HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan, HC 685

Tuesday 7 December 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer; Claudia Webbe.

Questions 251 to 459

Witnesses

I: Sir Philip Barton KCMG OBE, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Sir Laurie Bristow KCMG, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan; and Nigel Casey MVO, Prime Minister's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan and Director for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran Directorate (APID) at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Philip Barton, Sir Laurie Bristow and Nigel Casey.

Q251 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We have with us three witnesses from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I will just ask them to introduce themselves.

Sir Philip Barton: Good afternoon, Chair. I am Sir Philip Barton, permanent under-secretary in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Sir Laurie Bristow: Good afternoon, Chair. My name is Laurie Bristow. Until recently, I was the ambassador to Kabul.

Nigel Casey: Good afternoon, Chair. I am Nigel Casey. I am the director for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the FCDO.

Q252 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I notice, Sir Philip, that you introduced yourself as the permanent under-secretary of the FCDO. You did not use the somewhat traditional title of head of the diplomatic service.

Sir Philip Barton: I have two titles. I am also the head of the diplomatic service, but my formal departmental role is head of the merged Department of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Q253 **Chair:** Okay. That may be an issue that we refer to later.

The National Security Adviser described the UK's evacuation as a qualified success that did not in any way undershoot our original ambitions. Would you agree?

Sir Philip Barton: The way that I would characterise it is that the first thing to say is that the UK has been involved in Afghanistan for 20 years-plus. We owe a deep debt to our military who helped to keep the country safe and to diplomats and development experts who worked with and alongside other civilians. No one wanted our engagement and our presence in Afghanistan to end in the way that it did.

I am sure, Chair, that you will get on to what came about and why it came about. We had seen the eventual Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as the most likely outcome of the NATO withdrawal. That was our central assessment, as you know, but no one, including the Taliban themselves, saw the speed at which it would happen.

Our main effort was to try to avoid that happening and to secure a better outcome and some sort of negotiated power-sharing deal. But we also worked in parallel on our contingency plans and accelerated those as time passed after the US decision had been confirmed by President Biden in April. We were looking at an alternative diplomatic presence and we were also working up our contingency planning for a military evacuation.

It was for us as a Department but also, I think, across Government one of the most complex and challenging crises that we have had to face. For the short period that we were evacuating people, we did, as you know—enabled by the military who were on the ground providing the security alongside our Home Office and Border Force colleagues—successfully evacuate more than 15,000 people, but we always wish we could have evacuated more.

Everyone involved—those on the ground under Sir Laurie's leadership, the military and all the people working at the UK end—wish that we could have got more out than we were able to in the time that we had. That work carries on now. Since the end of the evacuation period, we have helped more than 3,000 people with an entitlement to come to the UK to leave Afghanistan.

The final thing to say, Chair—and I think you will come on to this—is that, as with all big crises, there are lessons to be learned. We are in the process of doing that as a Department. I am happy to go through that with you and the Committee in response to your questions later on. That is a slightly long answer to how I would basically describe my feelings about what happened.

Q254 **Chair:** At what stage did you understand the full extent of the challenge?

Sir Philip Barton: All along, we were hardening up our assessment of what was going as time passed. It depends on what you mean by "the full extent of the challenge". When we first saw the Doha deal back in 2020, we recognised that potentially it was problematic. We engaged with our US and other NATO partners, but also independently as the UK. The previous Foreign Secretary talked about this when he gave evidence to you in September. We tried to ensure that the peace process, which meant that there would be a withdrawal of the NATO military presence, did not lead to an outcome that was not in our interests.

While we did that, we were, as I say, developing our plans and early planning, under NSC direction, to achieve as much as we could for the UK and our interests, particularly keeping the UK safe in our counter-terrorism effort as we stepped up our planning. I think April was the point at which we knew that US policy was fixed and that President Biden had ratified the date.

We were then looking, including with the US, at how we could maintain our presence through what was called the diplomatic assurance platform of our contingency planning. As you move through April into May and the NATO summit and the G7, that was the point at which we had assurance that there was the potential of a US—and, I think, possibly a Turkish—airfield to allow us to maintain our diplomatic presence. Then we carried on our planning after that.

Q255 **Chair:** I am going to interrupt you, Sir Philip. How many people did you estimate you would need to evacuate when you got to the point in April that you realised that an evacuation was going to be likely?

Sir Philip Barton: At that point, we were focused on our continuing presence. We had a central assessment—

Q256 **Chair:** Did you not have any estimate at all of how many people you might need to evacuate?

Sir Philip Barton: I will ask Nigel to come in on the actual planning process. The period from 14 April onwards was when the decision was taken for headquarters to carry out from 21 April reconnaissance about what Operation Pitting, as it became known as, might look like. We then stepped up our engagement through May and June, including with Permanent Joint Headquarters, to harden up our planning. Nigel, would you like to say a little about the numbers behind that contingency planning?

Nigel Casey: To answer your question, Chair, we estimated, on the basis of historic data on passport issues, that something like 3,000 British passport holders were still in Afghanistan in April. That is one of the reasons why we at that point changed our travel advice to strengthen it to encourage everyone to consider leaving.

There were also at least 4,000 people potentially eligible for the ARAP programme who remained to be put through the programme and taken out. At that point, the plan was to get them through the process and out to the UK and resettle in advance of any potential need for an evacuation.

Q257 **Chair:** So you are talking about a total of 7,000. Are you surprised by the figures that have been given to us by Mr Marshall of between 75,000 and 150,000 who applied for refuge in the UK?

Sir Philip Barton: It is important at this point to distinguish between what we are talking about. There were in the end three ways in which people were evacuated. There were those under the ARAP scheme led by the Ministry of Defence with the Home Office, there were British nationals and then there was a decision to bring in Special Cases, as they were known, who were additional to our original planning assumption.

There was never an application process. I do not recognise the very large numbers that you are talking about. The numbers we had in our mind were those in the ARAP scheme, British nationals and then, when we realised we had capacity, those resulting from the decision to bring in some of the most vulnerable, which we did.

Q258 **Chair:** When did you agree what the conditions were to allow someone to be counted as a special case?

Sir Philip Barton: That decision was taken as Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban and when we had the plans in place and knew there would be spare capacity beyond those entitled under ARAP and British nationals or their dependants. We looked at who else and Ministers took the decisions to add the Special Cases.

Q259 **Chair:** So, in April, there were no intention to offer, for example, special assistance to Afghan judges who had sat on narcotics trials under British

support.

Sir Philip Barton: There was the ARAP scheme under which people who had helped us could be brought to the UK.

Q260 **Chair:** Sure, but narcotics judges in the special narcotics courts would not have counted?

Sir Philip Barton: The ARAP scheme was administered by the Ministry of Defence. There were criteria for those.

Q261 **Chair:** Yes, and the judges wouldn't have counted as part of that ARAP scheme.

Sir Philip Barton: If they were not directly employed or working closely enough, they would be assessed under the scheme whether or not they would or not be.

Q262 **Chair:** So would members of the national directorate of security who held in their minds the secrets that the Secret Intelligence Service and GCHQ had shared with them for the previous 20 years been eligible under the ARAP scheme?

Sir Philip Barton: Members of the NDS were covered by the scheme. Nigel, do you want to add any more about the criteria for the ARAP scheme?

Nigel Casey: There was provision for those who had not been directly employed by us but had worked particularly closely in special enabling roles, such as the categories you referred to, Chair, to be considered under category 4 of ARAP.

Q263 **Chair:** Despite that, you estimated that there were only 4,000 people in the ARAP scheme.

Nigel Casey: That was the estimate of the number based on what we knew about people who had applied at that point. The number of applicants grew significantly as the situation worsened through the course of the summer. By the time we got to the evacuation, we had higher numbers. It is an open scheme, so people are still applying today.

Q264 **Chair:** Did you assume that more people would apply as danger loomed closer?

Nigel Casey: We dealt with those who had applied at the time. We made assumptions based on the number of people we thought we could get through and then accelerated the programme of planned charter flights. I should stress that when I say "we", I am referring to a programme that was led by our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and jointly administered by the MoD and the Home Office.

Q265 **Chair:** Sir Laurie, you reportedly warned on 2 August that the Taliban were likely to take Afghan cities. What response did you get?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I think I would describe the reporting I was sending in as a kind of constant dialogue with London in which I was describing

what we were seeing and trying to interpret what it meant for our core objectives. I was trying to think forward a little to what would happen next with recommendations and proposals for what we should do as a result. In terms of the response from London, what we saw playing out was a scenario that we had envisaged and planned for. The response that I was getting from London was, "Yes, we need to accelerate our processing. We need to refine our contingency planning. We need to work ever more closely with the MoD on what would happen if the Government fell."

The key point here is that at the point of sending that telegram, it was not a given that the Government would fall and that the military would collapse. That happened over the course of the following seven days. A scenario—no more than a scenario—that we were all working to as one of several was that the Government might or might not hold a number of regional capitals, but that they might well succeed in holding Kabul. We would then be dealing with a Government who were not in control of the whole country, but one that did not precipitate the sort of collapse and fleeing of the Government that we saw on 15 August.

Q266 **Chair:** Did the FCDO take steps to speed up evacuation plans at this point? Did you take steps?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I arrived in post in June, having spent the previous several months working on the transition planning back in London. We were all apprised of the need—I was certainly pushing from Kabul—to try to up the pace as far as the system could manage for bringing out people eligible under ARAP. It was certainly the case that our planners and the planners at PJHQ were refining at increased intensity what Pitting would look like.

At that stage, it is worth bearing in mind that we did not know, if it came to it, which of the graduated response options we would be in. If you think of how PJHQ does its planning, one realises that there is a range of options from the fairly benign in which civil airlines are running to what we had, which was most definitely not benign. To illustrate that, I point out that Emirates, the civil airline, was running into Kabul until 15 August. The last Emirates flight attempted to land and was turned back. That was the speed with which events developed.

Q267 **Chair:** That is clearly a relatively rapid change of events. When you arrived in June, did you look round and realise the responsibilities that the UK had to many people in the country and that the numbers and estimates that Nigel Casey's team had pulled together were lower than you would have wished?

Sir Laurie Bristow: First, let me set out the direction with which I arrived from the NSC. It is important for the Committee to understand that, as part of the transition planning, we had reduced the size of the Embassy from a ceiling of 115 staff to a ceiling of 75 precisely so that we were able to manage the risk to staff and the risk of evacuating them if it came to it. What that meant in terms of prioritisation and my direction from the NSC was, first, a focus on supporting the Government. Without the

Government to which I was accredited we could achieve little to nothing. Secondly, it meant a focus on the all-important national security, particularly counter-terrorism, task and, thirdly, getting through the casework on ARAP. The working plan was to have completed the caseload on ARAP by, I think, the end of August. The fourth aim was to get the contingency planning poised.

I hesitate to describe it in these terms, but the numbers were always a "known unknown". We did not know how many people would come forward on the day for evacuation if that is what it came too. We did not know how many British passport holders were in Afghanistan on any one day; we had no way of knowing. What we did know was that if we were at the higher end of the scenarios that I have outlined, there would be a surge—a rush on the airport. That would be compounded for us by what was happening with the Americans and our NATO and other partners.

