

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The situation in Sudan, HC 438

Tuesday 28 October 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Tracy Gilbert; Monica Harding; Noah Law; David Mundell; James Naish; Sam Rushworth; David Taylor.

Questions 41-125

Witnesses

[I](#): Baroness Chapman of Darlington, Minister of State for International Development and Africa, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and Kate Foster, Africa Director, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

[II](#): Liz Ditchburn, Commissioner, Independent Commission on Aid Impact.

[III](#): Dr Bashair Ahmed, Independent Adviser, and Shayna Lewis, Sudan Specialist and Senior Adviser, PAEMA (Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities).

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Chapman and Kate Foster.

Chair: This is the International Development Committee's inquiry into the situation in Sudan. It is a one-off session but, given the news we see almost every morning now, particularly around El Fasher, it seems incredibly timely that we have the Minister in front of us to discuss a topic that I know is also important to her. We are very grateful for your time, Minister. As you can imagine, Members have a lot of questions; given the evolving situation, if there are things you would rather write to us on because you cannot give us the fullest answer there and then, we are happy with that.

Q41 **Monica Harding:** Thank you for joining us, Minister. Last time we saw you, you confirmed that funding for Sudan would not be cut, yet in the annual report and accounts we see an 18% reduction for Sudan and a 23% reduction for South Sudan. Can you explain those cuts in light of your previous comments?

Baroness Chapman: You will see the same if you look at Gaza, as well. They are all protected. The reason is that we have core funding, but then we supplement it with crisis funding. It would be great to be able to sit here and say that we did not anticipate having to access crisis funding for those settings in the coming year, and probably for some time after that—but we are going to, aren't we, because we know the situation on the ground. When the final tallies are made, it will be protected. Last year's funding includes some crisis funding.

Monica Harding: In terms of the protection of budgets, it is your indication that we need to go further into crisis, because the humanitarian situation is getting far worse, so can you commit that the ODA budget will not be further cut from where it is at the moment?

Baroness Chapman: The total ODA budget?

Q42 **Monica Harding:** The total ODA budget, not just for Sudan.

Baroness Chapman: You would need the Chancellor for that. I am not anticipating that; I have had no signals that that is the intention. But I do not write the Budget, and the Chancellor has a very difficult job on her hands to make things add up. I cannot answer for her. That is not what I expect, but I think that is as far as I can go, Monica. I can only refer you back to what the Prime Minister said at the time, which is that his ambition would be to get us back to 0.7%—but, as I say, I do not run the Treasury.

Q43 **Monica Harding:** Can we turn to El Fasher and the terrible situation developing there now, which poses risks to civilians left in the city and those trying to flee the city and access essential support? We have heard from organisations on the ground that those able to flee towards Tawila are adding to approximately 600,000 displaced people already there, and that supplies of shelter, medicine and clean water are not sufficient. Only

about 50% of needs are met. Can you give us any indication of what we are doing to get humanitarian access and to support the relief effort?

Baroness Chapman: The need is just vast, and it is getting worse. We are continuing the work we have done, which is recognised in the ICAI report. I wish we could do a lot more, but the right thing is for us to continue to work with our partners and try to co-ordinate internationally. I have had many meetings with international partners where we discuss Sudan and how we can work more closely together. The scale of the need and the atrocities we are now seeing mean that we have to revisit what we are doing and redouble our efforts—particularly when it comes to services for women and girls and the famine situation we are seeing. There is a strong need for us to work particularly through the World Food Programme and UNICEF and to look at what more we can do internationally.

Q44 **Chair:** Minister, can I come in on some specifics? You are talking about the humanitarian situation but, despite the information blackout, it is becoming pretty apparent that RSF are likely to be on a rampage of ethnic cleansing, genocide and crimes against humanity. We—the UK—are the penholder for both Sudan and the protection of civilians. Could you tell us what you believe our specific responsibilities are when we hear very plausible reports of some really gross offences? People are looking to us, so what are our obligations as the penholder for those two?

Baroness Chapman: On those things specifically, the most important thing we can do is support the fact-finding mission and ensure we have what we need so that accountability is possible after this. We support the ICC and will continue to work multilaterally to make sure we have that mission in place. We have been successful at maintaining support for that so far but, as you say, we are seeing those images, even without journalists in-country, and there will come a moment when we do seek to hold to account those who are responsible for this. It is vital that we do that.

What we really want to be doing is prevention, but tragically that seems to be beyond the international community's ability at the moment. We continue to use what few levers there are to influence the warring parties to come to some kind of process where these things are resolved in a completely different way. At the moment, looking at the situation on the ground, accountability is one thing that we can seek to ensure we can achieve at some point—hopefully very soon.

Q45 **Chair:** To be specific, are we trying to get an emergency session with the UN Security Council?

Baroness Chapman: Yes.

Q46 **Chair:** That is good to know. Are we surging our atrocity prevention team into the region?

Kate Foster: We continue to work closely here with teams and experts across the FCDO—particularly the atrocity team, who have provided brilliant expertise. We are doing that in parallel with colleagues in Geneva.



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Obviously, the recent mandate renewal of the fact-finding mission against a more challenging geopolitical environment than this time last year was a big achievement. In parallel, we are also in discussions in New York, which the Minister referred to. We anticipate a Security Council meeting in the coming days, and we are scoping whether there is the possibility of an emergency meeting in Geneva. We are very much tying that expertise in and behind, informing the work we are doing.

Q47 **Chair:** Was that a yes? Are the atrocity prevention team being surged?

Kate Foster: We are drawing on that expertise. From a structural perspective, where it sits physically is slightly less relevant, given that our access within Sudan is limited, but we are definitely able to draw on that to inform everything we are doing and test our approach within the Department.

Baroness Chapman: To interpret your question, I do think it is appropriate, given what we saw over the weekend, for us to reflect, reassess what we are doing and ask ourselves what more we might be able to do, whether it is what you suggested or other things, given the events on the ground.

Q48 **Chair:** Thank you. The Foreign Secretary said today that she is “urgently urging” the warring parties. We had a very detailed letter from you talking about the statements and the meetings that have been convened, but we are still seeing a massive humanitarian crisis, with famine and cholera. It seems to be an open secret that the UAE is arming RSF. Are we also urgently urging it to try to get a ceasefire?

Baroness Chapman: We are urging anybody with any influence over either side—you know I am going to say this—to use that influence to bring parties to the table to resolve this in the way it will get resolved in the end: through dialogue. We all know that that is where we end up, so we think we should get there now. We speak to those we believe have some influence over both sides, and we make this point to them repeatedly. We will continue to do that for as long as it takes.

Q49 **Monica Harding:** Minister, there are obviously human rights atrocities and violations of international humanitarian law happening in Sudan right now. Today, a report in *The Guardian* says that British military equipment has been found on the battlefields in Sudan. Even after the UN Security Council first received materials alleging that the UAE may have supplied British-made items to the RSF, the British Government went on to approve further exports of military equipment of the same type to the Gulf state. Even if the RSF are not using British missiles—which it looks like they may be—the UK is still breaching its arms exports licensing criteria, specifically 2, 4, 6 and 7, which look beyond whether they are ultimately reaching Sudan, and at whether our international obligations to IHL are being met by the supply of weapons to the UAE anyway. What would you say about that?

Baroness Chapman: If it is the case that missiles, as you said, are being used, that is an incredibly—

Monica Harding: British military equipment.

Baroness Chapman: Okay; I think you referred to missiles in your question.

Q50 **Monica Harding:** That is according to documents seen by the UN Security Council, according to *The Guardian*.

Baroness Chapman: I have seen the documents. As I have been briefed, because I asked—because as you can imagine, I share the concern—the equipment we are talking about would be things that have been sold to the UAE in the past and diverted, perhaps through many different parties. We have tried to trace, and in some cases have been able to trace, exactly which pieces of equipment—we are talking about engines for vehicles; there were some targets; there were things that we do not believe have been sold in the recent past and that we do not believe have been used in the armed conflict in the way that has been described by *The Guardian*.

I will continue to look into this, to make sure that I am satisfied that we are doing everything we need to do, because this is clearly an issue of great concern; but, as things stand, we do not believe that the reports in *The Guardian* are accurate in the way that they have been described. We take our responsibilities, as far as our arms licensing and where things end up, incredibly seriously. This really matters, because of our responsibilities around IHL, but also because of our international reputation and the way that we see ourselves. We will continue to look into this and monitor it incredibly closely, but at the moment, it is my understanding that we are not in breach.

Do you want to add anything to that, Kate?

Kate Foster: No, I don't.

Monica Harding: The article goes on to say that the UN—

Chair: Monica, I think the Minister has been quite fulsome in her response.

Q51 **David Taylor:** Thank you, Minister; it is good to see you again. Just to pick up on some of what the Chair has said, the reports coming from some of these NGOs are suggesting another Srebrenica. Many of us in the room signed the memorial book for that; I really hope that we will not be signing memorial books for what is happening in front of us now. Is there anything more you can say about the pressure, even behind the scenes, being put on some of the countries that are funding and arming the RSF?

Baroness Chapman: I do not think there is much I can add to what I have already said. I worry, like you, about what is about to emerge and what has happened. Whether or not it is a genocidal event like Srebrenica or an atrocity of another kind, this needs to stop, and it can be stopped by the decisions that could be taken by the warring parties. If there are those with influence over them, they should use that influence in the right and



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responsible way. We will continue to make that case in the way that we judge to be the most impactful at any point in time.

The lack of focus on this conflict astonishes me, particularly when you look at other conflicts around the world that receive such huge attention—and rightly so; it is not either/or. Given what is happening in Sudan—the scale of it, the length of time that this has been happening, the many millions of people affected, the displacement that is happening, the nature of the atrocities—I think it is really quite staggering that there is not more focus and attention on this.

- Q52 **David Taylor:** I agree, and we do not spend enough time on it in Parliament either. The point about the length of time is really valid, because what alarms me, and I am sure others, is that we heard some of the reports about arms being smuggled in months and months ago, yet the situation has not changed. The warnings that we are getting about what is happening in El Fasher are not new, so we urge you and your colleagues to do everything you possibly can to try to prevent it.

Baroness Chapman: I can give you that commitment.

- Q53 **Chair:** May I ask a question to Kate? I and the Committee agree with the Minister that Sudan has been a hidden war, and a war on women. We are frustrated as you are, Minister, that we cannot seem to get the attention to get a resolution. Kate, do you have enough resources to develop protection options for Ministers?

Kate Foster: Yes, we do. I am conscious that you are going to speak to Liz, and the ICAI report also touches on resources. Our resources do not look in a typical way, partly because it is not a typical FCDO embassy or high commission, and it is spread around a broad range of geographical locations. Protection-of-civilian options that can be meaningfully delivered are incredibly complicated, especially where they need to be mandated, whether by the African Union Peace and Security Council, by the UN Security Council, or through the UN fact-finding mission. The politics around that is incredibly challenging.

