

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: UK aid to Pakistan, HC 102

Tuesday 23 November 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 23 November 2021.

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mr Richard Bacon; Theo Clarke; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger; Dr Dan Poulter; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 62 - 82

Witnesses

I: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia, the United Nations and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict; Annabel Gerry, Development Director (Pakistan), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad and Annabel Gerry.

Q62 **Chair:** We will start our final session in our fascinating, long-term and in-depth inquiry on UK aid to Pakistan. We are very fortunate today that we have Lord Ahmad, who I think has the longest job title in government, which I will read out: Minister of State for South Asia, the United Nations and the Commonwealth at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict. Lord Ahmad, welcome. Do you have any more titles that I should have included, or is that enough for now?

He is also joined by Annabel Gerry, who is the development director for Pakistan at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Thank you very much for coming. I know that you have first-hand experience of this.

Lord Ahmad, we have been doing our inquiry and taking evidence for a number of months now, but I wonder if I could start by asking you what you feel the UK's key achievements have been with our aid in Pakistan.

Lord Ahmad: First of all, thank you. I welcome once again meeting with all of you on this important agenda. Pakistan is one of those countries where we have, over many years, invested quite specifically in key development priorities, both when DFID was a standalone Department and also now within the context of the FCDO.

In some of our notable achievements, we have been very steadfast in helping Pakistan's transition as a receiver of humanitarian assistance in particular to fast becoming very much a development partner. The low-middle-income country status that it has attained also lends itself to that. Our support is redirected and refocused in that regard.

Particularly notable achievements have been in areas such as girls' education, where we have seen, over a period of 10 years, millions of girls in some of the most vulnerable communities, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, really benefiting from direct investment by the United Kingdom, and also in women's engagement, particularly on health and health education. There are very sensitive issues because of various cultures, communities and religious sensitivities that exist, while nevertheless navigating that particular route in ensuring that the most vulnerable and the most in need attain that support.

Finally, on a more bilateral basis, we have seen, more recently, some real inroads on various areas that we are covering, particularly on climate and the environment. We very much welcome Prime Minister Khan's announcement on his 10 billion tree tsunami that he plans, although I did joke with him that a tsunami means getting rid of rather than planting. He took it in good humour.



Those are positive agenda items, but there is more still to be done and we are looking forward to really strengthening our development partner status with Pakistan.

Q63 Chair: This inquiry has highlighted some things that have gone really well and some that have gone less well. I know that past inquiries that this Committee has done have also highlighted some of the things that have not been so successful. I am thinking about the schools programme that we supported. When you reflect, what are the main lessons that you have learned in terms of how to both partner and deliver aid in Pakistan?

Lord Ahmad: One of the areas is to ensure that we do not treat Pakistan as a country as a whole, or as one size fits all. One has to be very sensitive and cognisant of the regional sensitivities that exist and the structure of governance within Pakistan, and to ensure that those without a representative voice in some of the remote parts of Pakistan are also accessible. Working both bilaterally and through international agencies has been a successful partnership—for example, with the World Bank. Specific initiatives such as social protection and support have really empowered women who, for the first time, have become empowered economically. That has been coupled with training support.

In terms of lessons specifically, we need to be better at identifying ground partners that we can really work with on a long-term basis, because it builds both experience and expertise. Ultimately, they know their country better than we or any development partner do, so we must engage effectively. Referring back to the point you made, we must also be very stringent in our controls and mechanisms to ensure that the support we give is fully monitored and accounted for.

Q64 Chris Law: Good afternoon, Lord Ahmad-ji. I just want to ask you specifically about the impact that cuts have had. Just looking at the last five years, bilateral aid has already dropped from £463 million to £305 million. Pakistan was the number one recipient in terms of aid given. However, it has now dropped six places last year to become the seventh largest recipient, and we are now down to less than half of where we began, at £200 million. Can you tell me about some of the impacts on the ground and how it is affecting people's lives?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, I acknowledge that we have reduced our development support for Pakistan. It has been driven partly by the economic circumstances we have found ourselves in. It has also been driven by the sheer fact that we have gone from 0.7% to 0.5%. That said, it is about how effectively we support development in Pakistan. As I alluded to earlier, the shift from humanitarian support, as Pakistan's infrastructure and support mechanisms have got more effective domestically, is the right approach, so that we then look at long-term development support. The fact that there has been a reduction is not just that there is less being spent; it is also reflective of Pakistan's transition from a recipient of humanitarian support to development support.