Q268 **Chair:** Did it not seem likely that the surge would resemble other such moments where power was collapsing, and that we would see not just those who were directly employed—embassy guards or whoever—but those who felt we owed them a duty of care, including people who may have been relatively remotely connected? Therefore, the numbers were almost bound to be significantly greater than you thought.

Sir Laurie Bristow: Honestly, I think that was at the top of everybody's mind during the planning phase. I repeat, it was one of a number of scenarios, and the one that we had, as it turned out, was the one that followed from the precipitate cascading collapse of the military and the Government.

Q269 **Chair:** General Dickie Davies, who, as you may know, served as an engineering general in ISAF for a number of years, submitted evidence in which he commented that "we appear to have not thought through our responsibility to those who have worked with us in adopting and promoting these values and who now, because of our withdrawal, are at risk." Do you agree with that sentiment?

Sir Laurie Bristow: No, I would not agree with that sentiment. We had a pretty good idea of how the collapse of the state and the return to power of the Taliban might impact on people who had worked with us. You mentioned earlier women judges; I would extend that pretty much to almost any women who aspired to work outside the home or to be educated, to LGBT people, and to people who worked with us and alongside us and not necessarily for us. Again, what I come back to is the point that it was not a given that the end would come in the way that it came and at the time that it came.

Q270 **Chair:** I think we can agree that the speed of the final collapse was possibly quicker than anybody thought, but surely after the withdrawal from Bagram, it was a matter of weeks not months and the end was pretty clear. It was unlikely that the Ghani Administration and therefore the Government were going to survive.

Sir Laurie Bristow: Again, the way I would describe the last week or 10 days was that of a cascading collapse. I don't think I would have extrapolated from the fall of Zaranj at the beginning that it would lead to the fall of Kabul and the Ghani Government only nine days later. I should just add that that there were efforts going on in the final day or so to manage a softer landing—negotiations between some leaders of the Republic and leaders of the Taliban for the Taliban to hold short from the city; I am sure that you have been briefed on that by other witnesses and it is in the public domain—but on the day, that is not how it worked out.

Q271 **Chair:** During the brief months that you were in post as Her Majesty's ambassador in Kabul, what contact did you have with the Foreign Secretary?

Sir Laurie Bristow: Through the Department—

Q272 **Chair:** No, what direct contact did you have with the Foreign Secretary?

Sir Laurie Bristow: My diary is imperfect, I'm afraid. It was rather a messy situation. I had contacts with the Foreign Secretary directly several times in August during the crisis. In the period when I was working on the transition planning, contact was regular—several times a week alongside Nigel—as we worked up through with him how we proposed to stand up the embassy after the military had left. By the time I arrived in Kabul, things had moved on a little bit.

Q273 **Chair:** What contact did you have with your neighbouring posts and possibly neighbouring states? What contact did you have with, for example, our high commissioner in Islamabad or our ambassadors in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I had several conversations. I kept in touch fairly regularly with Christian Turner in Islamabad, as you would expect. It was an absolutely key part of the jigsaw puzzle, particularly because of the work that we were pursuing with the Pakistani state and the Pakistani military on trying to find a way into, essentially, a military stalemate and some sort of negotiated settlement.

Q274 **Chair:** Did you or any direct employees of Her Majesty's Government have any contact at all with the Taliban before they took over the administration of the country?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I will defer to Nigel on that, if I may. I did not. I was accredited to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which is a quite important point in this respect.

Nigel Casey: The answer is yes, Chair. I had contact in the company of other US and European special representatives in my first week in the job in May. We had long had contacts with the Taliban. We did not declare those publicly as a matter of policy, and we kept them at the level of me, as special representative, or lower, but yes, we had had contacts for many years.

Q275 **Chair:** Did any of those include conversations about assistance with

evacuation or support to civilians, should the Taliban take power?

Nigel Casey: When I began this job in May, the conversations were all about pushing them to live up to the commitments that they had made in the Doha agreement to negotiate a power-sharing agreement. We had given very clear warning that if they sought to take power by other means, one of the consequences would almost certainly be forcing the withdrawal of foreign embassies and ending lots of the foreign assistance that went through the Government of Afghanistan.

Q276 **Chair:** May I come back to the period over August, when things started to go awry? When did you realise that it was all over, Sir Laurie?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I was tracking, particularly with our military colleagues, really from the fall of Zaranj onwards where we thought this was going to go. From that perspective, I was most focused on the things that would actually put the Republic's ability to survive and to continue to hold Kabul at serious risk.

The key moments were probably the fall of Kandahar and the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif. Earlier than that, the Taliban had made extensive gains across the country; they controlled the border crossings and the main roads around the country, which put an economic stranglehold on the country.

The absolutely key moments in the final couple of days were when it became clear that the military was no longer viable—I put that at around 13-14 August. Nigel may want to comment on this, but that was the point at which our military and the US general who was running the diplomatic assurance platform said, "Look, this is falling apart now." Then of course there was President Ghani's disappearance from the scene on the 15th.

Q277 **Chair:** I think that was the last moment. So you were alerting London pretty clearly by the 13th or 14th that it was over.

Sir Laurie Bristow: That that was what was happening. Until Ghani actually fled the city, I don't think anybody could say that it was over, because there was a still the option in play of trying to manage some sort of essentially negotiated surrender to the Taliban.

Q278 **Chair:** Sure, but effectively the Afghan Government, by the 13th or 14th, had not only lost control but had no prospect of regaining any form of control beyond perhaps the Arg palace.

Sir Laurie Bristow: I think that is probably correct.

Q279 **Chair:** And that is what you were reporting to London.

Sir Laurie Bristow: *indicated assent.*

Q280 **Chair:** At that point, you were presumably reporting that through the normal DipTel network. Were you also sending personal messages direct to key personnel, to make sure that they were fully aware of the danger that the UK mission was facing?

Sir Laurie Bristow: Again, I will bring in Nigel on this, if I may, because he will be able to give the London perspective on it, but I don't think there was any serious doubt that that was the situation. Of course, what that precipitated was decisions around the future of the mission.

Nigel Casey: Chair, if I may add, on the basis of the reporting that Laurie and the senior UK military representative, Brigadier Tom Daly, was sending back not just to me, but to the almost daily Whitehall meetings chaired by the Deputy National Security Adviser, I put a recommendation to the Foreign Secretary on 11 August that we needed to significantly downsize and move our embassy from the green zone in the city to the airport. That is a recommendation that he immediately accepted and we began acting on on the 12th.

Q281 **Chair:** Okay, so you would say, Mr Casey, that by 11 August it was clear that the position of the British embassy in Wazir Akbar Khan in central Kabul was no longer a viable option and that the sensible thing to do was move the embassy complete to the airhead?

Nigel Casey: The judgment that I had had to make and put advice to Sir Philip on every week since June had been whether we could fulfil our duty of care, which is, in reasonably foreseeable circumstances, could we keep our staff safe and could they do their jobs? By 11 August, I had concluded that that was no longer possible operating from inside the green zone and we needed to relocate.

Q282 **Chair:** Okay. Sir Philip, the embassy was by this point about 75 strong. That's correct?

Sir Philip Barton: That's correct, yes.

Q283 **Chair:** Would that make it one of the larger or smaller British missions around the world?

Sir Philip Barton: At 75 UK staff—there would have been additional Afghan country-based colleagues—it would have been medium to large. It's quite a considerable number. Obviously, it had been much larger.

We had already taken a decision earlier on, given the increasing risk in Kabul, to bring numbers down and really prioritise the work around the highest priority national security work on the one hand, and the work on the ARAP scheme to bring people to the UK as we accelerated that programme. Those were the two main focuses that Laurie and the team had then, as Nigel has set out. We then came down from 75 to 20 as we chose to move to the airport to be more secure.

Q284 **Chair:** But you would say that, even on 11 August, it was still a significant mission and, presumably for you on 11 August, the prime focus of your duty of care responsibilities around the world?

Sir Philip Barton: I think that was probably the riskiest place we had that sort of number of people. We do have other parts of the world—Somalia, Libya and other places—where colleagues work in dangerous and difficult

circumstances, and we pay particular attention to our duty of care, but yes, Kabul, Afghanistan, was the top of the list.

Q285 **Chair:** Right, so Kabul was the top of the list. On 11 August, the embassy was moving. On the 13th, it was clear that the military could no longer hold, and on the 15th, the President fled the country. That would be a correct summary of those few days, would it?

Sir Philip Barton: *indicated assent.*

Q286 **Chair:** What date did you return from holiday, Sir Philip?

Sir Philip Barton: I am happy to go into dates in a minute, Chair, but let me just say before I do that I have reflected a lot since August on my leave, and if I had my time again I would have come back from my leave earlier than I did. I did put in place, as I think you know, cover arrangements—both an acting permanent secretary in the normal way, and a director general to lead in parallel on our Afghanistan work. I stayed in touch with the Department all the way through the period closely—through August. But as I say, if I had my time again, I would have come back from my leave earlier.

Q287 **Chair:** Okay. Well look, we welcome the candour with which you express that. It does still remain a concern that the Foreign Secretary was on leave. You will remember the session that he had before this Committee in September. It does strike this Committee, certainly, as strange that, while the Foreign Secretary did come back eventually, you decided not to.

Sir Philip Barton: As I say, Chair, I have reflected on that, and if I had my time again, I would have come back from my leave earlier.

Q288 **Chair:** Okay, what date did you actually come back?

Sir Philip Barton: I came back on 26 August.

Q289 **Chair:** Where were you?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't really want to go into where I was—

Q290 **Chair:** Okay, let me ask the question differently. Were you in the United Kingdom?

Sir Philip Barton: I was partly in the United Kingdom and partly not.

Q291 **Chair:** Okay. Have you ever changed your holiday plans in a crisis before?

Sir Philip Barton: I have, yes.

Q292 **Chair:** Would you consider it normal for staff to do so?

Sir Philip Barton: Chair, as I say—I am at risk of repeating myself—I have reflected on this. There is a lesson for me in all this, which I accept. If I had my time again, I would have come back earlier.

Q293 **Chair:** May I ask, going back to the first question I asked you, whether you consider yourself a Crown servant or a civil servant?

Sir Philip Barton: I am both. Formally, I am a civil servant—a member of the diplomatic service and a civil servant. "Crown service" is a wider term than, I think, "civil servant"—it's a legal thing. We are also Crown servants, in that we work through the Government of the day for Her Majesty, as all civil servants do.

Q294 **Alicia Kearns:** I'm sorry, but I don't think it is enough to say "Mea culpa." How, in two weeks, did you at no point go, "This—I can't. I have to go in and protect my people"? It takes me to the question: how would you define duty of care? You said just now we pay particular focus to duty of care. Is that just to staff at post? What about the staff sat in the crisis centre?

Sir Philip Barton: I'm at risk of repeating myself. I have reflected on this, and if I had my time again, I would have come back, but I did put in place senior cover—both an acting permanent secretary and a director general, who was clearly going to be there and available to lead our Afghan work.