At different moments and times we have proposed and developed different options, but politically we have not been in a position to be able to get those through and agreed, for example at the Security Council. My team accept the ICAI comment, asking whether we are doing enough in this space. The answer is no. We need to continue to challenge ourselves to be creative. We are working to develop a new programme specifically in this space, working with two external partners who bring more specific expertise to help us to navigate through this. We are in the process of finalising those agreements so I will not name those partners at this moment in time, but once we have done that we can come back and set out to the Committee what those look like.

Chair: We would appreciate that, if only to give us some hope.

- Q54 **James Naish:** How long does it take to dial up a programme like that? Obviously, the situation on the ground is deteriorating rapidly. Are you



talking weeks or months to get programmes like that into place?

Kate Foster: There are elements of things that we can do that are agile and fluid. The way that we deliver a lot of our funding has that in-built agility for our humanitarian delivery partners. They are the ones closest to the ground, so we have always provided that flexibility through our funding agreements. Where we are able—for example around the situation in El Fasher, which, as we have talked about, is a risk that has been coming over an extended period of time—we give partners complete flexibility to reallocate funding, for example around the escalation in gender-based violence and the concerns around retribution. There is an in-built ability to do that in all our programmes, but to develop a more specific deliverable component that does not place Sudanese partners at risk of retribution—we know that is a big issue for organisations such as the Emergency Response Rooms and other mutual aid groups—is quite complicated. That is where we will benefit from the expertise of the partners that we are talking to, to deliver a combination of different types of interventions across the spectrum of protection of civilians.

Q55 **David Mundell:** I obviously agree with you on focus, and on the need to shine a light on this crisis, but do you not think that you and the Government have some responsibility in that regard? There has not been a single statement solely on Sudan since the London conference. Indeed, there was not going to be anything said about the London conference until I raised an urgent question, which Ministers actually resisted until the Speaker prevailed to allow it. The only other major intervention was another urgent question by my colleague Andrew Mitchell. Why are the Government not proactively doing more? You have referenced the two other major conflicts, in Gaza and Ukraine. There are regular statements and parliamentary events in relation to them, which the Government proactively take forward, but none on Sudan. All us parliamentarians—and this Committee—have a duty in relation to the crisis, but so do the Government, and so far, they are not giving any evidence that they are stepping up to that aspect of their responsibility.

Baroness Chapman: Parliament is the centre of our world, as we know, and if there is an appetite for more proactive statements from the Government to Parliament, I will completely take that on board. That is something we can fix; we can do something about that. I would point out that often what Governments choose to make statements about is caused by appetite within Parliament, so there is a chicken-and-egg question here. The reason you perhaps get so many more statements on other conflicts is because of the level of interest from parliamentarians.

David Mundell: But there is a degree of leadership as well.

Baroness Chapman: Indeed. I am not arguing with that; I can take that on board. That is something we can fix. However, that even with more statements from the Government in Parliament, I think there is still an underlying issue about interest. That is perhaps because it is Africa, or because it has been going on for such a long time; there is less profile, because it is harder to get journalists in; there are fewer people-to-people

links—although there are significant people-to-people links, and we have a substantial Sudanese diaspora. There may be many other reasons for it. But if more statements and more proactive parliamentary engagement from the Government might help, then I am more than happy to take that.

- Q56 **David Mundell:** I think it will help in terms of the focus issue. As you suggest, it does not necessarily move forward the conflict. Perhaps this is more for Kate, since you were not in the position at that time: are there any further reflections on the London conference? It was not really—to be kind—a success, because it was not possible to get the third parties to sign up to anything. Within days—which I am not putting down to the Government—an alternative RSF Government had been announced and there were further atrocities.

Baroness Chapman: I will give my answer, because I was doing development at that point but, as you say, I was not doing Africa. It did succeed in getting more focus, and you could argue that it did lead to subsequent international interventions. It created a moment to secure funding, and it highlighted the issue of humanitarian access. But I was not doing Africa at the time, and Kate was more heavily involved.

Kate Foster: It is always difficult to point to what would be the counterfactual if you had not done it. Relatively recently, in early September, with some increasing US involvement and leadership—which is really positive—we have seen a Quad statement that brings together the US with those regional partners. The language in that statement bears a lot of read-across to the chair's statement and declaration from the London Sudan conference.

You are right: we did not get an agreed communiqué out of that meeting. Personally—I think I was very open with our Foreign Secretary—I did not anticipate that we would. Having the conversation and the debate and highlighting the divisions still added value. It may have been a necessary step to get to the recent Quad agreement, but it is difficult to draw a tangible line of sight between the two.

Choosing to co-chair it with the AU and bringing them back into the leadership of an important continental issue felt significant. As Baroness Chapman said, it was not ever framed as a pledging conference, but we walked away from it with an additional £600 million or £800 million—I cannot remember which—on the table. There are some things that we take out of it that were meaningful. Broadly, continuing the international attention and dialogue, in a context where there is not much attention, in itself provided some value and leadership, which is similar to Mr Mundell's previous point about how we continue to demonstrate that.

- Q57 **David Mundell:** Minister, on the point you raised about the diaspora, the returners we saw indicated that there had been very little ministerial engagement with the diaspora—I think there had been two engagements between January and June.

Baroness Chapman: They must have been mine, then. We can definitely do more of that, and I think we should do more. It is only a matter of time



before we start seeing what is happening more strongly reflected in migration statistics. There are a lot of angles to come at this from.

If there is work to be done for the Government to engage more proactively with diaspora communities, I will work with colleagues in MHCLG to try to work out how we can best do that in a way that works for them. It is important that we understand their experiences, as well as listening and trying to make sure that the UK does its job well as host country.

Trying to understand exactly what they have experienced and the impact it has is something that can serve us well when we come to look at future conflicts and how we understand the impact on civilian populations, which I think is part of our role as well.

- Q58 Monica Harding:** I just want to pick up on your comment on migration. My understanding is that the largest number of unaccompanied minors who came to the UK on small boats were from Sudan. These are basically boys under 18 years old. However, and I think this is right, the Integrated Security Fund was not funding Sudan because it was not seen to be in the British interest. Part of its role is to support fragile states so that they do not go into conflict, as in Sudan, with people coming to our shores as a result. What is your comment on that?

Baroness Chapman: I would probably have to refer you to the previous Government on the decisions made leading up to the start of this current phase of conflict and whether the ISF was appropriate or considered. I just do not know what decisions were taken at that point, but I could not agree more about the importance of working to resolve and prevent conflicts in order to prevent the displacement of people. Clearly, it is the biggest driver of the movement of people that we see at the moment, and I do not see that changing. I think you are completely right.

- Q59 Sam Rushworth:** You talked about your four essential shifts in the future of aid, and one of those was about more technical assistance. In the context of Sudan, I am interested to know how Sudanese medics in the NHS might be able to better share their skills and support health systems development.

Baroness Chapman: That is a really good question. The way I would come at this is by reflecting on the conversations I had in Adré with Sudanese doctors—women who had fled into Chad. They were really angry that their professional lives had been interrupted, as well as with the impact on them personally and on their families. Their careers had been put on hold, and they felt that they had an awful lot to give. They wanted to use their skills, expertise and ability to support others, which is why they went into medicine in the first place. It was quite interesting to talk to them in Chad, which is a place with relatively—I do not like to use the word “weak”, but its health services are not what the Chad Government would aspire for them to be.

Is there something we can do to make more opportunities possible for this well-educated, professional, well-equipped workforce, who are fleeing their home and, I expect, would very much like to return? They are finding



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themselves in countries where those skills and expertise are in high demand, but the systems are not there to make the most of them.

There is something in that, but it is not a quick thing to resolve. It takes resource and co-ordination, and it is probably not something that the UK alone should be seeking to do; we need to work together with partner Governments to explore whether it is a possibility. I hope this is not the case, but we know from experience that once large numbers of refugees have relocated, particularly to neighbouring countries, they tend to stay there for an awfully long time—10, 15 or 20 years, and sometimes longer. It would be a tragedy if people who had spent their lives dedicated to public service, and to medicine in particular, were not able to use those skills in a country that really needs it.

Q60 Sam Rushworth: You are referring here to medics who have left the battlefield, essentially, and are now with the displaced diaspora. That is obviously important. We were in Nigeria last week and we asked them, “What is one thing you would like us to do and one thing you would like us to stop doing?” There was a very clear ask, which was, “Stop taking our best doctors and nurses to the UK.” That is from a country that is relatively safe, so it is obviously a challenge that medics are leaving, but what is the FCDO doing to play our part in ensuring that there are the medics necessary in the community where they are needed—particularly providing that expertise, as we have people in the diaspora here who have those links?

Baroness Chapman: That is a good question. Some of the answer is in what I just said, but at some point, if there is some sort of negotiated process here, they will be needed in Sudan to try to rebuild systems and support the society there. Failing that, FCDO and others around the world with a stake in this and an ability to influence it need to get our heads together and work out how best to go about this. I don’t think there is a single answer.

Sam Rushworth: It is not easy.

Baroness Chapman: No, it is not easy, but it is really important—and what a waste of human talent if we fail to address it.

Kate Foster: Perhaps I can add to that. I know, through conversations we have had at this end, that there are still immensely strong ties between Sudanese NHS workers here and their counterparts back in Sudan, many of whom are staffing the emergency response rooms and playing an incredibly vital role within society. We already have some funding flowing through to those mutual aid groups, including emergency response rooms, but it is something that ICAI has rightly challenged us on, in line with the localisation agenda and ambitions of this Government.

Over the coming months, we are really changing the way we work to accelerate much more funding through down to those local responders on the ground. Some of that will go more directly, and some through other partners. That helps to reinforce the capacity that there is within Sudan, and we will continue the conversation with Sudanese NHS workers here to



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see whether there is more that we can do. The last time I had those conversations, which was probably a few months ago now, I don't think they felt there was a need for us to step into what was a Sudanese-to-Sudanese link; they were asking us about what more we could do on the ground to support their colleagues, and that is something that we have very much taken on board.

James Naish: Why do you think it took so long for that to be realised?

Baroness Chapman: What do you mean—which bit?

Q61 **James Naish:** You were talking about getting more funds down to the ground. Why is it taking so long for that shift in thinking or approach?

Baroness Chapman: I don't think it has, really. I would love to say, "Oh, it is because we have a new Government", but to be fair—

James Naish: That was not what I was angling for, by the way.

Baroness Chapman: I don't think that would be true or fair. I think our understanding of the best way of doing things is constantly being challenged and is evolving. I have learned this from working in community development in the UK: the more you can do working with organisations that are as local as possible, you get the outcome of what you are trying to deliver, but you also get the capacity build and capability improvement that you leave behind. If you do it right, you end up with a cohort of leaders able to decide what is right for their own communities.