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Other elements retain the fact that we are regarded as a very transparent and trusted partner by Pakistan. The relationships are strong. Both Annabel and Christian Turner, our High Commissioner, have excellent relationships with key partners, but also with agencies working on the ground. There is more, as I said earlier in answer to the Chair, that can be done with domestic partners, and I hope that, as we move forward in nuancing some of our approach in each key area, particularly in the areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and continuing our support in Punjab, we are very much focused on how we can support domestic partners more effectively as well.

Q65 Chris Law: I appreciate that you acknowledge that there has been a decrease in funding, but you have not explained how it is impacting people on the ground, so I will give you some examples. You have talked in particular about trying to aid women to get into better employment. Aid has been cut to Work and Opportunities for Women, the Better Cotton Initiative and WIEGO Asia, which focuses on women homeworkers to create a home-based worker global network. That funding was cut by £200,000. How is that supposed to improve people's lives?

Lord Ahmad: I fully acknowledge that, when you are spending less, we have to be more focused in our spend. It does not detract from the fact that what we are spending in Pakistan is still improving people's lives, including girls and women. Of course, all our programmes go through an assessment. Like anyone else, I wish we could spend more in a focused manner, but when we have challenges on the budget overall, it is important that we analyse our programme spending. Pakistan is a big bilateral recipient. Equally, we need to get focused more effectively on how we work with our multilateral partners through multilateral support in Pakistan.

Overall, I believe, from the relationships we have in Pakistan, that they have been both accepting and recognising of the challenges we have had domestically, while also appreciating the fact that we have continued our support in various areas.

In terms of numbers going forward, when you are spending less, the number that you can support as compared to the previous year on specific programmes will be lower. Nevertheless, we remain focused on our key areas of focus, which include helping girls into education, and women and skills.

Q66 Chris Law: I agree with you there, because there has already been a reduction of 5,000 girls in one particular project in education. The largest decrease overall has been in education. This is a multi-year cut.

Moving on, can you tell us why there were delays in communicating aid cuts to delivery partners in Pakistan?

Lord Ahmad: I can answer that. If I may, with the Chair's permission, I will also ask Annabel to comment on some of the specifics. In terms of communicating, it is about making sure that those numbers have been



agreed before we go out and tell the country what their settlement is, and then delivery partners. As I have said before at this very Committee, in any programmes that have come across my desk where we are having to reduce, it is about looking at how we can sustain expertise in these programmes, and particularly people expertise, so that, when we can ratchet up and scale up programmes, we are able to do so without losing that expertise. That is the lens that I have certainly applied in this case. If I may and with the Chair's permission, I will ask Annabel to comment.

Annabel Gerry: Thank you very much. On your communication point, we communicated as soon as we could. We had discussions with our partners in the generality about the direction in which things were going. Of course, everybody would have liked more time than they had.

On the numbers point, it is really important to add to what the Minister has said, which is that we are also now building on years of really good success. If you take, for example, the country's social protection system, that was funded with very large funding from the UK for many years. By the beginning of the pandemic, we were stopping our funding to it, but we had built the system, so that, during Covid, they were able to reach an extra 13 million people with their own money. That is a success. That is the way we have tried to move.

If you look at education, it is about how we, with less money spent, focus on the most vulnerable, looking at the poorest areas and the most excluded girls, and work with the systems to get policy reform that is going to impact, while expecting the Government of Pakistan to make a bigger financial contribution itself. That is the way that we are squaring it off in terms of development.

Q67 Chris Law: I fully accept that there have been successes as a result of continued investment. The problem is that we now have a multi-year cut, and these are harder questions to answer. This means that, for example, you are finding more young girls not being able to get access to education as a result of these cuts. Having the systems in place is fundamental, but how do you square that with the fact that girls, many of whom have children themselves, are now no longer going to be able to get access to education, whether or not the system is there?

Annabel Gerry: We are very concerned about that indeed. That is an area that the Government have said will be a priority going forward. We are in the process of designing a new programme specifically to focus on girls. We gave 1,500 scholarships last year to girls from minority groups. Through the Covid pandemic, we did a lot of extra work to support girls who were out of school to learn remotely. There is no question that fewer girls than boys have come back to school, which is a big worry and a big concern for Pakistan and the future generation.

Q68 Chair: Annabel, I think I heard correctly that you said that the Pakistan Government are going to have to step up a bit more to bridge those gaps. How has that been received?