I made sure that we had the systems in place, going back months. Nigel has already referred to it. I was very closely involved, as the situation of our colleagues in Kabul became more dangerous, in putting in place a system, firstly of weekly reporting to me. We then brought it down to more frequent reporting as the situation became more acute. I was confident that we had a system in place that discharged our duty of care.

Q295 **Alicia Kearns:** On that, how—I struggle. I should disclose I have worked in the crisis centre as a Foreign Office member of staff. This was a catastrophe. This was not all the other things going on where we like to say, "Oh well, there are lots of other things going on." This was a catastrophe of an incomparable nature.

Mr Marshall set out in his evidence issues around no staff being conscripted properly into the crisis centre, no linguists, no computers, no proper access for visitors and no night shift system. Do you therefore think that those you put in place to take your role, in your absence, failed at their duties?

Sir Philip Barton: Let me come on to this, given you have mentioned Mr Marshall and we saw the witness statement that he has given. I take the issues he has raised very seriously indeed. He emailed me on 31 August. He had spent four days as a member of the crisis team, and he said in that email that he was going to share information with this Committee, which I think he had already done at that point, and he said that the civil service code had been breached.

I asked to see him, and did indeed see him later that day, given the serious nature of what he had said. I set out for him his options in raising concerns, and that we would co-operate with this Committee in any inquiry you subsequently had. I think, Chair, you may already at that point have said there would be an inquiry. We would co-operate with the inquiry and we would also, as we always do in the Department, carry out a lessons learning exercise.

We stayed in touch with him, and I decided that we should, given his genuinely held concerns, treat him as a whistleblower under the formal whistleblowing procedures. I used those to appoint a senior former head of mission, who had not been involved at all in the Afghan crisis, to look into his concerns, to talk to him but also those involved in the crisis response. She did that, she found no evidence that the civil service code had been breached, and she acknowledged that staff working under huge pressure had done their best to deliver the right outcomes. She also made some—

Q296 **Alicia Kearns:** I apologise, Sir Philip, but that takes me back to my original question: did those who, in your absence, had to step up fail, then?

Sir Philip Barton: No, I don't think they did fail. As I said right at the beginning of this session, it was an extremely complex and difficult crisis. We did—enabled by the military on the ground, very bravely making sure that it was secure enough in Kabul, and led in difficult circumstances by Sir Laurie—manage to evacuate 15,000 people. I do acknowledge there were things that we could have done better, and we all wish we could have got more people out. There are, I am sure, lessons we can learn.

Q297 **Alicia Kearns:** I am going to come back to the structural problems much later. Did you ever visit the crisis centre at any point?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, I did. I visited the crisis centre when I was in London. As soon as I was back, I was in the crisis centre. I have been a regular visitor to the crisis centre. I also kept in touch with those leading the crisis.

Q298 **Alicia Kearns:** Will you send us the dates of those visits, please, because I am not aware of any visits that have been recorded? Mr Casey, can I ask how often you visited the crisis centre?

Nigel Casey: I was there every day. I was acting gold crisis, so I was sitting in the crisis centre throughout.

Q299 **Alicia Kearns:** Again, that is interesting, because Mr Marshall had to point out that he does not actually know what you look like. It is surprising, if you were gripping the crisis centre, that a civil servant would not have any idea what you looked like. The crisis centre is very small—I have spent many hours in it.

Sir Philip Barton: Let me just say a little about how our crisis system works. When you are responding 24/7—we ended up, as I think the Foreign Secretary took you through when he gave evidence, with 500-plus people working in a 24-hour period—you cannot rely on a single individual to be the gold crisis leader. Nigel had the primary role, but there was a rota of golds to make sure that we had 24/7 cover at the leadership level, in our crisis response.

Q300 **Alicia Kearns:** But surely if a leader is gripping, the people in that room should know who that leader is.

Sir Philip Barton: I think people did know who Nigel was and who the golds were. I do not think anyone can be there 24/7.

Q301 **Alicia Kearns:** Finally, if this is not what failure looks like—I will come to why I think the civil service crisis system clearly failed—what does failure look like?

Sir Philip Barton: As I say, we successfully evacuated 15,000 people. We wish we could get—

Q302 **Alicia Kearns:** I'm sorry; this is not about the headline stats. It is about the system—the bureaucratic civil service system—that should be running a proper crisis centre, fully staffed to the levels that are needed. Sir Laurie said that this was a scenario that you envisaged and planned for, so if this is not failure, what is?

Sir Philip Barton: We declared a crisis. We went through the gears in putting more people in—we ended up with 500-plus. We had more than 1,000 people of course—

Q303 **Alicia Kearns:** Where were the 500?

Sir Philip Barton: Some were in the crisis centre; some were working elsewhere; some were working in our network.

Q304 **Alicia Kearns:** Where is elsewhere?

Sir Philip Barton: Some of them could have been working from home. The point is that you cannot, particularly during a covid time, have 500 people working in one space. It is about what they are able to deliver.

Alicia Kearns: Chair, I will leave it there for now.

Q305 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I apologise to Members and to our witnesses for being late for the beginning of the hearing. Sir Philip, can I take you back to the issue of holidays? The Committee has found it incredibly difficult to get any kind of information or accountability from the Department, particularly from the former Foreign Secretary, about what he was up to, whom he was talking to, and what he was discussing as the Taliban were advancing across Afghanistan towards Kabul. When did the Foreign Secretary go on holiday? What date did he leave the country?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not sure that I have that date. I think, on the Foreign Secretary's holiday, he dealt with that—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: He never told us the dates.

Sir Philip Barton: He dealt with his holiday in his evidence.

Q306 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** No, he did not, I'm afraid. He did his usual bluster and accused me of a political fishing expedition. What I am actually interested in, Sir Philip, is accountability. It is a matter of public record when the Taliban were taking various towns and provinces across the country. I would like to match the dates that they were taking over

various parts of the country with his call logs and whom he was talking to and when. I will be honest with you: when I asked him when he went on holiday, I thought that he would just give me a date and that we would move on to the next question, but he refused to say the date. The general consensus seems to be that it was on or around 4 August. Do you recognise that date?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not have the date in front of me, and I am not going to speak for the previous Foreign Secretary.

Q307 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** No, but the Department would know when its Secretary of State left the country, wouldn't it? That would not be an unusual thing for the head of the Department to know.

Sir Philip Barton: I do not have the date in front of me, and I am not going to speak for the previous Foreign Secretary.

Q308 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am not asking you to speak for the previous Foreign Secretary. Does the date exist somewhere in the Foreign Office and can you go back after this meeting, get it, and send it to the Committee?

Sir Philip Barton: I am happy to take that question away.

Q309 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So it does exist?

Sir Philip Barton: There is a system for ministerial cover. I am happy to take away the question that you have asked me.

Q310 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So the system for ministerial cover will presumably contain the date on which the Foreign Secretary left, and you will share that with the Committee.

Sir Philip Barton: As I said, I am happy to take that away.

Q311 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** What does that mean?

Sir Philip Barton: I am happy to look at the information that we hold and consult the previous Foreign Secretary.

Q312 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** He will not want you to tell me; he did not tell the Committee himself. Is there a reason why we cannot get the dates? We know he was out the country. We know where he was. We know all the stuff about a beach being closed. Why can we not just get the date he left the country?

Sir Philip Barton: I will have to take that away and consult the previous Foreign Secretary.

Q313 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You look delighted to take it away, Sir Philip. Can I come to the call logs? I have submitted some written questions to find them out, as I say, to map the dates that the Taliban was advancing on key cities and provinces in part of the country beside who the Foreign Secretary was talking to and when. Can we get the call logs of who he spoke to on the key dates?

Sir Philip Barton: I thought that the previous Foreign Secretary had written already to the Committee about who was in contact with whom. We did share a long list of what Ministers have been in touch with which foreign countries all the way through the crisis.

Q314 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** We never seemed to get the proper, black-and-white detail. I am interested in particular in the then Foreign Secretary's phone calls. I have had some information about Lord Ahmad and Lord Goldsmith, but I want to know who the Foreign Secretary was speaking to, not because I am on a political fishing expedition but because I think accountability matters. I know that is unfashionable with Ministers at the moment, but I think it matters, and it matters to the Committee, so can we get the full August call logs for the former Foreign Secretary and the date that he went on holiday?

Sir Philip Barton: I think the former Foreign Secretary wrote to the Committee about who was talking to whom. Nigel, do you want to add anything on this?

Nigel Casey: Just to confirm that, following your questions at his oral testimony session, the former Foreign Secretary wrote on 15 September with a number of answers to some of your questions, as he promised, and attached a table of all the calls, meetings and other interventions at his level and involving other Ministers in the relevant period.

Q315 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I will bring this to a close because I know other Members want to come in. Nigel, do you know when the Foreign Secretary went on holiday?

Nigel Casey: I do not know the exact date, no. That is the honest answer.

Q316 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Lastly, when did the Foreign Secretary—in July or August—speak to Secretary Blinken or the Secretary-General of NATO?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not have that in front of me.

Q317 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Can we get that?

Sir Philip Barton: We can look at it if it was not in the letter that Nigel talked about.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It wasn't.

Q318 **Bob Seely:** May I ask you some questions about Raphael Marshall's comments and the evidence he has given us, which I am sure you probably had a good look at in the newspapers and elsewhere today? Do you think his comments are fair, as he does make some fairly strong allegations?

Sir Philip Barton: The central point he made, which we looked at, was that there had been a breach of the civil service code. As I said in answer to Alicia, a very senior diplomat who had not been involved at all looked at that and found no breach. She did point to some issues, but she did say

very clearly that, under huge pressure, people had done their very best to deliver outcomes around the evacuation. Overall, I think some things he said are the sort of things we will look at in our lesson learning. Other things I do not think are fair.

Q319 **Bob Seely:** Parking the breach of the code, he makes some quite telling criticisms of individual and specific things. One of his strongest criticisms seems to be a sort of woolliness—which, sadly, some of us have encountered before—with FCO thinking, and over-optimism and over-hopefulness.

You had tens of thousands of people coming forward and you ended up helping very few. We sent thousands of emails, most of which seem to have gone completely unanswered, and for all we know may simply have been binned. Could you comment on that allegation about the amount of information you were dealing with, the number of people and the number of emails from MPs?

Sir Philip Barton: Perfectly reasonable question. The first thing to say is that we received a monumental amount of correspondence. I think it was something like 180,000 pieces of correspondence in August, and nearly a quarter of a million in total, with 19,000 on the peak day, compared with the height of the covid crisis when I think we got about 14,000 in two months, so it was a very high volume.

Secondly, in terms of what we did about that, we prioritised the work to get people on to flights and to go through information that we had received to see whether that led to us wanting to look at more people, rather than replying to each individual piece of correspondence. I recognise very much that, particularly in the House, that meant that you in this room, and across the House, were not getting replies. As we could, we basically put in place additional resource to work through all the cases and to give you all replies in September, as you know, but the decision we made was to prioritise looking at the correspondence rather than answering it.

Q320 **Bob Seely:** I just think we felt that we were getting false assurances that this was being taken care of when in fact you were being overwhelmed. I do not know whether that is a lack of honesty, a lack of clarity or a lack of just levelling with us about what you can do.

