose salary you were paying?

Lord Ahmad: Part of it is our own assessments. The other thing was that, during the course of our support in 2015, the OECD DAC assessment also assessed that everything we were doing when it came to ODA was within the parameters and definitions of what ODA funding can



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be used for. I think the contentious point was not whether funding in this area—that is, for policing and security—was necessary but whether ODA should have been used for that purpose. As I said, we had that objective assessment made by the OECD.

On the more specific recommendation, we have accepted their recommendation. If there are more specifics that Hugh or, indeed, others want to discuss with us, we work with them, as I said, so I would be very keen to hear what the specific evidence base was for that.

Q98 **Chair:** Minister, could we write to you on that point because we are hearing conflicting things here?

Lord Ahmad: Yes, of course.

David Mundell: We can set out the evidence from the previous session. If you were both able to respond in detail to that, that would be very helpful.

Lord Ahmad: As an added assurance, we will talk directly to Hugh and the team on this as well.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is appreciated.

Q99 **Chris Law:** I have two questions, but they are cojoined. First, do you think there was an optimistic bias—we heard that earlier—with regards to operations on the ground that meant we did not act earlier, sooner and more effectively? Secondly, what one thing would you change from the lessons learned in terms of investment with development spend in Afghanistan, if you had to repeat or go through the process again?

Lord Ahmad: On the first one, everyone is positive about what you are seeking to do and achieve. Having a medium and long-term view of what this will actually attain is key when it comes to support, particularly with the reason we went into Afghanistan.

Chris Law: What I am driving at is whether there was a blind spot as a result.

Lord Ahmad: There was certainly the fact that the Taliban did not go away, and somehow thinking that you can influence a fundamental ideology is, frankly, naive. That is quite a direct answer to that one.

We have to get a better understanding. I say—I'm the Human Rights Minister—that when we look at a country we must look at it through the lens of that country and its cultural and religious context. We cannot go in with a lens of the western world. We have to do that much more effectively.

Q100 **Chair:** Can I pull you on something that you said earlier, then? You said that when the leadership from the top went, there was nothing there. Would it have been a better approach if you were investing effectively in the bottom—in civil society—so that they could have put in the checks and balances? They would have called out the corruption if they had been given the voice to do it and the tools to do it. That is then changing a culture rather than changing who is at the top.

Lord Ahmad: You have answered question 2 for me. Yes, investing in



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grassroots communities, from the bottom up, strengthens societies at a local level. That said, we are still seeing some semblance of that on the ground now because there are certain regions where exactly that exists—where the local civil administration has been robust enough to deal with it.

Q101 **Chair:** Would you use that approach going forward in other situations?

Lord Ahmad: It is horses for courses. I would not use it in every country. We need to do a better analysis before we go in and be very clear on what our objectives are for the medium and long term. People went in with the right intent to build an inclusive country where every citizen can really benefit. The infrastructure that was set in place was very centralised. Where we have seen success is in those regional communities where structures were built up. They are continuing to operate in some shape or form effectively today.

Q102 **Chair:** If you did not put in a plan 20 years ago, should you have put it in five years in, 10 years in or 15 years in?

Lord Ahmad: There have been plans that were put in. We put in a plan post-2021. With all these things we need to ensure, with the support we are giving, that the end recipient and beneficiary is very clear, that we make regular assessments that that support is being received and that, where we highlight and see that that is not being achieved, mitigations are immediately put in place. I am conscious of time; we will write to you on the specific mitigations that we did put in at different times to address some of the concerns that were highlighted.

Q103 **Chair:** What is the key lesson that you will be taking from the ICAI review?

Lord Ahmad: One is recognising the role that agencies and our own people played in building things on the ground under extremely difficult circumstances. Secondly, investing in girls and women is absolutely pivotal and central to everything we should be doing anywhere in the world. Thirdly, yes, stronger mitigations can also be put in place. As we have just discussed, having a localised lens on supporting certain communities can also be enhanced.

Chair: Lord Ahmad and Andrew, thank you both very much for your time. It is always a pleasure for a Committee to have a Minister in front of us who is passionate about a subject area. Thank you very much for your time and everything that you are doing.