Annabel Gerry: It has been received really well. Because we have been partners for a long time and got to know the individuals concerned, there is a lot of respect for the expertise that has come from the UK. Increasingly, what they want from us is technical know-how, but they want to have systems and education funding that they can fund themselves. We need to think about how we can make the smaller grant money go further. It is about, for example, looking at piloting how you would include those who are at most at risk and show that there can be scalable solutions that the Government can then fund, such as investing in research and evidence, making sure that that is broken down, so that they can see what is happening, particularly with vulnerable students who might otherwise get left behind.

Q69 **Mr Liddell-Grainger** Following on from what Chris was saying, the thing that fascinates me is what buy-in you get from the local communities. How do you assess that buy-in? Pakistan is a very large country. Every part of Pakistan is very different to their neighbours. How do you look at the community and say, "That is worth supporting, that is going to be tricky and that is going to be nigh on impossible"? What is the logical thinking and your step thinking on how you get to those decisions?

Lord Ahmad: Again, Annabel will speak to some of the specific programmes. In the overall analysis, it is highlighting those who are the most marginalised and hard-to-reach communities. Under any normal circumstance, without international support, including support from the United Kingdom, those particular children, taking education as an example, would not be recipients of education.

However, one of the areas since looking after this from 2019 is making sure that we really do focus on the institutions themselves. That has been a key factor. This is not about just giving support and development funding to education per se, but about drilling down and looking quite carefully at the institutions that we are supporting, as well as, importantly, the curriculum that is being taught and the people doing the teaching. That is all very much part of the mix.

Where I feel there has been a real benefit from some of the programmes that we are looking at, with the merger that has happened, speaking as someone who has done all three—as a standalone Foreign Office Minister, double-hatted and now a merged Minister—is in some of our human rights priorities that we highlight with Pakistan bilaterally. We are able to really drill into those in terms of ensuring that minority communities, for example, also receive full support, particularly when it comes to the issue of scholarships, as Annabel said. These are some of the strategic issues that we and I look at when looking at programme funding for Pakistan.

Annabel Gerry: It depends on the programme in detail, but we will do context analysis. We will tend to look for the poorest and most underserved districts. That normally will make sense. For example, one of our programmes that works on gender-based violence, child marriage



and child labour was looking at a vulnerability index and at where the biggest incidence of those things was. We picked 22 districts that way.

Other times, if we are using our grant money alongside a big World Bank loan, we would pick an area to work in which they are working, so that the two can complement. It rather depends, and we always have to discuss this with the authorities, so that they are comfortable.

Q70 Mr Liddell-Grainger Pakistan has had terrorist threats. You get communities that are scared to do things. You have just described one programme. How do you buy into that community to try to persuade them that this is a better way of doing things and that education is better than AK-47s? There are parts of Pakistan where it is difficult. Are we progressing in those sorts of areas? Do you feel that we are making inroads?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, you are spot on. There are communities, as recent history in Pakistan has shown, in places where the Pakistani Taliban were taking control, or places like the Swat Valley, where clearly people lived, frankly, in fear. We have a very high-profile example of that in what happened to Malala Yousafzai for simply expressing her right to education and the right to education for every girl. Where we need to work is very much together with Pakistan and its security forces on the ground to build an environment that is conducive to allowing citizens to go out for their basic needs and children to go out and be educated.

It means that we are invested in a multifaceted way in trying to avert some of the terrorism that has happened internally in Pakistan. Although Pakistan is perceived as a country that is still really challenged through the terrorist threat, we have seen, in places such as the Swat Valley, those areas coming under the direct jurisdiction of the Government and the local authorities, which have allowed for greater security and safety, particularly for children, and particularly for girls, wishing to attend school. There is still so much work to be done, but we have to continue to invest in those relationships to make sure that that can be done.

It comes back to my earlier point about how we look, through a qualitative lens, at how our support is really leveraging real enhancements to people's lives, particularly for children. Some 63% of Pakistan's population is under 30, and that is going to grow. We need to be very sensitive to the fact that we should continue to invest in all these different pillars in order to ensure that those generations do get opportunities. I also take Chris's earlier point that we need to be vigilant in ensuring that there is that scope to expand as and when we can.