Sir Philip Barton: A quarter of a million—the sorts of volumes that we were seeing—were incredibly difficult to handle. As I said earlier, in terms of the three schemes, the one around the Special Cases was not an application process; we agreed categories with Ministers, and then looked for people within those categories, given the space that we had available.

To acknowledge your point, one of the things that we are looking at in our lessons learning is that we took very seriously what the Committee said around call handling and covid, and we have put in place more capability on that side, as the last Foreign Secretary said to you when he gave evidence in September. We will want to look at how we create more

contingency resource if we face correspondence, as opposed to calls, on this scale in future.

Q321 **Bob Seely:** The problem with these circumstances is that suddenly they become overwhelming very quickly, so I clearly have some sympathy with the position that you were in. You were on holiday. It was August. It was not the best time for a crisis to happen, but crises tend to choose the worst times. Was there, looking back, frankly a lack of urgency and a lack of grip, and that is why you found yourselves collectively so overwhelmed so quickly?

Sir Philip Barton: I genuinely don't think it was about lack of urgency or lack of grip; it was about the scale and complexity of the circumstances that we all faced.

Q322 **Bob Seely:** Okay. On the specific and slightly depressing issue raised by Raphael when he talked about a work/life balance—that everyone was being told not to work long hours, and not to work more than eight hours—I am thinking that this is a once-in-a-decade crisis. Okay, we have had covid, so it is twice in a decade. These things are very rare, and there comes a point where people really have to put their shoulder to the grindstone. If you have soldiers at Kabul airport working around the clock, people clocking off after eight hours and not bothering to come in for a weekend is complacent, woolly, waffly, unfocused and just a bit rubbish, isn't it?

Sir Philip Barton: I simply do not recognise that. I think it is based on a misunderstanding. There is not a clocking-off culture at all in the FCDO. We spend more time actually trying to persuade people not to work too hard and burn out. In terms of the eight hours, when we are in a full-blown crisis and it is very intense, we do have an eight-hour shift system.

We make sure, therefore, that people are getting a period of rest and then coming back on to shift duties. I think that is fairly standard. In 24 hours, there are three eight-hour shifts. Sometimes, depending on the time zone and the pace of work in a crisis we might have a long day with two shifts. In this case, we went to a three-shift system. Nigel may want to add something, but I really do not recognise what was said.

Q323 **Bob Seely:** On that shift system, did you have enough people to do the night shift? He is implying that, because you had this work/life balance, which is very important—don't get me wrong—some of the time you actually did not have the back-up that you needed to have.

Sir Philip Barton: This wasn't about work/life balance; this was about rostering shifts in a crisis to make sure that people do not burn out in a crisis and work too long in one period of time.

Q324 **Alicia Kearns:** It is recognised, I think unanimously, across the Foreign Office that there is an issue with there never being enough people for RDTs, which is why we have to go across Government. Every time there is a rapid deployment team, who are most likely being brought in to staff this, you do not have enough people. I have never, in my time at the

Foreign Office, ever seen a crisis where they were able to fill all the slots without constantly coming out and asking for more and more and more capacity, so I find it very difficult—in fact, I find it incredibly plausible is the other way to put it—that there were not enough people filling night shifts.

The idea that we had only one person at some points on the Special Cases inbox—that is not enough. I am looking for you to persuade me. I do not feel that there was grip, that these night shifts were properly filled and that there was conscription of staff on to this crisis.

Sir Philip Barton: In terms of the overall response, the first thing to say is that the way we are organised as a Department, we are not a contingent organisation, but basically organised and funded to deliver day in, day out around the world. That is the nature of our business, but we do have, and want to have, a crisis response capability. Over the years, as we have gone through big crises, we have looked at how best to do that.

For example, after the hurricanes crisis in the Caribbean in 2017, where we did have problems, we looked at how better to do this. We created a system called Directorate Crisis Lists, which allows us to access people from each different business unit, if you like, of the Department to staff crises.

One of the things we are doing as part of our lessons learning process is looking at the extent to which that worked effectively, how we can be more agile, how we can access contingent capability without reducing significantly our ability to deliver day in, day out business. Nigel, did you want to add anything around the staffing issues in August?

Nigel Casey: To answer the direct question, when it was clear we needed to increase staffing rapidly and significantly, we went through the acting PUS to all directors general in the organisation. They were all asked to produce a certain number of staff by a certain date, so there was that element of compulsion for the whole organisation to contribute and that is what happened.

Q325 **Alicia Kearns:** So on the nights of Sunday 22 August to Monday 23 August, and Monday 23 August to Tuesday 24 August, I understand there was no night shift allocated at all. Are you happy to say today that there absolutely, categorically was a night shift for the Special Cases team, but also beyond that? Will you put that in writing as well, as a follow-up?

Nigel Casey: I can tell you there were night shifts rostered from 14 August onwards throughout the crisis, so there were three eight-hour shifts every 24/7 period. I cannot tell you the precise numbers in every single team on every single bit of the operation on every single night.

Q326 **Alicia Kearns:** Was it rostered? That doesn't mean they actually turned up. Are you absolutely certain that there was a night shift on those evenings and every single evening, because I understand that people did not turn up that evening—or those evenings, plural?

Nigel Casey: I don't want to give you misleading answers, so I would have to check that and come back to you.

Alicia Kearns: I would have hoped to hear, "Of course, there was not one evening where we did not have a fully stocked team delivering exactly what was needed across every single team in the crisis centre." It is quite clear when you are sat in the crisis centre: if there is an empty team, it can be seen very easily.

Chair: We will go to Claudia.

Q327 **Claudia Webbe:** I just want to come back on an earlier point of clarity and ask Sir Laurie a question. On 2 August, it is reported that you sent a diplomatic cable warning, "We are entering a new, dangerous phase of the conflict," and that it was likely the Taliban would take cities. Can you confirm that that was correct? Did you expect, soon after that, the Foreign Secretary to go on holiday?

Sir Laurie Bristow: My telegrams, as published, speak for themselves. What I was trying to do, as you would expect, I think, in the circumstances, was tell it as I saw it. We were seeing major developments on the battlefield. We had emerged from Eid and from a kind of ceasefire.

We had seen an escalating pattern of attacks in Kabul as well, including probably the most important, the unsuccessful attack on the Defence Minister's house—a couple of blocks over from my residence. If he had been at home, they would probably have killed him and we would then have been in a rather different phase. There had also been the rocket attack on the Government as they were at the end of Eid prayers. I don't have anything to add, honestly, on the Foreign Secretary's holiday arrangements.

Q328 **Claudia Webbe:** Would you have expected the Foreign Secretary to have gone on holiday?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I come back to the point that we could see that the situation was moving into a different phase. The Taliban were upping the level of violence. They were becoming more and more challenging across the country, including in Kabul, but we did not know the timescale in which this would end or how it would end.

Q329 **Claudia Webbe:** In terms of the plans to put in place, what would you have expected in terms of the ability of the Foreign Secretary and Sir Philip Barton to be present, and for you to be able to have some communication?

Sir Laurie Bristow: What I would expect, I think, would be what happened. What I was trying to do in those telegrams was to alert the centre to what was unfolding. Of course, that wasn't the only source of information. I have done two director jobs in London and dealt with multiple crises, and you absorb information and synthesise it. The centre's job is to work out what that means in terms of our top-level priorities and to try to think forward to where we might be a week, two weeks or months from now.

Q330 **Claudia Webbe:** The situation got worse, of course. The Prime Minister went on holiday. Sir Philip Barton, your counterparts the permanent secretaries at both the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office also went on holiday, at the same time that you were on holiday. Were you aware of that?

Sir Philip Barton: I think all permanent secretaries who are away put in place other arrangements, and I have described the ones I put in place.

Q331 **Claudia Webbe:** Does it sound like joined-up thinking and planning to find that you and the permanent secretaries at the MOD and the Home Office were all on leave, Sir Philip?

Chair: It sounds very joined up to me.

Sir Philip Barton: As I say, when they are away, permanent secretaries put in place cover arrangements. Some Departments have second permanent secretaries and those that don't will have an acting permanent secretary covering an absence.

Q332 **Royston Smith:** Can I come back to Bob Seely's line of questioning? I was on holiday, too, as it happens, and I didn't come back, either, as it happens, but I was working every day as an extra pair of hands in my office. Not only was I on Zoom meetings with this Committee, but we were on Zoom meetings with the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary.

I am sure you did that too, Sir Philip—I'm not suggesting that you didn't. We spent a lot of time going through hundreds and hundreds of requests for people who needed help—this involved thousands and thousands of people—but we received few, if any, replies from the Home Office, the ARAP scheme and the Foreign Office. The evidence that we have had passed to us today suggests that a lot of those emails went completely unopened and unanswered.

I am still being contacted now, as a constituency MP, by people who asked for help, who think they are still waiting for help, but who may well now discover from this evidence that people in the Foreign Office didn't even open their email. How many of those unopened emails exist? How many of those people have not even had their cases looked at?

Sir Philip Barton: As I said earlier, we received an unprecedented volume of correspondence. We took the decision to prioritise identifying people for evacuation rather than replying. As I said earlier, we are looking at what contingent capability we might be able to put in place in future if we receive a similar volume.

We believe we have replied to every Member of Parliament who brought cases to us. If that is not the case, please let us know. We have also sent replies to all the separate correspondence we had—not from Members of Parliament—but I recognise that we will have made mistakes. We are grateful for the collaboration we have had from Members' offices. Throughout the period, we have tried our best to provide information to everyone who has approached either you or us directly.

Q333 **Royston Smith:** Are you suggesting that everyone who contacted you with people who were asking for assistance received a reply from the Foreign Office?

Sir Philip Barton: That would depend on what they were asking about. If it referred to a British national, then it was for us. Somebody under the ARAP scheme would have gone through the Ministry of Defence as the lead Department for that scheme. If it were under the Special Cases and leave to remain arrangements, which the Home Office lead on, it would have gone through the Home Office for them to deal with.

Q334 **Royston Smith:** Hundreds, thousands of people who may have qualified to leave didn't, or didn't have their cases looked at, perhaps. Who authorised the prioritising of animals over people?

Sir Philip Barton: There was no prioritisation of animals over people.

Q335 **Royston Smith:** Who took the decision, then, to evacuate animals over people?

Sir Philip Barton: There was no decision to evacuate animals over people.

Q336 **Royston Smith:** How, then, were animals evacuated before some people?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not sure that is right in terms of timing, but Nigel might want to come in. There was a charter flight arranged for animals. We helped enable that charter flight, but there was no prioritisation of animals over people.

Q337 **Royston Smith:** How, then, did that charter flight get in? How did those people and animals get through to get to their charter flight if it was not using British troops and resources?

Sir Philip Barton: Nigel, do you want to go through the detail of this case, because it's important?

Nigel Casey: Just to confirm what Sir Philip has said, there was no prioritisation of animals over people. The animals were flown out on a charter flight chartered by the Nowzad organisation. That flight left only after we had concluded evacuating people. At that stage at the airport, it was only UK military who were left. They were able to provide a certain amount of assistance to make sure that charter flight got out, and then they left themselves.