That insight is not particularly new, but there are trends in development, as there are in many areas of policy, and at the moment this is an understanding that is becoming more widely shared. That is partly, I guess, because of decisions being made about funding, not least the process the UN is going through of asking itself whether sometimes the way it delivers at scale using leaders from outside the country is always the right thing to do. This is just the next phase in thinking about development, and I strongly support it. Sometimes it is easier in theory than in practice, as Kate described, but it is still the right practice to aim for.

Q62 **Monica Harding:** Can the Foreign Office and the Government do anything to prepare the public? In that situation, things will go wrong. There needs to be a high risk appetite for projects that are going awry, simply because the checks and balances that go through a multilateral organisation might not be there in a smaller NGO that is working on the ground. The public might think that aid may not be effective, or not as effective as they want it to be. How do we prepare them for that risk?

Baroness Chapman: I think our appetite for risk needs to be flexible, to reflect the scale of what we are trying to do. When we are trying to do something local, innovative and relatively low risk in terms of the amount of money that we are investing, we can be more flexible. But I do not detect among the public any appetite to become more relaxed about what we spend and how we spend it. They are chasing impact and value, and we are with them on that.



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But I think you can do both, and sometimes you can work through an NGO partner but require them to build a relationship with a local organisation and say, “We’ll fund you,” so in a way you are passing the risk down, but you are requiring that risk to be answered and met. You can say, “We want you to work through a local, women-led organisation. We want you to build that relationship of trust. We want you to assure yourselves that they have answered risks around safeguarding, financial management—whatever it might be—in a way that is appropriate for your organisation.” I think these things are possible.

- Q63 James Naish:** Specifically thinking about the direct funding of aid groups, NGOs and things that you are referencing, are there plans to increase the level of funding for those groups, first in Sudan itself? Also, I asked you this last time you were here about Sudan: what is the thinking on funding for countries that are hosting the refugees around Sudan?

Baroness Chapman: Kate has described how we are working to do that, particularly looking at women and sexual violence in Sudan itself. It is quite difficult in some of the host communities. I know less about South Sudan, so perhaps Kate can come in on that, but certainly where I was in Chad we are working predominantly through the UN, because they have the scale, the presence and the security. These are not easy places to get to. You are talking about UN flights, and there is not a well-developed civil society in many of these places. That’s not to say that there is none, or that we cannot work to develop that. We are working with some local organisations, but it is quite limited, because these are new communities. Adré is in the now hundreds of thousands, but it was a tiny town previously. We are starting with not the best place.

- Q64 James Naish:** Are you suggesting that there is a cap on the amount of money and support that we could even provide, because of the very challenging circumstances that we are looking at?

Baroness Chapman: You cannot just say, “Here’s the amount of money we want to spend on locally led organisations” in a context like Adré. You have to work up to it. There is not a cap to it, in that if there was a vibrant sector there that we could work alongside, that would be much better. But where that is not possible, we will work to feed, vaccinate and educate children and provide psychosocial support through really quite impressive agencies that are operating there in difficult circumstances. They are doing a tremendous job. I would not want to give the impression that I think we should not work through the World Food Programme, for example, just because it is not a locally led organisation. It is incredibly impressive. It operates at scale, and it delivers in a way that no other organisation can. You need to be able to do both, I think.

Kate Foster: On South Sudan, as the Minister said, the demographic of the populations and the situations are very different in different locations, whether in Sudan—depending on where you are in the country—across the border into Chad, or in South Sudan.



On the South Sudan side of the border, you almost have three distinct categories. You have a very vulnerable, highly food insecure South Sudanese population. Broadly, those border areas are pretty isolated and underserved anyway, so they are probably IPC 3, bordering 4, as a base case. You then have Sudanese returnees—people who were in Sudan but left in the early stages of the civil war—and then you have people who fled from Sudan more recently as the frontline and fighting have fluctuated. Broadly, they are all in the same place, and frankly these are the same people to all intents and purposes, so there is not so much of a distinction.

Like some elements of the response in Adré, the backbone of the response in those areas is through the framework of the UN and larger international partners. They will employ local personnel and expertise to deliver services. They will not be bringing in external international staff; the vast majority will be locally employed people.

As we look across how we fund and what partners we support, it is about having as much flexibility as we can in how we work, as well as assessing what unique thing each partner brings in each context. That will differ in different locations. It might be that the UN is probably the most cost-efficient to provide a pipeline of nutritional feeding supplies or food assistance, so that is where you want the UN to focus, and then another partner might be better able to access or deliver a specific type of service. It will be about piecing these capabilities together. The configuration in Adré may be different from that in, for example, Darfur.

Q65 James Naish: I guess the fundamental question is how confident you are that we are currently using the most efficient mechanisms to get UK aid to the organisations and people who need it. Are you confident that that blend you describe is working, or are there areas that you have greater concerns about?

Baroness Chapman: I am fairly confident about that. It is a constant watch. As the numbers increase, and as food insecurity and famine become more prevalent, the way that we react needs to change. It is important that we keep a close eye on it, but I think that we are all right on that at the moment. We are never complacent.

Kate Foster: There is what we can do and how we can support, and then there is the reality of the access challenges, which really confront all our operating partners, whether they are Sudanese staff in emergency response rooms or INGOs and the UN. Those all look slightly different by virtue of the mandate of the respective organisations. I broadly agree that we are pretty confident that we have done what we can to make sure we are funding the right organisations in the right places.

We are doing a lot of money in Sudan through the Mercy Corps cash consortium, which is working effectively and in an agile way with local groups in different places. That gives maximum flexibility to respond to needs on the ground. But we should not take our eye off the complications and barriers created by access challenges, which prevent the funding that has been given from being delivered effectively.



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Q66 **Chair:** Could you give us an update on that—on the humanitarian corridors or civilian corridors?

Baroness Chapman: Yes, sure.

Kate Foster: Yes.

Chair: You are both looking at each other in despair.

Baroness Chapman: I think we both wish it was better, particularly in RSF-held areas. That is what I think.

Kate Foster: There are immense barriers to access—in the short hand, “bureaucratic impediments”, which is not a great phrase. There are three or perhaps four different frameworks of regimes that implementing partners are having to operate under, depending on whether you are in a SAF-controlled area or an RSF-controlled area. Those requirements change really regularly. It is frankly almost a competition to the bottom, in terms of what can better control provision of aid. We definitely see, for example, that if on the SAF side the introduction of a new stage or process is constraining aid provision, it is mirrored on the RSF side. There is definitely quite a lot of “look and learn” across the two.

Q67 **Chair:** Who is co-ordinating these negotiations? Minister, you said that you are speaking to everyone and anyone. But specifically on humanitarian corridors, is it the UN? Is it particular countries?

Baroness Chapman: It is the UN, but this is really difficult. We are finding them being charged for security to accompany aid convoys, and that kind of thing. There are all sorts of restrictions that you could argue—I would argue—are deliberately designed to interrupt access of humanitarian assistance, food and aid. I think that this is one of the things that we need to take into account when we are looking at accountability in the future. We have been speaking to Tom Fletcher and others, who are incredibly frustrated, to put it mildly. It is one of those situations—a bit like others we have discussed—where it is not about the amount of money or the amount of aid; access is the biggest impediment. Even when you have organisations that are prepared to take the risk and go into areas where there is conflict, they are not able to do it at scale, because of the restrictions that are imposed by warring parties. So it is incredibly difficult.

Q68 **Tracy Gilbert:** Minister, given the worsening situation, what is the Government’s ambition to drive home more support to women and girls in the current war zones? Has there been a change of direction?

Baroness Chapman: There has had to be a change. In relation to the sorts of programming we were doing before the most recent flaring of conflict, we were doing lots with women and girls on prevention of FGM. We were doing so quite successfully. It was very, very long term and not complete by any means, but we were making real progress. We have had to pivot that into conflict-related sexual violence work. It is important that we can do that, and we are enabling services for women to be provided. But the nature of the violence against women and girls and, increasingly, men and boys—sexual violence in this context—is something that I do not

think we have witnessed in other conflicts recently. I think that as the truth of this emerges, the world will be deeply shocked at what they hear.

Q69 Chair: Is this across the country and all sides?

Baroness Chapman: It is all sides, but from the intelligence that I have, around 80% of it is perpetrated by the RSF and the remainder by SAF. It is something that is becoming almost—"normalised" might be too strong a word, but it is certainly becoming more legitimised in the context of this conflict.

Chair: This is just extraordinary.

Baroness Chapman: Yes, it is.

Q70 Chair: The Committee has mainly, if not exclusively, heard from very powerful women on the ground, so while the majority of the crimes are being perpetrated against female civilians—I hear what you say about men and boys—it also seems to be women who are trying to provide the support, the emergency rooms, the medical help and the education. Are you having any luck in reaching them and giving them support, if only psychological support, to continue the incredible work that they are doing?

Baroness Chapman: Yes. I have met probably many of the same people you have, and the work that they are doing is tremendous. And they do it at some risk to themselves.

Q71 Chair: You spoke earlier about repercussions.

Baroness Chapman: Yes, that is right. I think the emergency response rooms are good, and they are helping many thousands of women in particular—it is a great that we are able to do that. The scale of the need here is extraordinary, and one of the conversations that we need to have now is how we go about extending the work that we are doing that is impactful and making a difference. We also need to think about how we continue to put pressure on the generals who are in charge of this. We need to make the case that there will be accountability for it in the future, and that they have the power to stop it. These are war crimes and atrocities, and this is something that they have a responsibility to work to prevent. We need to do both things.

Kate Foster: I will just add that building and increasing our support for women-led organisations on the ground is absolutely the backbone of our localisation agenda and our work in designing our new protection of civilians programme, which I mentioned before. Women obviously play a critical role in responding now, in being part of dealing with community issues and grievances, and in playing a key role in the future of Sudan. It is a real focus for us.

Q72 Tracy Gilbert: Given the risk and fear for the women involved, how are we going to meaningfully engage them in the peace process going forward? With the personal risks to them, what are the Government's plans to enable that to happen? We know that women must be involved, and we will have more likelihood of lasting peace if they are involved.



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Baroness Chapman: It is vital that they are involved for any lasting settlement to be possible. I really hope we get to a point where we have to answer that question very soon. At the moment, it seems like we are some way from it. We have some good experience in how we do this, and we would be very happy to lend that, or to play whatever role is needed to ensure that the peace we secure is inclusive and lasting.

Q73 **Tracy Gilbert:** Is there any indication that that is going to be supported by the men around the table?

Baroness Chapman: I think you know the answer to that, Tracy: not today—but you have to stay hopeful in these situations, don't you? I think we need to be ready and to have that capability, which we do. I remain hopeful that we are able, through the efforts that we and others are making, to bring this to some sort of resolution. Sometimes you have to stay hopeful for quite a long time.