One final point that I would make, particularly on education, is that it is not just primary education. Particularly for girls, when you analyse projects, it is the transition. We have to get better and more focused on that, in terms of girls going from primary to secondary, and also empowering young women, so that, when they have finished their education, they are empowered, through skills investment, to go into



work. I would suggest that, from my perspective, that is perhaps an even greater challenge. Education is one thing, but empowering women and that acceptance in certain parts of Pakistan is a bigger challenge.

Mrs Latham: Or university, even.

Lord Ahmad: Indeed.

Q71 **Mrs Latham:** Could you tell me what criteria the UK Government use when they decide whether to use local or international NGOs?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, if I could speak to the international, and particularly multilateral partners, one thing that, as the UN Minister, I have been scrutinising is which UN agency really delivers on specifics. We have to get more efficient on this, making sure that our money reaches the people who need it most, and reaches them in an expedited fashion. It is no good going through international agencies if the net result is that the end recipient or beneficiary is delayed in receiving that support.

That analysis of which agencies are more agile and where we can, as the sum of a whole—it is not just about UK funding but other country funding and multilateral support—achieve a greater return needs to be very much considered in terms of investment and yield. Rather than spending, for argument's sake, \$100 or £100, if we can scale that £100 or \$100 into a bigger pot that means £1,000, because we are working with key partners, then the leverage from that project will be greater and we need to be focused on that.

The other thing that, as I said, we have to get better at and be more vigilant of is mechanisms to ensure that, for the support that we give, particularly to local NGOs, there is full accountability and transparency of officials and Ministers, so that I can judge that the project is on time and on delivery, and is returning what it is. The Chair referred to historic cases in this respect, and we need to learn from those and make sure that whatever mitigation we put in place applies, particularly to local partners.

Q72 **Mrs Latham:** Could I just challenge what you said? You said that, if we put in £100, £1,000 might be spent, but £900 of that might be going to be spent anyway. Will we not be better focusing our money on NGOs that do not have huge overheads, like the UN and the multilaterals that we spend a huge amount of money with? They have enormous overheads that are taking money away from the organisations that could have the money. Yes, they might not be able to deliver quite so much accountability, because they are small, but would it not be better putting the money into those, where it is getting to the people directly because the overheads are not being stripped off?

Lord Ahmad: I agree in part, and that is why, as I said, there needs to be real scrutiny of multilateral partners, including the whole raft of UN agencies, in order to see who is the most effective in terms of speed of delivery as well as efficiency of their spend. I agree that there is this



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classic debate that sometimes happens about multilateral or bilateral. I do not think that it is a binary choice, because we have to do a quality assessment of certain agencies. It depends on the circumstances of a situation. We are not discussing Afghanistan but that is a good, practical example, and there will be certain areas within Pakistan where the reach of a UN agency or a multilateral partner, because of its accessibility, may be greater and more effective than a local NGO, simply because of the stretch of its ability and governance.

There has to be a recognition, but I accept in part what you are saying. Yes, there are circumstances, and that is why we need to ensure that every spend is done in an efficient and effective way, and that we really scrutinise our support to any multilateral partners. Where we have not been as effective over many years is in saying, if we have given X million to a particular agency—

Chair: Lord Ahmad, may I pause you? There is a vote at your end. We will pause this session for five minutes.

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Chair: Lord Ahmad, could I just notify you that, in the Commons, we are looking at a vote at 4.30? If we do not get through all of our questions, would you indulge us if we write to you and you reply that way?

Lord Ahmad: Yes, of course.

Q73 **Mrs Latham:** When Andrew Mitchell was Secretary of State for DFID, he brought in a rule about how much the overheads could be for any organisation. Do you look at that factor that he brought in? How do the UN organisations that you are giving a lot of money to compare with the percentage that he set 10 years ago?

Lord Ahmad: I am aware of the criteria that Andrew set. What we are currently doing, and what I can share with you, is that, with the merger of the two Departments, it is right that we relook at the priorities and the governance, and that is exactly an area that the new Foreign Secretary is very much looking at quite carefully. As we complete that exercise, I will be able to inform you much more effectively, but one thing that I can say is that I totally understand the nature of this. We have had quite candid discussions with multilateral partners, not least the UN agencies, in terms of the issue of overheads. As I said, it is wrong. If there is British development support, it should go to the people who need it, not to pay for overheads of organisations.

Q74 **Mrs Latham:** Yes, not to pay high salaries of over £1 million. What challenges do the NGO partners that you work with have on the ground when delivering UK aid projects in Pakistan?