Q338 **Chair:** Following up on that, may I ask how much staff time did it take up to handle that process?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not know.

Q339 **Chair:** Did it take up staff time that could have been used for anything else?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not know how much staff time it took up.

Q340 **Chair:** You have just been telling us that there were limited resources, so I am curious how much staff time was taken up.

Sir Philip Barton: As Nigel said, the evacuation of people had ended by the time that flight took place.

Q341 **Chair:** Could the evacuation of people have been continued for a few hours?

Sir Philip Barton: No.

Q342 **Chair:** Why not?

Sir Philip Barton: Because the period in which we were allowed to evacuate people had come to an end. There were very clear timelines set for how the evacuation period would end, and then we moved into a new phase of withdrawal of the people, enabling the evacuation.

Q343 **Chair:** According to whom?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not understand.

Q344 **Chair:** According to whom had the timeline ended?

Sir Philip Barton: Nigel set out the detail of who took the decision on this, but it was very clear that the US had the principal lead. Obviously, our military were also involved. Working backwards from the deadline for the completion of the overall withdrawal gave us what was the last point at which people could be evacuated. Nigel, do you want to go through that in a bit more detail? I don't know if Laurie wants to add anything from the ground?

Nigel Casey: Chair, the PJHQ were in charge of the evacuation, as you know, under the leadership of Admiral Sir Ben Key. They advised us of when the last available flights were to take out civilians—Laurie and the remaining civilian staff who had been helping evacuate civilians. We obviously took advantage of those flights to take civilians out safely at the last possible opportunity. Thereafter, the only British military flights were to take out our own soldiers.

Q345 **Chair:** So there was no extra staff time, military time or any extra resource at all used for the evacuation of the Nowzad contingent?

Nigel Casey: Well, the permission for the charter had to be sought and supported by our Ministry of Defence to get that charter permission to fly out, but it did not detract from the operation that we had run to evacuate civilians. It did not stop any civilian being evacuated.

Q346 **Chair:** You can understand where I am going with this question. If the gates were able to be opened to let another group through, whatever that group contained, could it not have been opened to let through, for example, the five-year-old son of the interpreter I was trying to get out?

Nigel Casey: I understand exactly why you are asking the question, Chair. We operated on the basis of advice coming quite rightly from PJHQ, who were running the military evacuation and the flights on which we

depended to get civilians out—Afghans, British nationals and ourselves. We followed their instructions and took people out on the timetable that they gave us. I don't believe it was possible that anybody else could have been evacuated who was not going on that specific charter flight, which was not a UK flight.

Q347 **Chair:** As far as I understand it from having spoken to the military commander on the ground and indeed the then PJHQ commander, now Admiral Sir Ben Key, the principal obstacle to evacuation was not air capacity, but the ability to get people on to and off the airhead and to process people. Is that correct?

Nigel Casey: The reason we ended the evacuation when we did was that our efforts to negotiate extra time—the Americans had led with the Taliban—did not succeed. We all hoped that the evacuation could run on for days more, but the Taliban did not agree to that. That is why the evacuation ended when it did. The UK military had to leave before the US military did, and that was the basis on which these decisions were taken.

Q348 **Chair:** I understand; that is not quite the answer to the question I asked. Am I right that the constraints were to do with the ability to enter the safe area of the airhead and then the ability to process people?

Nigel Casey: That was one of the constraints, but Laurie, who was on the ground, may wish to speak about that question.

Sir Laurie Bristow: Chair, I entirely understand the point. We all left Kabul thinking about the people we weren't able to get out, and that is natural in the circumstances. It might help the Committee if I talk through just a little some of the constraints in the final days; I think that will help to answer the question.

First of all, you are right in the sense that there was an increasingly compelling constraint in our ability to get people through the Baron system and on to the airfield—when we had the Baron. Of course, after the 26 August Islamic State attack, we had to close the Baron down in short order and move our staff and the remaining people in the queue on to the airport to a back-up location we had to try to process them through.

Another factor in play here was that the Taliban themselves were becoming increasingly, to say the least, unco-operative about letting people come forward to the vicinity of the airport or on to the airport. The number of gates was closing down, partly as a result of that, and partly as a result of the Americans taking their own decisions on that.

Of course, as Nigel has explained, there was a sequencing that needed to be followed to safely close down the operation and get our military and civilian staff out. With the very active co-operation of the brigadier on the ground, we managed to squeeze that timetable, but within the parameters of the possible.

Did the operation around the animals displace people? I have checked this with the commander on the ground. His take is the same as mine: that no

aeroplane failed to land or take off because of that charter flight, and nobody would have got through the system but didn't because of this decision to facilitate the animals on to the airfield.

Q349 **Alicia Kearns:** Apologies, Sir Laurie, you said that no one else would have made it through the system, but British soldiers went out, opened the gates, got these animals into the airport and made sure they made it on to the aeroplane. We have lots of planes. Those soldiers, instead, could have been sifting through the applications of the tens of thousands still stood outside the Baron hotel—I know, because my friends and their family were outside and couldn't get in.

Surely those soldiers could have been processing those individuals. We know that soldiers were processing people to go home—people who had permission to come. How, in any way, are all those soldiers processing animals and escorting them through not being delayed from being focused instead on sorting people and putting them on to planes? Clearly, more planes were allowed to take off, because their plane took off. We could have had a British plane; those soldiers could have been sifting those people who were outside waiting, who had permission to go, and getting them on to a plane.

Sir Laurie Bristow: My understanding is that the issue in the final few days was not planes or capacity on planes.

Q350 **Alicia Kearns:** That is exactly my point. The capacity issue was soldiers and sorting people to get them on to planes. I am arguing that those soldiers who were escorting animals could have been sorting through people who had permission to be on planes and getting them on to a plane.

Sir Laurie Bristow: I am not sure that the trade-off is that simple.

Q351 **Alicia Kearns:** Then what is the trade-off? Why couldn't we have done more? Why couldn't those soldiers have been sifting people and getting them on to the plane? What was the bureaucratic problem that stopped them?

Sir Laurie Bristow: In the final days of the evacuation—the period from the attack on the Baron through to closing the operation—I think about 4,000 people came through the system. It was essentially completing the queue of people that we had.

Q352 **Alicia Kearns:** There was no completion of the queue.

Sir Laurie Bristow: No, of course there wasn't any completion of the queue, but it was the completion of the people who were in the Baron system at that stage. Could I just spell out what happened? We had the attack on the Abbey Gate outside the Baron. We had to, essentially, close down the Baron evacuation handling centre. We had to move our staff out of there. We had to move the people who had been processed and were in processing out of there. We had to relocate them on to the airfield to a very, very, frankly, basic back-up site and complete the casework in the time available, which was, by that stage, extremely constrained.

In terms of the work flow, I cannot say with certainty that soldiers were actually physically moving animals through the gate. I would need to check the facts of that, to be perfectly honest, but it is not my understanding. I checked this with Brigadier Blanchford, and it is not my understanding that anyone could have been got out but was not as a result of the animals being brought on to the airfield by their owner.

Q353 **Graham Stringer:** I know it is painful, Sir Philip, and you have said you have reflected on your holiday, but I just want to return to it for one question. You have, effectively, apologised for not coming back from holiday. What difference would it have made if you had?

Sir Philip Barton: That is a good question and something I have reflected on. In terms of the overall response, when the Government respond to big international crises involving multiple Departments, the normal order is for director generals in different Departments to work both for their Ministers and into the centre of Government, where the co-ordination happens. That is what happened in this case.

In the FCDO's case, there is a crisis structure underneath that we have talked about. When I reflect on this, one of the reasons behind why I said what I said at the beginning is that I think I should have been more visible to our people who were working on the crisis. I was involved and in touch with the Department throughout, as I said, but they should have seen me visibly involved.

Q354 **Graham Stringer:** Would it have made any difference on the ground? Would it have made any difference in getting out the people whose lives were at risk in Afghanistan, had you been back? That is the important reason for your existence, really, isn't it?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not believe that me being present in London as opposed to on leave and keeping in touch with the Department would have changed the outcome and the number of people who were evacuated.

Q355 **Graham Stringer:** It is an interesting question.

Sir Laurie, returning to a question that the Chair asked you, you said you had an incomplete record—or words to that effect—of your telephone calls with the Foreign Secretary. Why is that? I would have expected an ambassador to have a pretty perfect record if they talked to the Foreign Secretary.

Sir Laurie Bristow: As I said earlier, when I was working on the transition planning before deploying to Kabul, both Nigel and I, as the directors, saw the Foreign Secretary regularly several times a week as we worked through the implications. I don't recall having a conversation with the Foreign Secretary in the period from arriving in Kabul to the onset of the crisis. There was no particular reason why I would need to do that. Certainly, when there were Cobras taking place, the Foreign Secretary would have been on those.

During the crisis itself a small but quite important consideration here is that I did not have a PA. Essentially, my diary was run kind of on the run

through the day, so what I cannot do is go through my diary and say on this time, on this occasion, the call was there. The reason for that is that we needed to be very cautious about the numbers of people we had in Kabul.

I think the number of FCDO and Border Force staff peaked at 33 in the course of the August crisis. It would, in my view, have been wrong to have anybody at risk in Kabul who did not absolutely have to be there processing people. That, I am afraid, is the answer to the question.

Q356 **Graham Stringer:** That does not really answer the question. The period from the start of August to 15 August was, I understand, a period of intense pressure, but talking to the Foreign Secretary must lodge in your memory. As you have said, it is not something you do every day. You can see why the Committee wants to know how many times you talked to the Foreign Secretary.

Sir Laurie Bristow: I talked to the Foreign Secretary one on one, essentially, at least twice that I have managed to find in my diary during that period. There were a number more times when both he and I were in the same Cobra meeting.

Q357 **Graham Stringer:** So twice in the first fortnight of August, before the fall of Kabul. Thank you for that.

Records were left in the embassy of Afghans who had helped the British forces and the UK. Why did that happen? What has been the outcome of the internal inquiry into that?

Sir Philip Barton: Shall I start, and then Laurie might want to add to that?

I think you know that the reporter from *The Times,* Anthony Loyd, came to us at the end of August and said that he'd seen papers containing personal information and *The Times* shared with us the details of three Afghan families whose names he told us he had received. *The Times* kindly collaborated with us over this and we evacuated those three families, a total of 11 people, within 24 hours.

Subsequently, *The Times* passed us the details of six names—four of those are now in the UK; two others weren't people who had worked for embassy but had submitted CVs.

On your question around the review, I had commissioned—the Foreign Secretary referred to this in evidence—a review of what happened and what lessons we should learn out of that particular aspect. We concluded and the review concluded with very high confidence that all physical documents and IT systems containing classified information had been either removed or destroyed prior to the closure. In respect of unclassified documents containing personal data, the review concluded that it almost all will have been removed or destroyed, but we can't absolutely guarantee that.

In terms of what happened—Laurie will want to add to this—we had a plan as we stepped down our presence and went through the withdrawal, including the move to the airports, to make sure that we had either removed or destroyed all sensitive information. We had a team designated to do that, but because of the collapsing time scale, the time available to do that was compressed. We regret this very much, as it were. We regret that people were put at risk, but it was an operational mistake made under immense pressure, as the security situation deteriorated very suddenly. Laurie, you may want to add on the specifics.