Q74 **Chair:** Minister, I would like to ask you a couple of curveballs. First, the Home Affairs Committee identified the excess profits made by contractors for the asylum-seeker hotels in the UK. Of course, this money came from the ODA pot; I personally think the money would have been much better spent keeping people safe, secure and prosperous in their own countries.

Baroness Chapman: I agree.

Q75 **Chair:** However, they think £45.8 million of excess profits is owed to the Home Office. Have you been given any indication that this is coming back to your budget?

Baroness Chapman: I did not know that, but now you have told me, I can quite happily make sure that this money goes to a very good place. As you would expect, I have had conversations with the Chief Secretary about this; if we are to maintain our 0.3% commitment going forward, and 0.5% this year, it does not really matter to me whether that money comes directly from this pot or that pot. It matters that we maintain our ODA commitments, however that is done.

Similar to the question that Monica asked me about the Budget, we have a plainly stated commitment about our level of ODA spend and our ambition to get it back up. If there are savings to be made by the Home Office quite rightly spending less on asylum hotels, and if that money was from ODA, it should stay in ODA.

Q76 **Chair:** Are you having those same conversations with the Chancellor?

Baroness Chapman: I sit next to the Chief Secretary in Cabinet, and I use every Tuesday morning as an opportunity to make those cases.

Q77 **Chair:** For the final question, we know that the FCDO team has dropped from 12 director general level staff down to seven. We have also found out that nearly 2,000 staff have a redundancy notice warning, which does not mean to say that they will be made redundant. I am very concerned about that. You know my views: the staff that we have are exceptional and are the best value for doing all the development and, indeed, all the



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international work that we do. I also know that you have been very committed to protecting the skills that we have. The thing that concerns me most, Minister, is that we have a new Foreign Secretary who has her own views and opinions on what needs to happen, and you are going through the process of identifying what your priorities will be and shaping your future programme, which we were told was ongoing and would not be finalised until the new year. How can you be making staffing cuts when you do not know what staff you will need?

Baroness Chapman: The first thing to say is that it is absolutely right that Olly Robbins is making these decisions about staff. Even allowing for the merger, there are thousands more people in King Charles Street who were not there before. Those are not people who were out in the network, in country, working with teams on the ground; they are in Whitehall. No one can really tell you how that has happened and why that has come about. There is a problem, and it is right that he is setting about that. I am sure he would come and give you more detail. I do not run HR for the Department, but I support that in principle.

I think that you are right to flag, as you have done before, the need for us to retain our expertise and capability. We need to make sure that when the decisions are made, we do not cut our own feet out from under us. A lot of the way that we want to pivot our development work is more into the expertise piece, the system strengthening and the partnership building, making sure that we can use our development expertise directly alongside our diplomatic skills. That needs care. All the conversations that I am having are along those lines and about making sure that we do not lose that capability. It is a work in progress, but it is happening at pace.

Q78 **Chair:** That is what concerns me, Minister. You have a hard 25% cut, and you are going through a sensitive process to get the best value for money and the most impact in development, and you might find yourself without the key staff you need. I am thinking particularly about conflict and atrocity prevention, which we spoke about earlier. That is a small team, so if you take 25% out of that, you suddenly do not have the functions that you want.

Baroness Chapman: You are right. I suppose the responsibility I have, though, is to move faster than Olly Robbins, which I can do. The other thing to point out is that some of the changes that we make will mean that it might not be that we need so many staff, but actually that we need some different expertise in future from what we had in the past.

Q79 **Chair:** Absolutely; but that should be led by you, Minister, and the Foreign Secretary.

Baroness Chapman: I agree. Thinking about our international finance and the work that we are doing to get more money from public capital markets into developing economies, it is quite specialist and technical. It needs a completely different skill set from managing programmes, so we need to look at that. It is not just a numbers game; it is about whether we have a big enough team doing that and whether we need fewer people doing some of the other activities. Some people can do both, some people



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want a change of direction and other times you have to change. The best thing that I can do is to work at the pace that I need to and try and give the organisation the clarity it needs to make the decisions that help to support our agenda.

Q80 **Chair:** If I may say so, the Committee is very concerned about it—

Baroness Chapman: I am not surprised.

Chair: We want to shine a really bright light on it, so this will not be the last you hear.

Baroness Chapman: Why not get me and Nick Dyer or me and Olly to come and talk to you about that?

Chair: Okay then, if you are asking.

Baroness Chapman: I am sure they will thank me for that.

Q81 **James Naish:** At a party conference, I was part of a roundtable, and it was brought to my attention that you do not have a special adviser. Is that still the case?

Baroness Chapman: Yes.

Q82 **James Naish:** In that case, how can we have confidence that you are able to do everything that you have just described?

Baroness Chapman: I have never ever been asked, but there has never been a demand from MPs for more SpAds.

James Naish: But it is an extremely complex brief.

Baroness Chapman: Oh, it is, but I have amazing civil servants, and I also compliment the Foreign Secretary's SpAds. What I definitely do not want to do, if I do get a SpAd, is have somebody who sits separately and does development, and then you have the Foreign Secretary. I just think that is the road to hell. The whole thing has got to be properly integrated.

I do not want to name any individuals, because that is not fair, but there are people within the Foreign Secretary's SpAd group who are excellent and who understand this agenda very well, and I work closely with them. Honestly, I would not read too much into it. I feel like the world can live with fewer SpAds.

I am really sorry, Chair—I have got Cabinet in ten minutes.

Q83 **Monica Harding:** Very quickly, the British Council tells us, in its second round of restructuring, that its offices will go down to 65, and that is even without it paying off the loan. They will go further down after that. Part of the problem is that it is not winning any development work, because there is no ODA budget for it to win any more—not the bit that it needs. It has also shelved any plans to expand into francophone Africa and lusophone Africa. Is that true? What is your position on the British Council, and can we get a commitment that it will fulfil its role not only in soft power and prosperity, but also in its development work?

Baroness Chapman: Yes, we work really closely with the British Council. I think it is fantastic. There is this issue with the loan that we do need to get resolved. It needs a proper agreement with the Treasury, instead of going from one year to the next, because that does not work for anybody; it just causes uncertainty and this sort of annual panic.

We have done some transformation work that must be nearly complete, if not complete already, which I need to check in on. We want to continue to support the Council so that it can carry on doing the brilliant work that it does. I understand the predicament it is in, and I understand how it got there. I do not have all the answers about how it gets itself out of it, but I have confidence in the leadership there, and those are people I think we can work closely with. That is the intention.

Chair: Minister, thank you very much.

Examination of witness

Witness: Liz Ditchburn.

Chair: I welcome Liz Ditchburn, who is one of the commissioners at ICAI, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, and has recently published a report on the Government's work in Sudan. Let us jump straight into it.

Q84 **James Naish:** Thank you, Liz, for coming to give us evidence. As we have just been hearing, the Government have described the crisis in Sudan as a priority for the UK. What would you expect to see from the Government, given that formal commitment?

Liz Ditchburn: Thank you. That was very much the frame that we used when we approached this review, because we were very clear that the Government had made Sudan a priority. During the course of the review, that priority was reassessed and confirmed as one of a very small number of countries.

On what would I expect to see, I look at the evidence and think about where they stand on those different aspects. The first thing is that I would expect to see high-level and consistent political attention. I would expect to see a coherent, whole-of-Government approach. This is a UK priority; it is described as not just an FCDO priority.

Given the nature of the Sudan crisis, I would expect to see a regionally coherent approach—understanding the broader risks and opportunities, and the willingness to host, for example, in neighbouring countries. I would expect the whole approach to be long term, looking beyond the immediate crisis—long standing though that already is—but also to the future.

Operationally, I would expect to see predictable long-term funding and staffing commensurate with the ambition and priority status of Sudan. Culturally, in terms of how the organisation operates, I would expect to see an approach that uses all the opportunities. Even if some of them do

not work, I would expect a very expansive approach to looking at all the different ways in which the UK could make a difference in Sudan.

Normally, alongside priority status would come the ability to, at times, cut through systems when they are not working quickly enough in accordance with the priority status. Those are the sorts of things I would expect to see. If it is helpful, I can put the evidence into place against that.

Q85 **James Naish:** Yes, the next question is on your assessment of how the Government are doing. That is a very sensible list of things that you would expect to see, so I am interested in your assessment of how the Government are performing.

Liz Ditchburn: It is important to say that there are lots of strengths and lots of good things going on in Sudan, but we have also very much identified some areas where more could be done, more opportunity could be taken or more impact could be achieved. On my point about high-level and consistent political attention, over the course of the period that we reviewed, which was from 2019 to the recent past, that political attention has clearly waxed and waned, and there has been a real sense of renewal from mid-last year and through the autumn particularly.

What is really interesting—Mr Mundell asked a question that relates to this—is that, looking as an observer, recently it feels like it has gone quieter again. It is important to say that people read those signals very closely. Whether it is the Sudanese diaspora, stakeholders or organisations that are being funded, they are all watching to see what kind of political attention an issue has.

Even if there is stuff going on behind the scenes, if it is not visible to people, that sends a signal, so consistency is important, as is maintaining a profile and keeping on going. We see a patchy picture on that historically; even now, if you do not say anything, it creates a vacuum and people read into that, regardless of whether they should or not.

The second area is around coherent, whole-of-Government action. We are clear in the review that we see this area as underdeveloped. There are more opportunities to work together across different parts of Government to understand risks, look at opportunities and bring into account the wider interests. The FCDO would very much say, “No, we do have those contacts, and there are definitely working contacts in place between the FCDO and other parts of Government.”

What we did not see, though, was a sufficiently high-profile and structured approach to what the whole-of-Government action on Sudan might be. That does not necessarily have to look like a National Security Council-type of process, but it feels like it needs some sort of structure.

You need the right people at the right level around the table to be able to identify those opportunities. You miss opportunities if you do not have the right people round the table in a sufficiently structured way to unleash that whole-of-Government action, so it is true that some things are in place, but we argue that it is not enough.



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You are all very aware of the regional implications of the Sudan crisis. We found some great examples, universally acknowledged, in which the UK has been really fleet of foot and quick to respond in Chad. We got lots of very positive feedback about that. It is, again, a very different type of response, but in South Sudan, the UK's ability, as a very long-standing South Sudan actor, to operate effectively on a needs basis rather than a status basis is really positive, as is lots of informal contact between posts and people in the region.

What we did not see was a more intentional regional approach that has in place the mechanisms that can enable resources to make sure they are in the right place and leverage all the different understandings of the different issues. The regional implications of Sudan are about not just refugee flows, but arms flows, economics and all sorts of other things. There is lots of complexity in these border situations and in the broader region.

- Q86 **Chair:** Liz, if I may pause you there, one of the questions in my mind is about our team on the ground. Do you think we have the necessary people with the necessary skills in our high commission out there?

Liz Ditchburn: In which particular one?

Chair: In Sudan specifically.