Lord Ahmad: Perhaps I can give some reflections and then bring Annabel in on this as well. First of all, it is just the ability in terms of their



own structures and governance. It is their ability to have the expertise on the ground in terms of delivery. There are issues of funding cycles as well, which we commented on earlier, and ensuring that a programme or a project is sustainable for a period of time. We currently have a raft of projects, notwithstanding the reduction, which we are very much committed to seeing through to their end, particularly on areas of health and education.

There are particular challenges, but they vary from region to region and from state to state. As I said, in certain parts of the country that are harder to access, where there is a greater level of vulnerability and where particular NGOs may be working in support of particular minority groups, they face added challenges from the community and, indeed, their ability to engage effectively and deliver support in the way that they can.

Annabel Gerry: In terms of Pakistan-specific features, permissions is a big one. They need to get permission at different levels—federal, provincial and local—and that can sometimes take time. As Lord Ahmad said, access is the other main one that we come across. Otherwise, it is pretty similar to the partnerships that we would have in other countries, where the requirements that we have to make sure that UK taxpayers' money is well spent can be onerous for the smaller ones. That is an extra investment that they have to make in their organisations. In terms of Pakistan-specific things, the biggest are probably the access and the permissions.

Q75 **Mrs Latham:** Do the UK Government do anything to help support the work that you trying to do in Pakistan? What other Departments in government can assist you?

Lord Ahmad: We have a good, close working relationship on the climate and green agenda with Defra. We work very closely with our colleagues in the Home Office when it comes to security and support, and particularly countering the terrorist threats that prevail within Pakistan, and on the trade side with the Department for International Trade. I was talking earlier about skills and empowerment. Ultimately, there has to be a read-across. We have very good structures and, without embarrassing Annabel, I have visited Pakistan on a couple of occasions: the team is both expert and geared up, with real specialists on the ground, and that is what we need.

Annabel Gerry: If I can add, we have gone for a fully integrated system. For example, on health, it would not just be FCDO people working on health. You would have anybody with an interest in health working in that team. That is quite powerful. It is a change process. It is quite powerful bringing together all of the different expertise that we have. It is the right thing for Pakistan that they get the best of all of us and from the partnership.

Q76 **Mrs Latham:** When you say health, are you talking about British or international NGOs, or just people within the British Government who



have an interest in health?

Annabel Gerry: In that example, I was talking about different parts of the British Government that have an interest in health and are represented in Islamabad. Within the health sector and the different sectors, there are coordination groups as well.

Lord Ahmad: In a way, if I could sum it up, it is a project-based approach where you get the expertise across the piece for a particular programme or initiative.

Q77 **Theo Clarke:** Minister, what are UK aid programmes doing or planning to do to counter the secondary impacts of Covid-19 on Pakistan? I would be particularly interested in the most marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Lord Ahmad: First of all, when the Covid pandemic struck, we worked very closely with Pakistan on a raft of different priorities. I was personally involved in the repatriation engagement, and we had a very constructive engagement with Pakistan. The first step that we took was through the World Health Organisation, to reallocate, support and put additional financing through WHO to support Pakistan's immediate Covid-19 pandemic response. We also stood up an extra £88 million in respect of the immediate Covid response. We also identified how quickly Pakistan had the structures to stand up.

One thing that was noticeable and was good to learn, because of the work we have done, speaks to a point that Annabel made earlier about infrastructure, support and development. You will know, Theo, that we have done a lot of work on polio eradication. Speaking to the chief scientist and chief medical officer very early on in the pandemic, they were able to redirect some of their structures and focus that they were using for polio vaccination towards providing immediate health provision. It was good to see that there were some real economies of scale that could be shared across different programmes and projects.

Equally, we worked on setting up COVAX, and Pakistan was a recipient of various COVAX vaccines. As you know, we are currently going through a bilateral programme of allocation of additional support with vaccines. Although we have not finalised any programmes, there is a case to make for further support to Pakistan in terms of receipt of vaccines. Generally, in terms of their vaccines programme—again, Annabel will speak to this—they have had good structures, but the main challenges have arisen not so much in the urban centres, but in hard-to-reach communities.

There has been a degree of vaccine hesitancy and, frankly, at times, in certain communities, peddling of what goes into a vaccine somehow not being acceptable within certain communities. Therein, education is extremely important. We stood up a lot of investment, going to an earlier question from Chris on communication, in engaging and being on the front foot in terms of communicating to different communities about the



support that was available and the importance, once vaccines became available, of those being called forward going and having their vaccines.