Sir Laurie Bristow: The key point for me is the last of those. It is, to say the least, absolutely mortifying that it happened. But it did happen. The journalist contacted us. I spoke to him several times to try to establish exactly what information he had and how he had come by it. My understanding of the information is that he was shown some documents by the Taliban, didn't see what all of them were—he certainly wasn't able to pass either the documents themselves or everything that might have been in them to us.

But what he told me is that there were six names. He tried calling them all. Some of them rang out. Some of them were in the UK. We have established that four of the six who were our country-based staff are in the UK. The other two names were not of individuals working for us but, as I understand it, people who had submitted CVs.

Again, my understanding from the journalist is that the people he had spoken to who were among those names alerted him to three other families, and those were the 11 people who we got out very quickly indeed. We were straight on to it, got them out, passed them through—they are now in the UK.

I repeat the point that it is mortifying, personally for me and for all members of staff concerned, that this happened. But just to expand a bit on the context that Sir Philip gave, this was an emergency destruction of an embassy happening at extreme speed.

The destruction plan had been compressed twice from a matter of the best part of a week down to hours—this reflected the situation happening. It didn't start on day one. As part of the process of preparing the transition to the post-NATO arrangements, a lot of destruction had happened and a lot of thinning out of material had happened in the previous months, but at the end of the day, it was a mistake.

Q358 **Graham Stringer:** I have not completely followed the numbers that you have been through. Are there any people whose names were in those records who are still at risk in Afghanistan or is everybody back safely in the United Kingdom?

Sir Laurie Bristow: As far as I know, no. Nigel, do you want to confirm that?

Nigel Casey: As Sir Laurie said, the names of the families who were passed to us by *The Times*, we evacuated quickly—in a matter of days, after we had that information.

Q359 **Graham Stringer:** It should not be really a lesson learned, should it? I mean, it should be absolutely fundamental that if you are evacuating an embassy, you get rid of all sensitive records. Was anything else of a sensitive nature—computers, programmes, anything else—left behind in the embassy?

Sir Laurie Bristow: We are confident that the most sensitive material, particularly the chancery, was comprehensively cleaned out.

Sir Philip Barton: In terms of your point, there was a plan, as Sir Laurie said. It was a five-day plan cut short to two days and then to just nine hours, because of the collapsing timescale. But we absolutely take seriously our responsibilities, and one of the things that we have done in the light of this incident review is to be sure, as we look at other places in the world where we might need to evacuate, that we have put in place robust plans to make sure that everything that needs to be either removed or destroyed is done so.

Q360 **Graham Stringer:** There has been criticism from Ministers and officials in other Departments that officials in the embassy left, so that it was left up to soldiers to process applications to get out. What is your response to that, Sir Laurie?

Sir Laurie Bristow: Essentially, it is not the case. I mentioned earlier that we had, at the peak, 33 staff in-country. They comprised 20 FCDO staff, 13 Border Force staff, a combination of British embassy staff, rapid deployment teams—actually, two rapid deployment teams that we brought in several days apart—and two Border Force teams that were also brought in several days apart.

My characterisation of how things worked on the ground was very different from some of the stories that I have seen, certainly in the media. I would describe the working arrangements between us, the Border Force and the military at all levels as something I am proud to be associated with.

Q361 **Graham Stringer:** What is your current position? Clearly not ambassador to Afghanistan anymore? Do you not know?

Sir Philip Barton: He does know; the nature of the role changed in a fundamental way, so Laurie and I agreed that he would step down as ambassador. We have Dr Martin Longden as our chargé d'affaires, based in Doha, representing our interests in Afghanistan and providing continuity. But the job that Sir Laurie was appointed to in effect changed in a significant way and he has stepped down from that role, and remains working for us in the FCDO.

Q362 **Graham Stringer:** I have a final question, Sir Philip. There has been criticism of a lack of co-ordination between the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. Do you think that if you had been back from holiday, the ability to centralise command would have

been better, and do you think it should have been better?

Sir Philip Barton: In terms of cross-Government co-ordination, that is obviously done by the Cabinet Office—

Q363 **Graham Stringer:** Well, it clearly wasn't done by the Cabinet Office.

Sir Philip Barton: That is where us, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence stocked in. There were daily co-ordination meetings, and Nigel can describe how they worked in practice, and I think we did work effectively under extreme pressure with our colleagues across Government. But Nigel, talk about the cross-Government co-ordination.

Nigel Casey: During the crisis, every single morning there was a cross-Government senior—as in, three or four-star representative level—meeting chaired by either the National Security Adviser, Stephen Lovegrove, or the deputy National Security Adviser, David Quarrey, so there was very close co-ordination every morning. We were all getting the same information picture and discussing the same decisions every morning and therefore were able to brief our respective Ministers on the same basis.

Within the FCDO crisis centre we had secondees from PJHQ to link us up directly to PJHQ here and to the operation in Kabul. We had civilians from the MOD, and we had staff from the Passport Office, from Border Force and others such as HM Revenue and Customs, to help with call handling, so it was a genuinely cross-governmental effort. As Sir Philip and Sir Laurie said, it was one that all those who I have spoken to who were involved in were proud to be part of.

Q364 **Graham Stringer:** But it didn't work, did it? Because there is pretty public disagreement between those Departments you said you were co-ordinating. Do you have an explanation why it did not work?

Nigel Casey: I do not accept that it did not work. We evacuated 15,000 people in two weeks. That does not happen by accident. I cannot speak for the political level, but the experience at official level was of extremely close working and, as Laurie testified, of very close relationships in very difficult circumstances in Kabul itself.

Q365 **Chair:** Let me just follow up quickly before I come to Chris. You spoke about how you were stretched at various points. Did you ever consider employing reserves or calling in former members of staff to the crisis centre who had experience in the languages related to Afghanistan?

Sir Philip Barton: In terms of augmentation to our crisis response, we did bring in some military personnel, not least to help with the handling of some of the correspondence. We did augment also using the civil service's civilian augmentation, which have through HM Revenue and Customs, again to bring in more people to help with the information management and the challenge we had in that area. So yes, we did bring in additional people.

Q366 **Chair:** Did any former members of staff offer to help?

Sir Philip Barton: Nigel, were there offers from former members of staff that you are aware of? I am not aware of any.

Nigel Casey: We had lots of volunteers from within the FCDO and, as I say, we brought in extra resource and accepted offers from other Government Departments as they were made.

Q367 **Chair:** I have been told that there were offers made by former members of staff who spoke the specific language groups.

Nigel Casey: I am not aware of offers from former members of staff.

Q368 **Chris Bryant:** Sorry, Sir Philip, to go back to your holiday issue, but I am going to, if you do not mind. Can you tell us when you went on holiday?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, I went on holiday on 9 August. Just to repeat what I said—

Chris Bryant: No, I've got it. You don't need to repeat it.

Sir Philip Barton: I'm going to say it again. I have reflected on this very carefully, and if I had my time again, I would have come back early.

Chair: It sounds less credible every time you repeat it, Sir Philip. It sounds platitudinous.

Q369 **Chris Bryant:** It just feels a bit scripted now. So you were away from the 9th to the 26th. How much of that time was the Foreign Secretary away?

Sir Philip Barton: As I said, I am not going to speak for the Foreign Secretary and his holiday.

Q370 **Chris Bryant:** Let me just explain why this matters. It is the whole of the leadership of the Foreign Office at the same time. That is why this bit matters to us. Because it seems axiomatic to me that if the Foreign Secretary is going to be away, the permanent under-secretary is not going be away.

Sir Philip Barton: I do not think that is actually true as an axiom. It is quite usual, actually, for Secretaries of State and permanent secretaries to be away in periods that are normally holiday periods. In both cases, there will be senior Ministers on the ministerial side and a senior acting permanent secretary or second permanent secretary on the official side.

Q371 **Chris Bryant:** When did you book your holiday, roughly? Was it months and months before, or was it, like, on the 7 August?

Sir Philip Barton: I am really not going into details of my holiday arrangements.

Q372 **Chris Bryant:** But you see, that matters as well. Because if you were booking your holiday by the time it was obviously clear that there was a crisis, that is a dereliction of duty.

Sir Philip Barton: In answer to your question, I have thought about this very hard, and I answered Graham Stringer's question about what the

impact was, and I have been honest with you in saying that I think the impact was on my colleagues. I do regret the fact that I did not decide to come back to support them, but I do not think it affected the outcome in terms of the people we were able to evacuate from Afghanistan.

Q373 **Chris Bryant:** The question for us might be rather different from the question for you. The question for us might be, why on earth were you going on holiday on the 9th, by which time we had a pretty clear idea of what was going on?

Sir Philip Barton: When I went on leave, including on the 9th, there was no inevitability at that point that Kabul was going to fall in the period that it fell in. The best assessment was that it could take some time still. There was no certainty over the timescale.

Q374 **Chris Bryant:** By that time, they were already talking about 31 days, weren't they?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't recognise—

Q375 **Chris Bryant:** That is the evidence that has been given to us repeatedly, and by lots of organisations on the ground in Afghanistan. Not so much the advice being given by the Foreign Office, but that by lots of other organisations working there was that all of this was an inevitability and that at the outside it was going to be six months.

Sir Philip Barton: That is the point. That was our central assessment, that Afghanistan would most likely fall to the Taliban. There was great uncertainty about exactly how quickly that might happen.

Q376 **Chris Bryant:** As I understand it, the Foreign Secretary went on holiday on 6 August. So you were basically planning to be away at the same time for two weeks.

Sir Philip Barton: I'm not getting into the Foreign Secretary's holiday—he can speak for himself. On that—

Q377 **Chair:** Sorry, Sir Philip, and forgive me for interrupting, Chris. I understand your need for privacy and your right to have leave, but the problem is that in a leadership structure—one on which the UK depends absolutely for its security—if both leaders are out of the country at the same time, that raises serious concerns.

It may not be that you would have made a substantive difference on this incident. It may be that you are right: the substantive difference was only on your colleagues and being able to support the efforts that they were making in the crisis centre—though for some of us, that would still be rather important. I also accept your review—your reflection of the position.

The problem that many of us have, which is why this keeps coming back, is with the very idea that the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister—let us not forget that that is what his position was as First Secretary of State—the Foreign Secretary, the PUS, the National Security Adviser, the PUS at the Home Office and the PUS at Defence were all away at the

same time. Sir Laurie, did you think of taking holiday at around that time?

Sir Laurie Bristow: Chair, I was in London for four days, around 7 to 11 August, as part of a planned rotation. I am not sure whether you are familiar with how the embassy is staffed, but essentially it is a six-and-two rotation. The embassy is staffed specifically so that there is an alternative ambassador at the time we are there. Of the time I was in London, I probably spent the majority of it in meetings, either in the office or with the office.

Q378 **Chair:** And you went back rather quicker than your six and two.

Sir Laurie Bristow: Yes.