Liz Ditchburn: The British Office Sudan operates out of Ethiopia and Nairobi currently. We very clearly think there are not enough people. The people who are there are excellent. The calibre of the staff, the way in which they operate and the respect with which they are held by other donors and by stakeholders—I was really pleased to see how valued and important that resource was, but there just are not enough of them. I have a list of areas where the report shows more could have been done, or more impact could have been achieved, if there were more people to do the work. This stuff is very difficult, and it is people-intensive; it is not just about money.

- Q87 **Chair:** You said you started looking from 2019. The conflict has been going on for three years, but it has been building up for a lot longer than that. In that period, did you see a reduction in the number of people we had there, or historically has it been dwindling?

Liz Ditchburn: I do not know that we have clear numbers, and of course the operation has changed very much. For the earlier part of the review period, it was the British embassy in Khartoum, which was a classic embassy—it looked like an embassy and had all the functions of an embassy. What we now have in the British Office Sudan is only some of the functions around development, humanitarian and political, but we do not have the other sorts of functions that would normally sit within an embassy structure, so it is quite hard to compare. We were not able to get really clear time series numbers of people, neither were we able to get really clear comparisons between the team in the British Office Sudan and other comparable crises. But our strong evidence was that there were

insufficient people to match the ambition. Do you want me to continue with what I was saying previously?

Q88 **James Naish:** Yes. You worked through the first three—the political, the coherent whole-of-Government approach and the region—and you were getting on to the other aspects.

Liz Ditchburn: In terms of the long term and looking beyond the crisis to the future, it was hard to tell—we do not have a strong evidence base to say, “Is that in the right place or not?” It is clearly one of these issues where you need people. This is all about people—their thinking time, their time talking to others, their dialogue time, their engagement with partners and so on. That is a question mark, but it is neither negative nor positive; we just did not have a very strong set of evidence on that.

Operationally, there has clearly not been predictable long-term funding. The volatility that you will have seen in the numbers in the report is really striking. It is very clear that that sort of volatility undermines partnership. It undermines long-term planning. It means people cannot make the best decisions about how to use that money. It undermines trust, and that is something that partners are still very much holding. Even though they are hearing the UK Government say, “We will protect the allocations for Sudan,” their experience tells them that they might still be worried. It definitely undermines trust.

The other thing that came clearly from the evidence was about in-year uplifts. It is always great to have that resource that you can do more with, but it is really not the best way of allocating money to bring it out halfway through the year. In fact, we were doing the evidence gathering around the turn of the financial year, and even though it was thought that Sudan would be a priority, country teams did not have their final allocations. They were not able to programme that money finally and formally with partners. Predictability does not mean, “Tell me how much money I’m going to get on day one of the financial year.” It means, “Tell me well in advance. Give me multi-year funding. Enable me to commit long-term funding to partners so that they can plan, put the resource in place and use that funding effectively.” We definitely saw a gap there.

The other operational issue, which we talked about, is staffing. We just did not see the level of staff available to meet the ambition and what we understood priority status to mean, but the quality and the calibre is excellent.

Q89 **Chair:** Did you reach a conclusion on why they were under-resourced?

Liz Ditchburn: No. I do not know. It is very hard to change. FCDO systems seem to find moving resource around quite challenging. Although there are surge mechanisms in place, they had not been able to deliver to the British Office Sudan the kind of resource that was needed at the time it was needed in the way it was needed. It was easier to surge people into jobs in London to support the London conference, but that is not the same as having people in place in country. The FCDO systems currently work

better for some kinds of surge than for others. Of course, Sudan is not a short-term surge; we are talking about long-term postings.

Q90 Chair: Exactly. You sat through the previous session with the Minister, and she is clearly very passionate about this. It does seem odd.

Liz Ditchburn: I am waiting. I am interested to see what happens. I think it is clear that there is a gap between staffing and ambition, but I recognise that when you are running an organisation, you have many competing needs for staff. For me, the compelling evidence was the list of things—which are all in the report, but in different parts of the report—for which it is clear, and the evidence told us, that more or better could have been done with either more programme management capacity or more staff.

That includes money to local partners through localisation, protection of civilians and atrocity prevention, engaging with diaspora, investment in peace processes including the participation of women, access issues, the famine response, and learning and innovation from other areas and other experiences. Had it been just one of those things I would say, “Okay, you’ve made a choice. You’ve decided not to make that a priority,” but across the waterfront these are opportunities that are being forgone largely because of shortages of staff time.

Q91 Chair: That list is almost the list of what the Minister said were her priorities, so it is curious.

Liz Ditchburn: Yes. It is also true that the staff are extraordinarily committed, passionate individuals, who are working their socks off, many of whom were evacuated from Khartoum in very traumatic circumstances. The combination of understaffing with those kind of stresses puts the organisation at risk of very serious wellbeing issues.

Q92 James Naish: Starting to think about learnings from what you have seen, what do you think the UK needs to do and what lessons need to be learned about how it can effectively mobilise and co-ordinate in response to an international situation such as the one in Sudan?

Liz Ditchburn: For me, there are two issues. First, the word “priority” means that it is one of a small number of priorities. Everything cannot be a priority. I am taking that at face value. If Sudan is a priority, you need to get the staffing right, in a sense, in the first place. The situation is clearly not going to resolve any time soon. Even if there is progress on peace, the work of rebuilding will be extraordinary. There is no world in which, if the UK wants to play an important role in Sudan, it is not going to require a lot of people to do that. That is the first issue.

The second is about agility and flexibility: making sure that your systems are able to start with the right allocation but also to flex, to surge and to bring in different areas.

I think it might be of interest to the Committee that I am anxious about understanding the interdependency between what has a Sudan label on it and what else is necessary to enable the people working on Sudan to be



effective. You cannot put your arms around this bubble and say, "As long as we have enough people here, everything ought to be okay." The Sudan teams draw on the central humanitarian experts; they have their own expertise, but they also draw on that of others.

Look at the resource allocation situation in Chad: it has its own humanitarian problems, as well as the need to support refugees over the border from Sudan. If you prioritise the Sudan refugee bit of the system too much, and Chad feels that there are other humanitarian crises not receiving the same kind of support, that risks undermining the long-term ability to host.

There are interdependencies between different parts of the system and between different capabilities, so you cannot just say, "We'll put a label on Sudan"; you have to understand what else in the infrastructure or the architecture of the organisation supports the most effective Sudan response.

Q93 Monica Harding: Can you talk to us about the failure of the international and domestic accountability mechanisms to prevent atrocities in Sudan? How are the current efforts to protect civilians and pursue justice evolving on the ground?

Liz Ditchburn: I am not best placed to talk about the detail of some of that. The Minister referred to things that have been happening recently. We looked particularly at a submission that was made, I think, around autumn 2024, which put forward to Ministers for decision a number of opportunities and options to work on atrocity prevention and the protection of civilians. The decision that was taken was at the less ambitious end of those options. I think there were a number of reasons for that. One of them—I think the Minister referred to this earlier—was that there was concern about the political feasibility of some of those options in terms of the time they were being considered. There were also constraints in terms of resourcing and staffing that meant that some options were less possible. That is how it was presented to us: there were options to do more, but the decision was taken to choose one of the less ambitious options.

Q94 Monica Harding: I did not really understand the point about political feasibility. What does that mean?

Liz Ditchburn: It is referred to only briefly in the report. It is not something that we went into great detail on. What we were looking at were the decision processes of the UK Government—how were the UK Government approaching the choice of deciding how to act within the sphere of protection of civilians? They received a detailed submission laying out a number of options that the teams believed could be taken forward, and they had to make choices.

Q95 Sam Rushworth: The barriers to working with local organisations are particularly important in these contexts. When there is violence on this scale, you often see the biggest NGOs leave the field, and the ultra-local, grassroots, peacebuilding and resistance organisations are left behind.

What are we doing to support them? What do you see as the barriers for the UK in supporting them?

Liz Ditchburn: The picture we gained through the evidence we took was that, certainly at the time we were gathering it, the rhetoric around localisation and the importance of it had not translated, at that point, into reality—maybe it will do—and the major shift that had been talked about had not been achieved. There are a number of reasons why we understood that had not happened. One of them is risk appetite, which I think the Committee talked to the Minister about. The second is the way the corporate systems operate and what they demand of implementing partners.

There is also staffing, because working more directly with smaller partners tends to be more time-intensive rather than money-intensive, but if you believe that that is the way to achieve impact, it can still be the right thing to do. All those constraints mean that the mechanisms that have been used tend to go through multiple layers: rather than going directly to local actors, they pass through a number of other intermediaries, who also need to take their own costs out.

It is also important to remember that working directly with local actors—as I think you are suggesting—is not just about the most efficient way to get money to people on the ground; it is also about a transfer of power and the way in which that partnership exists. We heard very clearly from local organisations that had or had not received funding that—I think this was the way it was put to us—“Partnership does not look like coming to us to implement when you have already decided everything.” We did not see, at scale, a real appetite to engage and to be part of something, as well as being able to utilise resources and get them to the people who need them most.

Q96 **Sam Rushworth:** Do you feel we are getting resources down to that level? I appreciate your points about risk; that is a real challenge.

Liz Ditchburn: According to the data in the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, 37.5% goes to local actors, but the vast majority of that passes through a number of other intermediaries. Only 1.5% actually goes direct to local actors without intermediaries.

Sam Rushworth: So 36% is basically spent managing the risk of passing on 1.5%?

Liz Ditchburn: No, because of that 37.5%, a lot more will get to the local actors than nothing. But obviously those chains do exist, and they all have legitimate costs. This is an area where I feel the FCDO, if it is serious, really needs to invest some of its best thinking—all that expertise—to ask, “Okay, how can we do this? What can we learn from other situations and from other donors? The US did a lot of funding direct; how can we learn from that? How can we learn from other settings? What do we need to do to challenge ourselves about our own systems? What is it in our own systems that is preventing this, and how do we change those things?”

That has to be an organisation-level conversation. It cannot just be done by people working on Sudan. It has to be a change of policy.

Q97 **Chair:** Is that specific to Sudan, or is it a general comment?

Liz Ditchburn: I think it is more general. The risk appetite and the compliance needs—all these things—are sitting in the corporate systems. They are not sitting with and owned by the people in country offices, and they do not have the power to change them, so it is definitely a corporate issue. It is about corporate risk appetite and corporate systems, and how they constrain choices that individuals within country teams might otherwise be able to make.

Q98 **Chair:** Even if the proportion of money that you talked about going to locals is not as stark as you said, it is still pretty shocking.

Liz Ditchburn: What it tells you is that, currently, the only mechanism to reach local actors is through others. The only mechanism that is really operating at scale is through others. The option of going direct is not operating at scale, and there are very clear barriers in current FCDO practices and systems that stop that happening. That is the thing to change.

Q99 **Sam Rushworth:** Is this an area in which the FCDO needs to up its game and develop the skills and methodologies within the organisation to do better?