There was a general sense, when I last visited Pakistan in June of this year, and a real recognition of the simple measures that people could take that we have adopted here as well, from mask-wearing to the washing of hands, in terms of what they could do.

Annabel Gerry: From the start, we split the response into three: stopping the disease, mitigating the impact and aiming for a resilient recovery. Mitigating the impact and the resilient recovery are both in the secondary impact part of it. As Lord Ahmad was just saying, in terms of behaviour change communication, we did an enormous campaign that reached 80 million to 90 million people a month, for several months, with a constant reminder of the same things and about the public health measures that people should be taking.

There were things that perhaps you would not necessarily have expected us to do, but which were really impactful. We worked with two provinces—Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab—on investment strategies and recovery strategies for economic stimulus and social protection. They were valued at £778 million in Punjab and £161 million in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The investment from us was tiny; it was just a bit of technical assistance to get them to really look across their budgets and see what they could do, as well as helping them identify savings so that they could make that investment.

Q78 **Mr Sharma:** How have the UK Government engaged with the Pakistani Government on issues of religious freedom?

Lord Ahmad: That is an area of my portfolio twice over, both as the Minister responsible for south Asia and also as the Minister for Human Rights. It is about really scaling it back to what Pakistan's constitution is all about. It is about ensuring rights for all citizens, irrespective. You have to contextualise when we are talking about the issue of human rights, applying the lens of that country in terms of incremental progress that can be made as well.

However, what we have seen, tragically, particularly since the era of the late President Zia, is the really regressive nature of minority rights in Pakistan—Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities, and other minority Muslim communities, including Shia and Ahmadis. There has been a very candid level of exchange. In my period of time looking after our south Asia relationships, it has been a key priority. The creation of the freedom of religion or belief envoy role on behalf of the Prime Minister is a crucial part of how we engage on this priority across the world.

Pakistan is a human rights priority country, and one of the reasons it is on that human rights priority list is because we have seen this religious space for minority communities closing down. We have seen churches attacked and minority communities not just marginalised but consistently



persecuted, and the rise of extremism. These are all interlocked and interdependent, and what we need is to see progressive, inclusive voices within Pakistan, and to work with key partners on the ground to ensure that change comes from within.

As a country from the outside in, we can do so much in terms of making the case and rightly standing up for persecuted minorities. However, we also have to stabilise and strengthen progressive and inclusive voices within Pakistan to make sure that that happens. That starts, fundamentally, with education, and that is why this issue of the curriculum is very close to my heart. If we are investing in a curriculum that is inclusive and states that every citizen of a country has an equal right to justice and access to services, that is the right way forward. If the curriculum negates or tries to marginalise a community, my view is very clear that we should not be supporting that.

Q79 Mr Sharma: What discussions have the UK Government had with the Pakistani authorities on mitigating the impact of the blasphemy laws, particularly on religious minorities?

Lord Ahmad: We have quite specific discussions. I am going to be very candid with you. Are we going to see a repeal of those blasphemy laws in the near future? I hope, God willing, yes. Do I believe it is a reality? The short answer is no. They are a legacy of our time when British rule prevailed over that part of the world. They were set up as a protective measure, not as an aggressive measure against a minority. Unfortunately, how they have now been applied and contextualised is to use blasphemy laws to target, first and foremost, minority Muslim communities. Often in blasphemy cases, the issue is not one of blasphemy. It may be over a land dispute, a property dispute or a family dispute, but the issue of blasphemy provides a neat way of causing and taking forward a particular case.

The other thing comes back to the point of education. The more we invest in the right kind of inclusive education and syllabus, the more we will negate the impact of these blasphemy laws and their application as they are right now. The challenge, of course, is that the extreme element of the narrative, which is a minority in Pakistan, has a major influence over the country. We have seen instances of extremist organisations that have shut down a whole city or the whole capital by simply sitting down and blocking the roads. Therefore, we must work in an inclusive way and, of course, support minorities. We have made very clear to Pakistan that the blasphemy laws are a hindrance to their progress as an inclusive, progressive democracy.

Q80 Dr Poulter: Just turning for a moment to the situation relating to Afghanistan, how has the takeover there changed the security situation in Pakistan? Will it have a destabilising effect on the region?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, on Afghanistan specifically, just prior to the takeover by the Taliban, I was at a conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan,



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where all the key partners involved, including the then Afghanistan Administration, President Ghani and Foreign Minister Atmar, were present. The inevitability, if I can put it that way, of the Taliban takeover, certainly once the decision was taken for NATO forces to withdraw, was, to my mind, never in question. The question was one of timing.