Q379 **Chair:** This is the point we are coming to: leadership matters. It is not just about the difference that a leader can make in tactical command, but about the strategic intent that it demonstrates to an organisation and the seriousness with which an organisation pursues its functions.

I come back to the first question I asked you, when you described yourself as a civil servant. You are not, sir, a civil servant; you are the head of Her Majesty's diplomatic corps. That is a function greater than the civil service. It is greater than the civil service for the simple reason that you are solely charged with the exercise of extraordinary powers on behalf of this Government with almost no review or check. That is fantastic, and that is why we are lucky to have brilliant people in our diplomatic service around the world—by the way, I can point to 50 today and 100 tomorrow.

However, if you are effectively in the position of a Crown servant, in a similar position to that of a commissioned officer of the Crown—I know that you have warrants, which you proudly display on your walls—it raises some serious concerns if that ethos is not being followed at the head of the organisation. Forgive me, but that is why this keeps coming back.

Sir Philip Barton: I think I am true to the ethos of public service, Chair. That is what I try to live by; that is what motivates me in my job.

Q380 **Chris Bryant:** May I move on to a different issue? This morning, the former Foreign Secretary said that 1,000 FCDO staff were working in the crisis centre, but I think the number given today was 500. I am not sure whether that is FCDO staff, and 500 by normal call standards would mean roughly 85 full-time equivalents on a 24/7 rolling basis. Is that right?

Sir Philip Barton: I think the 500 referred to—I think it was a bit more than 500—was the peak number in a 24-hour period. I think you divide that by three to get any number on a particular shift.

Chris Bryant: That really isn't how it works.

Sir Philip Barton: You have three 8-hour shifts, so that's—

Chris Bryant: That's really not how 24/7 works.

Sir Philip Barton: In terms of the overall number—I think it is more than 1,000—that I think the former Foreign Secretary was referring to, it is the total number of people from across the Department who worked on the crisis at one time or another.

Q381 **Chris Bryant:** So anybody who sent an email about anything, in other words?

Sir Philip Barton: No, not at all—actually, those who would have been on the rostered shifts. Nigel, do you want to say anything more about the figures?

Nigel Casey: That is right, Philip. The 1,300 is, in fact, the total number of staff who contributed to it—who worked, at some point, on the crisis roster, whether working in the crisis centre or from a post around our network, remotely, or from home, so that's what that—

Q382 **Chris Bryant:** Between what dates?

Nigel Casey: That is during the course of the crisis. The 500 figure—

Q383 **Chris Bryant:** So from April through to August?

Nigel Casey: No. In the course of the evacuation period; so let's say from 15 August to the end of August.

Q384 **Chris Bryant:** And that is all FCDO staff, not from any other Department?

Nigel Casey: The 1,300 is FCDO staff, I believe, yes.

Q385 **Chris Bryant:** You believe. I am not asking you to give us 1,300 names, but it would be good if you could give us an indication of what Departments they came from and broad categories of numbers, because 1,300 and 1,500 just sounds very suspiciously round. I don't buy it, if I'm honest. It certainly doesn't equate to anything that I've heard from other officials in the Department or from the evidence we have been given.

Nigel Casey: Okay. We can write to you with a breakdown of how we arrived at that number.

Q386 **Chris Bryant:** Thank you. Can I go on to Special Cases? I note that everybody keeps on saying, "This has been a wonderful success; we've managed to get so many hundreds of people out under Special Cases," and so on. However, there is an alternative argument, which has been put to us, which is that, actually, the way that this was all structured was a terrible mistake.

We had three different systems running at the same time, run by three different Departments. One of those systems is not yet up and running at all, one was run by the MOD, which was the ARAP, and a third was the creation of this Special Cases category. Because there was simply so much coming through, we ended up not really prioritising properly, but basically licking a finger and sticking it in the air. When, and by whom, was the Special Cases concept devised?

Sir Philip Barton: Ministers took a decision on or around 16 August that, in addition to the ARAP cases and British nationals and their dependents, if there was space on flights, we would extend the evacuation to others—the so-called Special Cases.

Q387 **Chris Bryant:** When you say that Ministers decided, what does that mean and where did they decide that?

Sir Philip Barton: Nigel, can you describe the Ministerial decision-making process on that?

Nigel Casey: The key Ministers involved were the then-Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary. As Philip says, they had been clear with us, up until that point, that the overwhelming priority for evacuation were British nationals and their eligible family members and those who had been accepted under the ARAP scheme. In the week of the 16th, it was decided by those Ministers that, if there was spare capacity on flights—when PJHQ advised us that there was capacity—we would look to prioritise additional Afghans who did not fall into the first two categories.

Q388 **Chris Bryant:** Help me a bit, because the normal process of ministerial decision making would be on the back of a report that is sent up from officials, or the Ministers saying, "We're interested in doing this; officials, is this a possibility?" Was there a paper that was considered, or was this just that they sat in a room, came up with a view, and told you, "Right, we're creating this Special Cases category"?

Nigel Casey: Ministers met, I think, six times in the course of the crisis in a Cobra format, and I believe it was from one of those early meetings that the decision was taken that we should, in response to the calls coming through from Members of Parliament, NGOs and others, do what we could for people who did not fall into the first two categories, and that we should indeed respond if and when we were advised by PJHQ that we had capacity on those flights. That was always the basis of this scheme.

Q389 **Chris Bryant:** Mr Marshall told us—in what I must say was an extraordinarily well-argued document; it seems a great loss to the Foreign Office that he is no longer with you, but I will leave that to one side—in paragraph 35 of his evidence, which I believe you have all seen, "I believe the Foreign Secretary had approved a submission including a list of categories of people to be evacuated (intelligence officers, journalists, judges etc)." Is that right? Was there a submission?

Nigel Casey: Yes. There were two submissions; that's right. We were asked by the Foreign Secretary for advice on which categories of people should be prioritised. We put advice to the Foreign Secretary and he—absolutely rightly, I think—wanted to take responsibility for making those very difficult decisions himself.

The way that the process worked was that he decided which categories should be prioritised. We were then tasked with prioritising individuals, within those categories, according to a set of criteria, which had been agreed by Ministers. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: I suspend the session, as the Division bell is ringing.

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Q390 **Chris Bryant:** Sorry for the hiatus. We were talking about the submission that went up to Ministers, to the Foreign Secretary, about the different categories that might be included in the Special Cases list. Can we have a copy of that submission?

Sir Philip Barton: We would not normally share advice to Ministers with the Committee. There were two, in fact, but we would not normally share advice to Ministers.

Q391 **Chris Bryant:** Sorry, I did not hear the last bit of that. Are you saying no?

Sir Philip Barton: There was more than one submission. We would not normally share advice.

Q392 **Chris Bryant:** This was an abnormal situation, and I would have thought that this goes to a key point, which is whether it was wise or not to have created the Special Cases process at all.

Sir Philip Barton: We give advice as civil servants to Ministers, and that advice is between us as civil servants and Ministers. I am happy to take away your question and see whether we can do something in this regard, given the exceptional nature of the circumstances. We do not normally share the advice we give to Ministers.

Q393 **Chris Bryant:** I understand that. It would be great if you could, not least because I have had several Cabinet Ministers say to me now that they thought it was a mistake to open up a new category, and that we were just being far too—the Foreign Secretary was spraying promises around the place, none of which could possibly have been met. Do you think that is a fair characterisation?

Sir Philip Barton: We gave advice to Ministers on the cohorts—the types of people we might help—given that there was spare capacity available, and PJHQ went on to advise that there was that capacity available. Given the capacity, it was right that we looked at whether there were more people we could help out of Afghanistan through the UK in the pressurised situation that we were in.

Q394 **Chris Bryant:** How many journalists did you think would be in that cohort?

Sir Philip Barton: I will bring Nigel in on the numbers in particular categories. I think the overall headline was that we called about 1,200 people forward, 500 of whom ended up on flights. For the remainder, their right to come to the UK remains. Nigel, can you say anything about the categorisations?

Nigel Casey: You will remember the context: at this point, there was very significant pressure, not least from Members of Parliament, on behalf of particular cohorts, notably—for example—the Chevening scholars, but also on behalf of women's rights activists and other groups. The Prime Minister had received a letter: representations were made on behalf of a number of British media organisations that were concerned about the safety of their staff.

Q395 **Chris Bryant:** Sorry, did you just say "the Prime Minister"? You had representations from the Prime Minister?

Nigel Casey: No, representations to the Prime Minister. A media consortium wrote to the Prime Minister in early August.

Q396 **Chris Bryant:** Sky.

Nigel Casey: I am sorry?

Chris Bryant: The Sky list, for instance.

Nigel Casey: Sky was one of the leaders of the consortium, but there were separate approaches from media—from the BBC, from other journalistic organisations. That was the context in which Ministers decided that if we had space—they were very clear, as I said earlier, that the priority had to be British nationals and their families, and then ARAP-qualified people—if there were space, then for the reasons that the Chair was setting out at the beginning of this session, it was right for us to respond to the extent that we could.

I absolutely share your presumption that we could only promise what we could deliver, and that is why we were only able to call forward people according to the space that the commander of the operation at PJHQ gave us progressively in the latter stages of the evacuation.

Q397 **Chris Bryant:** It just seems terribly cruel to offer this suggestion that all these new categories, some of which are very difficult to determine—I mean, it might be simple to determine who counts as a judge. The term "journalist" is a very broad category, especially in Afghanistan. I just wonder whether it wouldn't have been much more honest and straightforward, and fairer and less cruel, to say, "I'm sorry, we're not going to set up a whole new system."

Nigel Casey: The honest answer to that question is that Ministers considered all the options in the circumstances and in the light of the very strong representations they received from many of your colleagues in both Houses of Parliament and elsewhere, and they decided that the best course was not to change the priorities that they had given to British nationals and ARAP-qualifying people, but to see where we could help to evacuate small numbers of other Afghans who did not fit into those categories.

Q398 **Chris Bryant:** But an alternative would have been to say, "Right, we are going to be more flexible on the interpretation of ARAP." I ask this question because a very common complaint from MPs was that we were

writing in and did not have the means of establishing whether the individual concerned qualified for ARAP. We presumed that the MOD would be able to do that, but we wanted to know, if it was on the borderline, that they would then be automatically considered for the Special Cases plan. But as I understand it, that did not happen. Is that right?

Nigel Casey: Ministers did test the flexibility that there was in the ARAP scheme, particularly category 4, which I referred to—people who were not directly employed by the Government but who had worked in a prominent role alongside us or in enabling roles. That category had been originally designed for a very specific cohort of people who had worked with our agencies, but Ministers tested, in the context of the significant pressure to try to help other Afghans, the boundaries of whether it was possible to stretch that—notably, for example, when media organisations came to us to make that request.

We looked at that and took legal advice, and we tested what was possible. In the end, we concluded that we needed to look for another route, and the only plausible other route at the time was to use the power that the Home Secretary has to grant leave to enter the United Kingdom outside the normal immigration rules and in exceptional circumstances. That was why that that route had to be chosen for those who did not fit into category 4.