Liz Ditchburn: Yes, and not just for Sudan, but in order to have that mechanism available in other settings as well. It is not straightforward. Kate mentioned some of the challenges of working with organisations. You absolutely do not want to put organisations at risk because of their relationship with you. There are many challenges to sort out, but do I believe that the FCDO has the capability to do this if it is a high enough priority? I think they do.

Q100 **Sam Rushworth:** Is it a high enough priority?

Liz Ditchburn: Well, the Minister said it was.

Chair: One of the essential shifts is from international intervention to local provision. I do not know how they are going to do that unless they start taking up some of the suggestions you are putting forward, so that was very interesting.

Q101 **Tracy Gilbert:** How could the FCDO better measure the impact of programming on gender-related challenges?

Liz Ditchburn: I think the picture we found on women and girls is very relevant to other conversations the Committee has had. Obviously, you will all be aware that the situation for women and girls is dire. It is a combination of very long-standing inequalities and harmful practices, and then all the impacts of the conflict, including conflict-related sexual violence. We found that the UK's documentation and statistical recording of aid suggested very clearly that gender was being mainstreamed into the big programmes. The big humanitarian programmes are all marked

against the gender marker, and they all have information in their documentation that says, "This is how we're thinking about mainstreaming."

What we were not able to find was the follow-through on the impact of mainstreaming. There are a number of challenges in doing that. There are already number of challenges in assessing impact in difficult situations where access is very difficult and you cannot go to see programmes directly, and so on, and some of these things are very long-term. It is not easy—we are not suggesting that it is—but we think the UK should ask itself this question very explicitly: "How confident are we that the way we are doing mainstreaming is having the impact that we want it to have and that we expected it to have when we designed the programmes?"

It is also very true, especially in a context like Sudan, that mainstreaming alone is unlikely to meet the needs of women and girls, and that the combination of targeted, directed funding and mainstreaming funding will be important. There is less targeted funding than perhaps there has been in the past.

Tracy Gilbert: That is one of our big concerns.

Q102 **Chair:** Liz, this is your first time in front of us. We are very grateful. We found the report hugely useful. Is there anything that we have not covered that you want us, or rather the people that will read the transcript later, to know?

Liz Ditchburn: I think we have covered everything. I should say that there are many positives to call out. The UK has done some really good work in Sudan, partly because of extremely talented and hard-working people and the resources that have been put into it. Across the whole piece from 2019 onwards, there are some real successes from which one ought to learn. It is important to learn from what goes well as well as what goes less well. That is all I wanted to say. There are lots of positives, but we clearly identified opportunities to do more.

Chair: Thank you. We will follow those up.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Bashair Ahmed and Shayna Lewis.

Q103 **Chair:** Welcome to our witnesses. It must be quite extraordinary hearing other people talking about a country that you know so well. We are very interested to hear your views on what you have heard and what we need to know when it comes to Sudan. Thank you both for being here today. Can you give us an introduction about your background so that we know more about you?

Shayna Lewis: I am Shayna Lewis. I am a Sudan specialist and senior adviser with PAEMA—Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities. We work on community-driven atrocity prevention in Sudan, Myanmar and the DRC.



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Dr Ahmed: I am here in a personal capacity. I was previously the CEO of Shabaka, a diaspora organisation focused on diaspora engagement in humanitarian action. I am also a research associate at the University of Sussex specialising in migration and humanitarian policy.

Q104 **Chair:** We have questions, but we want it to be a conversation, so please come in on each other's questions or bring us more information if you want. Shayna, could you give us an understanding of what you witnessed when you visited Sudan recently?

Shayna Lewis: My last trip into Sudan was in June this year. I travelled to Port Sudan and into Khartoum. This was only a couple of weeks after the Sudanese Armed Forces had recaptured the city from the RSF following two years of control. What I witnessed in the capital was the systematic destruction of Sudan's healthcare system at the hands of the Rapid Support Forces. I visited many of the public hospitals in the capital, including Al Buluk hospital, the only functioning paediatric hospital in the entire state, as well as Ahmed Gasim, one of the main cardiac and renal transplant centres in the country.

What I saw was astonishing. Anything that the RSF could not carry out to sell or destroy, they attempted to destroy in situ. This included, in one of the facilities, all the paediatric ventilators in the ICU, because they wanted to remove the ability of children to breathe. I also saw the destruction of the country's only cardiac MRI machine. They also removed all the electrical infrastructure from certain facilities, from the cables to the batteries. An entire hospital was stripped away—all the cables under the floorboards. When that was not enough, they smelted down the electrical infrastructure inside the hospital itself, transforming a hospital—a beacon of life amidst the landscape of war—into an incinerator.

I think it is a challenge to understand the scale of the destruction until you start to frame this as, rather than a war between two parties, a war by two parties and their external backers against the civilians of Sudan.

Sudan's medical system was concentrated on Khartoum before the war started, and many of these hospitals received referrals from across Sudan's other 17 states. The medical director at Al Nao and Al Buluk hospitals recounted to me how, even during the war, they had received patients from as far away as South Darfur—from Nyala, which was under RSF control.

Many of the needs in Sudan at this point, when we think about the humanitarian response, are developmental. Medium to long-term investments are needed, and they will require the systematic rebuilding of the country's infrastructure to ensure access to healthcare for all and the protection of civilians without discrimination on any ethnic, racial, geographical or gender basis.

If I may for a moment, I would like to root us in what is happening right now in Sudan. As many of you will be aware, the city of El Fasher fell yesterday to the RSF. This was the SAF's final remaining base in all of

Darfur. I noted the comments of some in the Committee earlier; unfortunately, this is already an epochal moment that will go down in infamy, alongside Rwanda, Srebrenica and Gaza.

Q105 **Chair:** Why do you say that?

Shayna Lewis: Because for the past 48 hours, teams such as my own have been reviewing footage from El Fasher. Fundamentally, we have been warning about the risk of mass atrocities in El Fasher, including with briefings to FCDO, for two years at this point. We went back this morning and counted all the briefings that we have delivered over the past two years. The first one was in October last year, and we have submitted 20 briefings to the international community. I myself have briefed the Security Council on the situation twice in the past nine months, including on El Fasher.

This is an abject failure of the international community to engage in any prevention initiatives. I was, quite frankly, astonished by Baroness Chapman's remarks that they had not been able to pursue atrocity prevention. What we have seen now is a lack of political will, fundamentally. There is a range of tools. There is a very active civil society community of experts who have been engaged and who have been putting forward proposals on what can be done to save civilians and to engage on the civilian protection threats across Sudan. They have not been taken seriously.

Q106 **Chair:** Can you give us some examples of what that would look like?

Shayna Lewis: Absolutely. We think that one of the main threats to civilians, in our analysis, is the ongoing telecommunications blackout, which has persisted since February last year. We frame it in this way because it underpins so many of the other threats that happen in the country. When we think about the humanitarian response, it is the difference between the trucks that have been leaving Port Sudan and travelling across country—the UN agencies being able to still maintain contact with their teams once they leave Port Sudan. When I was there in June, they recounted that once they leave Port Sudan, they are in a blackout. Even just co-ordinating distributions on the ground has been incredibly hindered by the blackout.

To turn to some of the questions you have been asking about accountability, the documentation that is happening on the ground is entirely led by the Sudanese, particularly young Sudanese women, who are putting their lives on the line every day when they step forward to document the atrocities on the ground. They all rely on the internet to share that information with the wider world. It is not just human rights documenters, but the journalists doing this work on the ground, collecting evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity. How can they do that when the internet has been weaponised?

Previously, we were told that the telecommunications networks were damaged and that significant infrastructure needed to be repaired, but no

independent technical assessment teams have gone in to assess the damage—

Q107 Chair: From the UK or from anywhere?

Shayna Lewis: From anywhere. The Sudanese armed forces have had control of the capital, which is where the centres are located, since March or April this year, but there has still been no initiative there.

One of the other ways in which the international community could tackle the telecommunications blackout is by funding the work of the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster, which sits in the UN and is primarily engaged with ensuring access for humanitarians. It has been doing a fantastic job, particularly in the east of the country and now in the centre. Part of its mandate is also to ensure access for civilians, and I have had meetings with its people for months. They have told us that, because of the aid cuts this year, they are not able to pursue any kind of improvement in access for civilians, even though they met civilians in Darfur who beseeched them to take it forward as a priority.

Unfortunately, a lot comes down to the issue of funding and political will. We are not seeing either of those, particularly from the UK Government. Also, on this failure on atrocity prevention, I reinforce the point that it is what you as a Committee warned about in your report on atrocity prevention: without concerted action, “mass atrocities are likely to become more common, which will constrain global development”. We are seeing that play out in real time.

To colour that a little, many people have worked in this area for a long time, and many people who left El Fasher are now finding out that their loved ones are dead by viewing footage of summary executions, which are circulating all over social media. Again, the telecommunications blackout means that it is now impossible to speak to anyone in El Fasher. The only lifeline that the Darfur region had previously was Starlink, but when civilians are running for their lives with—if they are lucky—one bag of items, they are not setting up a Starlink device and ensuring that it has an eyeline, so they are in total blackout. The only documentation that we have now is the satellite imagery that groups such as the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab are providing, or the self-reported footage of the atrocities by the RSF.

Unfortunately, that is too little, too late for a lot of those populations, but what can be done now is to surge the humanitarian response for El Fasher, because those who are able to flee need a lot of assistance, as we heard. The response in Tawila is only 50% funded at the moment. I will pause now.

Q108 Chair: You have hit on what this Committee has been wrestling with for years. This is arguably the biggest humanitarian crisis on the planet. We are looking at not just the casualties of war, but the atrocities, the famine, I think a cholera outbreak, and the systematic destruction of the medical facilities, education and so on. Why does the world not care?



Shayna Lewis: I wish there were an easy answer to that question. I will start with the most frustrating one: part of it is the racist attitude of this being another war in Africa between Africans. Fundamentally, the war is bigger than Sudan, with the risk of regional destabilisation. We have seen that play out in real time over almost three years. The region is a powder keg. Earlier in the year, we were lucky that South Sudan did not go differently, but we are still watching those dynamics very closely.

On what we heard earlier from the Minister, questioning the lack of attention that we are getting from Parliament, some very strong parliamentarians—many of you are in the room—have been putting in those urgent questions and trying to keep Sudan on the agenda, but we need much more of that initiative. I would love to have more mass lobbying days and more engagement with parliamentarians, but in terms of the chicken and egg of who is driving who, there is a vacuum of leadership in the British Government on Sudan, which we have seen over years. At least under the previous Government, we had the achievement of resolution 2736 in the Security Council, which was specifically on El Fasher. Again, since that moment, however, there has been a lack of political will on implementation.

I said this in the Security Council: without the political will, resolutions are just pieces of paper—until there is more impetus globally, and particularly until there is targeting and naming of the external backers. We were so happy, Chair, to hear you name the UAE earlier, because that is so rare, if we think through who on the international stage has named the backers. It is the secret in the room, yet we have the Quad process in the US. They are the people with the most leverage—Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—but why are they the countries that we are convening? Well, they are there because they are the external backers.