Subsequently, specifically in answer to your question, what we are seeing right now is an organisation that—I would put this quite clearly and candidly—is probably surprised that it is currently governing the whole of Afghanistan, and that is the Taliban. We have to be very cognisant that there are different factions within the Taliban that have different controls in different regions. I have been engaged quite extensively with key partners on the ground. We have had people, including some of our senior diplomats, visit Kabul to look at the operational capability of delivering humanitarian assistance. The current instability, which was perhaps predicted to the extent it was, has not prevailed. What we have seen thus far, thankfully, is a limit to the implosion that was expected in terms of civil war, et cetera. The fact is that it is a very fragile situation.

I am very candid and will say again on record that I do not believe that the ideology of the Taliban has changed. I still believe—and I speak as a Muslim by faith—it is a perverse ideology to the religion that I follow, or, indeed, any religion or belief. That said, what has changed is Afghanistan. In the last 20-odd years, the country and the people have changed. Women are empowered. Communities felt part and parcel of a society that was increasingly progressing on a fragile road to democracy.

That has now stopped. What happens next is very much part and parcel of the challenge that immediate neighbours are facing, including the current issue of migration across their borders. We are working very constructively with the likes of Pakistan, but also Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It comes back to a point that Pauline raised about international partners—the ones that have access. Local NGOs cannot be deployed, but the international partners, particularly UNICEF, can.

This morning, I spoke to David Beasley of the World Food Programme. I also met earlier today with Deborah Lyons, who is the SG's special representative on the ground in Afghanistan. Thus far, the Taliban is allowing humanitarian aid to be delivered and support to be given from nearby countries. Airports are operational, including Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad, which has allowed for humanitarian access.

The key challenge to stability will be the rights of communities—both women and girls and minorities—within Afghanistan, and the jury is well and truly out on that. In terms of stability, Pakistan's biggest worry is numbers leaving Afghanistan en masse. Even over the last 20 years, notwithstanding what has been reported, Pakistan has had to take a heavy burden both in terms of the number of people who have been killed, which runs into tens of thousands, because of the situation in Afghanistan, and also the number of refugees, which runs to well over a



million in Pakistan. Those things are very much part of our consideration in working constructively in support of Pakistan.

We stood up an initial £30 million to be prepared, and Annabel and the team have been working out an immediate response, if required, so that we can provide immediate support to any refugees coming over the border. Equally, we are working with key agencies. The Prime Minister announced £50 million a few weeks ago, and one of my current priorities is making sure, coming back to Pauline's point, that it reaches the beneficiaries. We are very much working out the specific details of that as I speak.

Q81 Dr Poulter: Could the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan influence the rise of religious extremism that we are already seeing in Pakistan?

Lord Ahmad: Pakistan itself is a very disparate group of people.

Q82 Dr Poulter: It is indeed, but could I just press you directly?

Lord Ahmad: What I was getting to is that the Pakistani Taliban are distinctly different to the Afghanistan Taliban, and there is no love lost between them. The Pakistani Taliban have targeted Pakistani institutions and Government agencies, etc., so the relationship between the Pakistani Taliban and the Pakistani Government vis-à-vis how Pakistan has engaged with the Taliban within Afghanistan are two different perspectives. Although their philosophy may be equally perverse from my perspective, the fact is that they are two distinct organisations. As I said, there is no love lost, and they have an increasing disdain for each other in terms of their operation.

Does it add to instability in Pakistan? Yes, absolutely. We have invested in Afghanistan. When you see an organisation like the Taliban prevailing next door, of course it has an impact. What we have seen is a large number of people who are of that mindset leaving Pakistan and going into Afghanistan, because they see that it is more reflective of their own thinking and ideology.

Mr Liddell-Grainger You have answered this in part, but because of what is happening with refugees coming over, what support can we give, through Pakistan and through our own resources, to those refugees who are now displaced persons in Pakistan and in some of the valleys that you mentioned earlier?

Lord Ahmad: Annabel can speak on some of the specifics—
[Interruption.]

Chair: Colleagues, I will have to end this session. Could I ask Lord Ahmad if he could follow up on some questions? We would be very grateful. Thank you very much.