The report in *The Guardian* today about the actions of this Government is damning. I have to question why, in September 2024, the UK provided an open individual export licence for some of the matériel that you referred to, Ms Harding, when in at least January of that year, a UN report very clearly stated the link with the UAE supplying weapons to the RSF. Why did we have that export licence, when it meant in practice that unlimited quantities of exports were sent without monitoring?

If we already know that there is this link, it is not good enough for the Minister to sit here and say, “I’m not an arms expert.” I am not an arms expert either, but fundamentally it is the responsibility of this Government to know where the weapons they are selling are going. If there is any implication that they are involved on the battlefield in Sudan, that is in violation of the Darfur arms embargo. Frankly, we should be considering whether there should be sanctions for violations of the arms embargo.

Q109 **Sam Rushworth:** Gosh. Thank you for your evidence so far. You heard me ask earlier about the role of local organisations and the fact that, in these situations, the large development actors often vacate the field. Given the critical role of local organisations, what practical steps do you feel the UK Government could or should be taking to overcome the



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barriers that are preventing us from getting aid to where it is needed, such as the issues that you heard mentioned around compliance, risk and so on?

Dr Ahmed: That is an important question. Sudan is an important test case for the whole humanitarian reset. There has been a failure to realise the importance of locally led action. For a long time, there has been an understanding that the mutual aid groups are temporary until the professionals come in. This is two and a half years later, and the reality is that these groups have the most access. They are able to respond even given the current situation in El Fasher. Most of the people I have been speaking to have been the mutual aid groups. They are on the ground, providing information on who is doing what and so on.

Why do we have the red tape? A lot of people say, "Oh, we don't know where it is going to go," but these groups actually have a high degree of transparency, because they have to respond to their communities. There need to be stronger mechanisms to do that at scale. As Liz and others raised, one of the challenges for British Office Sudan in other contexts is that it does not have enough staff to manage these programmes. But this is already happening: for example, philanthropy groups have taken on the mantle by providing support for locally led mutual aid groups on the ground. To have only 1.5% going directly to these groups, which are dealing with the majority of the response, is unacceptable—it is shame on everyone.

People say that this is unusual in Sudan, but it has been practised in numerous other countries, so we need to look elsewhere—Myanmar, Syria and other contexts. Seeing it in a vacuum, in just the Sudan context, is a mistake. There are successes, and there are ways of doing it. We just need the political appetite to do something like that.

Q110 **Chair:** Can you give us an example of a success and a way to do it?

Dr Ahmed: I will refer to Syria. Before the current Government there came into play, parts of north Syria were inaccessible to international organisations. Syrian organisations were really taking the lead there. They were taking all the risks, delivering the aid and responding. No one could provide any of that aid, and that happened for years.

In Sudan, I think the first time the UN went into the capital, Khartoum, was only last December. Even now, the UN and the INGOs are demanding more funds, and they have the infrastructure that can provide support and assistance at a large scale, but the reality is that there are a lot of limitations and red tape. The international organisations just do not have enough access, so they work with mutual aid groups as partners, but those groups are the ones delivering the aid. They are essentially the intermediaries, in many ways. That must be understood in the context of Sudan and other countries. Look at Syria and Myanmar—this is already being done.

Shayna Lewis: Can I add to some of the examples? There are many Sudanese local NGOs that have been operating since before the war

started, not just during the past two years. That is more than just the emergency response rooms that are doing fantastic work; there is also a whole set of mutual aid initiatives that, as Bashair said, are flourishing but have not received funding from the international community.

I know of more flexible humanitarian funding groups that have been directly funding these local groups and have had very positive results. There are groups operating in Darfur that are the only ones that have been distributing aid across the entire region, including in all the RSF-controlled areas, but they are not being recognised at the international level. I will not name them because it is not safe for them, but that work is already happening on the ground. Those Sudanese groups are often the only ones with access to these communities, so the fact that nations around the world continue to prioritise funding the large INGOs or UN agencies suggests a real lack of understanding of how aid is currently flowing into Sudan. It really needs a reinvigorated approach, which you referred to earlier. The ERRs are one example, but there are many on the ground, and it is really on us to develop a new approach.

I want to mention that US Aid, up until its dismantling, was the largest donor to the ERRs. There was a very long process within US Aid of working out how to do that direct funding, but it was eventually able to pull it off. Part of that was because the ERRs developed their own reporting system, which, as Bashair mentioned, is downward looking: it is accountability to their own communities. They were able to convey that information to their donor, but it needs a new approach from the UK Government, because we are in 2025.

Q111 **Chair:** Has anyone stepped into that gap?

Shayna Lewis: Absolutely no one.

Q112 **Sam Rushworth:** If we had representatives of those communities giving evidence to the Committee instead of you, and we were to ask them what they currently lacked, particularly since the funding stopped, and what we could provide them with, what do you think they would be likely to say?

Dr Ahmed: There are many ways to answer that question. It depends where they are. Some of them want a ceasefire. They want protection. It is not always just about the money. That is quite important. Needs and realities on the ground are evolving. There are already the resources; the massive diaspora funds the groups that have access.

Q113 **Sam Rushworth:** Do you mean the mutual aid groups?

Dr Ahmed: Yes, they fund the mutual aid groups, which are cost-effective. If you work through mutual aid groups, about 95% of the money goes directly into the communities, but it is probably about 65% when you go through the international organisations and when you have multiple layers.

We did back-of-the-envelope calculations at some point. It can take money about 11 months to get from the UN to local groups. There are costs at each stage, and rightly, there are overhead costs. They vary



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between 7% and 12%. The maths is there. It is not because of a lack of evidence; it is about people's resistance to the new work way of working, which is, "This is a professional. This is red tape." Sometimes, the issue is not with the funders but with the middle belt of intermediaries.

There might be a philanthropist with £5 million who just wants their money to be channelled to the groups working on the ground, but once all the steps and due diligence processes have been completed, it all gets tied up in compliance. What is the ambition: perfect paperwork or saving lives? That is how you have to look at it.

Chair: But you also understand that it is not free money. It is taxpayers' money and Governments have to account for it, but I understand the point you are making.

Q114 **Monica Harding:** I want to drill down on the accountability, if I may, and what practical steps we can take, but first I want to return to what you were saying about the blackout and why there is no public consciousness of this. We are receiving information about human rights atrocities; the American Administration under Biden called it a genocide. This information is coming out. You said that it is just another war, which is why people are not interested. I know that the parallel is probably unhelpful, but what has happened in Gaza was "another middle eastern conflagration", yet people were still interested and very focused on it. Why has this not captured the public imagination?

Dr Ahmed: I think it is just because you do not have a clear story about the conflict in Sudan. People are like, "We need a clear bad guy or good guy," or, "It's a complicated conflict." When you start explaining to people, you lose them. There were also issues of access—people want to see photos and all of that. So it does not appeal in that way, but racism is certainly a big part of that as well—it's like, "Oh, another war. It looks the same." There is no one answer; there are multiple levels and multiple reasons. I would love to speak to a behavioural scientist, just to work out the rationale behind it, but at the end of the day, we are dealing with the consequences.

The UK Government should not be dealing with what is easy messaging, but focusing on the responsibilities and what can be done. What I would love to hear more is: "Yes, there's accountability, but it can be done without formal structures." There are already processes and pathways to do that: you can support unregistered groups. You do not have to have the pressure from the media; you have the communities, the Sudanese diaspora, who have been on your doorsteps as parliamentarians and as all-party parliamentary groups that have been trying to raise this, but there has been no response.

Q115 **Chair:** Can I push you a little further? You said that there is more that the UK should be doing. I raised this with the Minister, because we are the penholder, both for Sudan and for the protection of civilians. I agree we should be doing more, but what more should we be doing?



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Shayna Lewis: We do a lot of engagement at PAEMA with the Security Council on Sudan. I think the last experts briefing that I delivered was about two weeks ago—other than a few of the P5, everyone was present, including the incoming members of the council. There is engagement, particularly at the expert level, and there is a lot of desire to do something on Sudan, but I will be frank: the UK has a little bit of a reputational problem at the moment.

Q116 **Chair:** In what way?

Shayna Lewis: Russia was categorical after vetoing the civilian protection resolution—I believe it was November of last year—that they would veto anything that the UK put forward.

The UK is very protective of its penholder status, but what we really need is space for African member states to be able to step forward and lead on some of these resolutions. There have been initiatives such as joint statements that the UK has co-authored with some of the African member states who are on the council, which have been strong statements over the past, I would say, five months or so.

So there is a little bit of movement in that way and some reconfiguring of the usual approach on Sudan, but I think part of the reason why we are not seeing much at the council is because the political gridlock that has infected the Gaza case file and the Ukraine case file has also spread to Sudan, and that is because of the role of the external backers.

I am sorry if I sound a little like a broken record, but we know that when the Port Sudan authorities tried to bring together an emergency session to specifically look at the UAE's involvement on Sudan, the UK provided a lot of political cover—this was widely covered in the media, so I do not think I am breaking any rules here.

Why does the UK Government continue to prioritise Emirati investments and political relationships over the lives of Sudanese on the ground?

It is a country of 49 million people. Almost 30 million people are currently in need of humanitarian assistance. What we are seeing on the ground in El Fasher right now is the worst, but not the only crisis occurring across the country. If you look at the western region of the Kordofans, there are also very similar siege tactics that the RSF is employing—medieval siege tactics—where they are constructing walls around cities in South Kordofan and other areas of the country, and they are preventing civilians from fleeing or goods from entering the cities, including El Fasher and other areas. There was a massacre that took place on the 26th in Bara, where hundreds of civilians were killed by the RSF over a 24 to 48-hour window, and in West Kordofan as well.

Ms Harding, to come back to your question of why we are not seeing the engagement versus other conflicts, I think it comes back to the telecommunications blackout and the fact that we are not seeing the same level of imagery that we saw on Gaza. It was the brutality of those images



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of children being bombed in their homes that broke through into the public consciousness and really changed things internationally.

On what we are seeing in Sudan, I do a lot of engagement with the media. Most of what I receive cannot be published because it is too graphic. When we receive videos of someone being beheaded or disembowelled in Sudan, there is nothing that anyone can do with that. They cannot even describe the footage. It is a question of not just what is available, but also humanising what is happening in Sudan. These big statistics mean nothing. I see policymakers' eyes glaze over in briefing after briefing when we go in with these statistics.

That is part of why, as an advocate, it is so important for us to get on the ground to be able to amplify stories, but also important for the Sudanese to be able to sit at these policymaking tables themselves and be given a platform. We tried to facilitate a delegation of Sudanese women who are involved in the response to the UK, and we were working closely with FCDO on this—it was around the London conference—right up to the last minute when it got to the visa process, and then we were told by FCDO, "There is nothing we can do about the visas." If that sounds strange to you, it is because it does not add up. But that was the UK Government.

Chair: I will bring in David, because he has done a lot of work on this.

Q117 David Mundell: Do you think there is anything more we can do? I put that to the Minister, because I agree with you: I feel the Government could do more to highlight and focus on the issues. We have not had a proactive statement from the Government. In questions—we had them today—I have asked that question and others have asked the question. We have never had an answer in relation to the UAE when it is asked on the Floor of the House. Today is an opportunity, which you are taking forward very articulately, to get more information and views out. But is there more that we could do as parliamentarians in trying to escalate the issue?

Shayna Lewis: I do think that Parliament could do more—a lot of what you are already doing. I hear from parliamentarians that when your constituents come to your office hours and raise Sudan, it then translates to the Floor of the Commons. But there needs to be more engagement across the board. I am not sure, in the UK civil society space, what that engagement currently looks like with parliamentarians. That is definitely something we can improve on and make sure that the briefings that we share with FCDO we also share more widely.

But we need the urgent questions. Considering that this is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world and the largest protection crisis in the world, it should be on the agenda every single week. Also, because of the UK's role as a leader on Sudan, morally and also politically, it should always be here. We were a little confused previously when Foreign Secretary Lammy would repeatedly say that Sudan was one of his No. 1 priorities as Foreign Secretary, because we were seeing the disconnect between that stated level of ambition and the lack of output from FCDO.



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The previous briefing detailed a lot of that gap and the lack of funding. I know a lot of the UK office's Sudan team and they are fantastic, particularly the staff who came out of Sudan and are still doing this work while, on a daily basis, they are getting reports of their family who are still in Sudan. There are many more who could be brought into that team, and it again comes back to that funding piece.

Dr Ahmed: To echo what Shayna just said, there are some practical steps that can be taken on the commitment. For example, on working with local aid, supporting mutual aid groups and working with the diaspora, why can there not be 60% allocated directly to mutual aid groups for next year? With the diaspora, the engagement is ad hoc, and we have had a lot of complaints about it across the board. You have to think generationally: why could there not be a diaspora committee instead of this ad hoc engagement? That could be a very practical step to do that.

On the humanitarian reset, Sudan is a test case, so why are you not building the processes to apply it, not just in the Sudan context, but in others? Humanitarian crises are not going to end anytime soon—they are getting more complicated. Introduce the blueprint now, instead of waiting and responding in an ad hoc way, which will be more expensive and challenging, and it will just put you on the backfoot in responding.

We also need to understand that protection is not negotiable. You cannot just wait and say, "Yeah, we cannot stop it now, but we will deal with justice later." That is not acceptable, and there needs to be that protection. I am very sad that I have been covering and working on Sudan for more than two decades. I covered the first Darfur conflict, and I am now writing the same reports I wrote then. I have just had to change the dates, and not even the locations—or maybe I have added more locations. The engagement back then was very different.

Q118 **Chair:** In what way?

Dr Ahmed: There was more political will, and there was more engagement to put pressure on the warring parties and different groups to stop the atrocities. There were UN Security Council resolutions and peacekeeping, so there was a lot more pressure to stop atrocities, and the situation could have been much worse at the time. It was horrific, because you had genocide then, but what is happening in El Fasher now has already happened in Wad Madani and Khartoum, and it could happen again. In a couple of months' time, we might be here saying, "Oh my God, I cannot believe we have done that." All you are going to see is a repetition. The lack of engagement in how the UK Government are responding now, compared with how they responded 20 years ago, is day and night—it is unheard of.

Q119 **Tracy Gilbert:** Bashair, you have mentioned the diaspora a couple of times. How do you think the UK Government could engage the diaspora more effectively with organisations across the UK to ensure that they are meaningfully integrated into the UK's response to the crisis in Sudan?



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Dr Ahmed: I have been advocating for this for quite a long time: there needs to be a diaspora policy to guide that engagement. Ireland has one, and the US has one. It is actually happening in several countries, which can show you how to do it. You cannot wait for a crisis to happen to begin engagement. It will also happen in future with trade. You need to have a diaspora policy to guide that, as well as a dedicated team. It does not even have to be a whole team—I know that can be quite an expense—but at least one resourced person to do this engagement and hear the messages.

The diaspora is not one thing, so they are not all going to be coming with the same vision. That usually scares everyone. I have heard the complaint quite a few times, "There are too many different diasporas. You are not on the same page." Of course not; you are dealing with a whole country of people coming here. Look at your own constituencies. Could you imagine bringing all the different ones together? It would be an interesting discussion.

Consistent engagement can happen, but there is also the division over whether it is going to happen at the FCDO's Sudan and South Sudan desk or at British Office Sudan—that tension also has to be taken into consideration. How will that deal with not only Sudanese in the different countries but the Sudanese diaspora specifically in the UK? To date, there has been this ad hoc engagement with specific individuals, because you know them and have a connection, so those who have access are those who are known to specific members.

Q120 Tracy Gilbert: Are the structures that you suggested, such as the models in Ireland and the US, the kind of thing that you think would work?

Dr Ahmed: It is something to consider. The US is a completely different beast in terms of the configurations, but in the UK there could be something specific that works for the UK. In Ireland it also looks very different. Germany do not have a policy, but they do diaspora engagement; they have specific programmes. There could be a specific policy that is unique to the UK, in terms of the type of population and the migration histories.

You are dealing with migration histories that will vary, depending on whether people came back in the early 1990s or more recently. You need to deal with that diversity. An interesting one that the US special envoy did was town halls—regular town halls to do this kind of engagement—so that could be one way of doing it. I would be more than happy to share more suggestions and details, because in my previous job we wrote quite a few papers on these policies.

Chair: We would be very interested.

Dr Ahmed: We will do that.

Shayna Lewis: It is also a question of who the diaspora has access to, because it is one thing to be speaking with parliamentarians, but it is another to be speaking with the decision makers in Government. We



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among civil society have recognised that a lot of these foreign policy decisions are being made not by the FCDO or even the Foreign Secretary, but at the level of the Prime Minister's foreign policy adviser, and as far as I am aware, no one in civil society—despite over a year of engaging—has been able to secure a meeting with them. That is an issue at diaspora level. It is an issue for experts who are trying to engage and understand what the blocks are on UK policy progress and leadership.

If there is one thing that the Committee could take forward, it is helping to break down some of those barriers, so that these communication channels can be working both ways. As much as we are trying to understand more about the international intractability, we, as experts who are doing this day in and day out have a raft of resources and information that we could also be sharing. The UK Government do not have the capacity to be engaging like that on a daily basis at grassroots and national level, so there need to be back-and-forth communication channels. At the moment, we are not seeing that happening as much as it should be.

Q121 **Chair:** So it is not just about diaspora engagement; it is about engagement with civil society as a whole.

Shayna Lewis: Yes. That has definitely been a struggle for us in engaging with this Government.

Q122 **Chair:** You say “this Government”—so you have seen a change in the last 16 months.

Shayna Lewis: Yes.

Chair: How unfortunate.

Q123 **David Taylor:** But how?

Shayna Lewis: We were able to engage with the teams under the previous Government much more easily. They were very willing to have these meetings with us. In the initial period when this Government came in, there seemed to be a blanket policy of not engaging outwardly with any civil society. After a couple of months, that seemed to change; there was some loosening. But there still seems to be, even among some Ministers, this reticence to view civil society as a resource at all. That is a real shame. Yes, we will often say the hard things that I think Governments would rather that we did not, but as I said, we are a resource and—

Chair: Having a critical friend is a blessing.

Shayna Lewis: Thank you.

Chair: It is nothing to be scared of.

Q124 **Sam Rushworth:** Perhaps this is a question for the future, but I would be interested to see some of the evidence of pushback and refusal, because we gather evidence as well as testimony—I am talking about attempts to engage and letters declining now compared with before.

Shayna Lewis: I would be happy to share those.

Sam Rushworth: Thank you.

Q125 **Monica Harding:** I have a final question. You talked about a lack of political leadership. Why do you think there is a lack of political leadership on this?

Shayna Lewis: I think that is really a question for the Minister and for the Africa director. Why is there a lack of political leadership? I think it is partly because they can afford to continue viewing Sudan as an issue that does not directly affect them, when it really does. This is an issue for the UK, and not just because of the potential migration impacts noted by previous speakers, but because of the regional destabilisation that I was talking about.

We are currently discussing whether Ethiopia and Eritrea are on the brink of war again. Part of that is to do with the Sudan dynamics and the fact that there are troops who have been trained in Eritrea who are aligned with the Sudanese armed forces. Again, that has been well documented by the UN panel of experts.

Egypt is hosting over a million Sudanese at the moment, but the economic situation in Egypt is far from stable right now, and it is also dealing with Gaza on its eastern border. To continue round, Libya is hardly a bastion of stability in the region, and Haftar is currently implicated in much of what is happening in the triangle border area between Chad, Libya and Sudan.

In Chad, the Minister said that Adré had been a tiny town before the conflict started, but there are almost half a million Sudanese displaced or living in displacement camps in eastern Chad, displaced from the Darfur conflict from 2003 onwards. Chad has a long history of playing host to Sudanese communities across that border, but it is dealing with many internal political dynamics. It had the election at the beginning of the year where, thankfully, there was not the eruption of conflict that had been expected, and we were all very grateful for that.

I will not touch on South Sudan in a lot of detail, but it is implicated in what is happening in Sudan right now. Different sides have backed different parties. I think I have covered all the bordering countries except for the Central African Republic, which I will not touch on.

Those regional issues affect the UK, whether we deal with them today or in five years' time. It is whether we want to engage in peacebuilding now, to contain the potential threats to UK domestic security now, or when they have escalated further down the line.

Ms Harding, I note that I did not really engage on your question of accountability, and I am so sorry. If I can touch on that—

Chair: Briefly, if you do not mind.

Shayna Lewis: Very briefly, it all comes down to Sudanese documenters, because the fact-finding mission that was mentioned earlier and the ICC investigators do not have access to Sudan—they have not since the



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beginning of the war. They are relying on evidence collected by Sudanese documentation groups.

I will just note that when I was in the region in August and September this year, I met many of those groups, and 83% of them told me that they have no funding pledge for 2026. That is a fundamental question about how not only domestic, but international accountability can continue, and about the need for accountability not on the same timeline that we saw in the Ali Kushayb case, which took almost two decades before a verdict was reached at the ICC, but accountability now for what is happening across the country. That is possible through pursuing sanctions that target both sides and their external backers.

Chair: I listened closely, and the Minister did not use that word once.

You have given us loads of evidence and loads of things to follow up on. If you want to submit more to us, that would be very helpful as well. We will not let this go, but I appreciate that there is much more that could, should and needs to be done. Thank you both for giving us so much good intelligence and delivering it so well. We really appreciate your time.