Q399 **Chris Bryant:** That felt like you had a set of clear criteria for ARAP, but you had completely discretionary territory, with very few real criteria, for the Special Cases, which were not being decided by the Home Office but were being decided by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

May I just repeat the question that was asked repeatedly in the House in the summer? If an MP had written to all three Departments, because we did not know which was the right route for an individual person, and the person was turned down for ARAP, would they then be automatically considered for the Special Cases list?

Nigel Casey: Not automatically, no. We never set this up as an application-based scheme. It is very obvious that if we had done that, either at the time or subsequently, the demand would have been overwhelming. That was demonstrated after the Prime Minister and Home Secretary announced that we would be opening the ACRS scheme—the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme—on 18 August.

We received the vast bulk of emails from lots of ordinary Afghans who wanted help under that scheme. We set it up in a different way, which was based on the cohorts that we knew would likely to be of particular vulnerability as a result of the Taliban takeover—those on whose behalf MPs had made representations to the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and other Ministers in the House of Commons, the House of Lords and elsewhere. We responded to the requests and pressures as best we could within the constraints of space available on flights, taking into account the priority given to British nationals and ARAP.

Q400 **Chris Bryant:** It just feels as though you added to the chaos, rather than diminished it, by creating a third system.

Nigel Casey: The alternative would have been to say no to everybody. For the reasons that the Chair set out at the beginning of this session, that would have been even more unpopular.

Q401 **Chris Bryant:** Chasing popularity rarely works in a moment of crisis, does it? Isn't that what we have learned?

Sir Philip Barton: In the end, it wasn't ideal, but it was better than not being able to help anybody.

Q402 **Chris Bryant:** But the argument made by Mr Marshall is that because we brought this chaos into the system, we were not really prioritising at all. We were basically sucking a finger and sticking it up in the air.

Sir Philip Barton: I don't think that is a fair description of how the process worked. There was decision making around the cohorts. PJHQ then said, I think on 21 August, that there was space on flights.

There was a constraint around being able to contact the people and their dependants and doing the security checks to ensure that they were eligible to come to the UK. Then we started calling forward Chevening scholars, journalists who had been flagged to us by our UK media organisations, and women's rights activists who had worked with HMG. As space became constrained, and I am sure that Nigel can take you through the detail of this, there was a daily meeting involving FCDO, Home Office and MOD Ministers that looked at how to prioritise within the cohorts. Nigel, do you want to say a bit more about the prioritisation exercise?

Nigel Casey: On the back of the decision by Ministers that we ought to try to help, the cohorts were decided by the then Foreign Secretary. Within those cohorts, officials sifted the cases that had been referred to us or that we were aware of to try and prioritise, according to a set of criteria that had been agreed by Ministers, who was most at risk and most deserved our support.

Q403 **Chris Bryant:** So there is a list of criteria.

Sir Philip Barton: The criteria were basically: contribution to UK objectives; vulnerability; and, in very rare cases, sensitive information or knowledge that individuals held.

Q404 **Chris Bryant:** Criteria, which, from the evidence we have been given, were pretty difficult to adjudge, especially if you had never worked in Afghanistan before.

Sir Philip Barton: In the end, recommendations were made and there was proper consideration before decisions were taken.

Q405 **Chair:** When you say decisions were taken, do you mean the final decision as to whether to admit or refuse an individual?

Sir Philip Barton: To call forward, yes.

Q406 **Chair:** Presumably, that decision to call forward would not be made on all the 50,000 people who applied, it would be made on a list prepared by junior staff. Would that be correct?

Sir Philip Barton: Nigel, do you want to describe the process that was gone through to draw up lists from within the cohorts and then how decision making was made by Ministers in terms of prioritisation?

Nigel Casey: The individuals who had been brought to our attention were sifted and accorded priority, and then put to panels of more senior officials, all of which included at least one person with Afghan experience, to make decisions as to who should be prioritised for the call forward as space became available.

Q407 **Chair:** So those initial lists were prepared by junior staff who may or not may not have had quite the same experience or understanding as you.

Nigel Casey: The first sift, yes, but then the decisions were taken by officials—

Q408 **Chair:** I understand that, but the first sift would have effectively knocked out 70%, 80% or 90% of the people who applied. So in fact, for many people the first sift was the last sift.

Nigel Casey: That is right—that is the nature of any sift process.

Q409 **Chair:** So the junior staff were taking the fundamental decision on some 80% or 90% of cases.

Nigel Casey: The number that went on to the panels was still vastly greater than the number that could have possibly been accepted. If they did not make it through the sift, there would have been very little chance that they could have made it through the panels.

Q410 **Chris Bryant:** Then there was a list that went to the Foreign Secretary. According to Mr Marshall, and I think the former Foreign Secretary sort of accepted this on the "Today" programme this morning, he was not happy with the format. Is that right?

Sir Philip Barton: I think the Foreign Secretary was saying that he wanted to understand the context in which individual decisions were being made, and the way in which items were presented for decision. I do not think it was about the format.

Q411 **Chris Bryant:** I am sorry, but you mumbled a bit towards the end of your answer—or my hearing has got worse.

Sir Philip Barton: Apologies. I think the Foreign Secretary was basically talking about wanting to understand the overall context in which individual decisions were being taken. It was not about the format; it was mainly about the full picture of where we were. Again, Nigel, do you want to add anything on the information, as presented to the Foreign Secretary?

Nigel Casey: No, that is correct, Philip. The Foreign Secretary, I think rightly, all the way through from the beginning of this process recognised

that these were really difficult decisions. He did not want to put officials in the position of making those very difficult judgments, which are for Ministers to make. He took that responsibility; we put submissions to him, and we got quick decisions back from him. I totally understand why he wanted to see the full context before making those difficult decisions.

Q412 **Chris Bryant:** Okay. How many people who qualified for ARAP did we end up leaving behind?

Nigel Casey: The ARAP scheme is open-ended, so there are people who are still applying today.

Q413 **Chris Bryant:** How many are left to come?

Nigel Casey: It depends on how many people apply. We were there for 20 years, so there are a large number of people who could potentially still apply and make their case. At the end of the evacuation, the figure that the MOD team who lead on ARAP gave for the number who had not been evacuated at that point was several hundred families.

Chris Bryant: We keep being told "several hundred"—several hundred is a very broad number. It would be great if you could come back with an actual number of what it was at the time that we stopped the evacuation, and what the number is now.

Sir Philip Barton: Let me give you the first figures: 5,000 were evacuated during the operation. Three hundred and eleven of those were families. About 1,500 people in total had been called forward and were not evacuated. We know that some of those are still in Afghanistan. Eighty-three of those families have completed their journey to the UK. I can't answer your final question because, as Nigel says, it is an open scheme. We will have to come back to you on that.

Q414 **Chris Bryant:** And UK nationals?

Sir Philip Barton: UK nationals is a much harder question to answer, given the uncertainty—a lot of them are dual nationals—around how many there actually are in country. I don't think we can give you a figure today for how many UK nationals there are in Afghanistan—

Q415 **Chris Bryant:** Is it 100, 1,000, 5,000, 20,000?

Nigel Casey: What we can say is that we have drilled down into all the data that was given to us by people registering their presence after the end of the evacuation. We have had a team of HMRC staff calling every single person they could get hold of on that list. As of today, we have about 200 people who were established as eligible to come to the UK and are documented, and who are therefore on our list for evacuation on the first available Qatar Airways flights through Doha to the UK.

Q416 **Chris Bryant:** And Special Cases people?

Nigel Casey: Of those, we evacuated nearly 500 during Op Pitting. Since then, another 432 have arrived in the UK—that is about 900. That leaves roughly 300 of the original cohort still to be evacuated.

Q417 **Chris Bryant:** One other question. It was said that one of the criteria that was used was sensitivity, which was understood to mean that an MP had raised the matter with the Foreign Secretary directly. Did that play any part?

Nigel Casey: It is certainly true that the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers were seeking to respond to representations by MPs wherever possible. As Philip mentioned earlier, the sensitivity question also referred to whether the person in question might hold sensitive information as a result of working with or for the British Government.

Q418 **Chris Bryant:** Okay. On whether or not MPs were responded to, the Prime Minister said in the House that: "The right hon. Gentleman asked some specific questions about the handling of requests from those still in Afghanistan and those who have been interceding on their behalf. I can tell him that by close of play today every single one of the emails from colleagues around this House will be answered—thousands and thousands have already been done."

Now, Mr Marshall tells us that, "Between Wednesday 25 August and Wednesday 1 September…emails were processed by marking them with a flag once read but were not entered into a spreadsheet. I do not know what system has been adopted since 1 September. I believe the purpose of this system was to allow the Prime Minister and the then Foreign Secretary to inform MPs that there were no unread emails." Is that right?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't know if that is correct. As I said in response to earlier questions, there was an unprecedented volume of correspondence. We prioritised looking at it, rather than replying to it. Once the evacuation period was over, we prioritised replying, particularly—but not only—to Members' correspondence. We wrote back to all MPs who had written by 6 September, and we then carried on working through it. As I said, we are grateful for the collaboration we had from Members' offices in picking up areas where we made a mistake or missed something.

Q419 **Chris Bryant:** Would this be a typical response? I had a letter from Lord Ahmad on 19 September. It is several pages, saying what you did with all the individuals whose names I had passed on to you. In every single case, they were all passed on to the Home Office on 16 September. Were any actually considered in any shape or form?

Sir Philip Barton: Individual Departments are responsible for their elements of the schemes run by the MoD with the Home Office.

Q420 **Chris Bryant:** These are all applications under the Special Cases.

Sir Philip Barton: That's a Home Office lead. It is the responsible Department for those cases.

Q421 **Chris Bryant:** Why were we asked to write to the Foreign Office? I thought the Foreign Office was dealing with the Special Cases.

Sir Philip Barton: Nigel, do you want to come in on this?

Nigel Casey: The Special Cases scheme was in effect only for the period of the evacuation, which came to an end on 26 August. As you know, the Foreign Office does not have any power in law to grant entry clearance to anyone else.

Q422 **Chris Bryant:** But I wrote on 20 August, with all these names.

Nigel Casey: Those letters signposted people, depending on which category they were in. If they were British nationals, they would have come to us. Since then, the Foreign Office would have acted on that information—sought to contact those people and establish where they were, their circumstances and how we could help them. If they were ARAP, we would have referred them on to colleagues in the MoD team, who deal with ARAP, so that they could pick those up.

We have established a joint Afghanistan caseworking team, which is a joint FCDO/Home Office/MoD cell, which is working to help get out everybody to whom we made promises during the evacuation. That work has continued since the end of the evacuation. We have helped in some way more than 3,000 people to get out of Afghanistan, and get from a third country back to the UK.

Q423 **Chris Bryant:** When you referred them to the Home Office here on 16 September, you were basically referring them for the resettlement scheme that hasn't yet opened, weren't you?

Nigel Casey: Those who were called forward for evacuation under the so-called Special Cases provision during the evacuation, as the Home Office said in a policy statement on 13 September, will be resettled under the ACRS. The pathway 1 of the ACRS is already open. We brought back 500 people under that pathway during the evacuation, and since then more than 400 more.

There are more to come from the cohort already called forward during the evacuation, to whom Ministers made a commitment that that call forward would be honoured, even if we could not get them out during Op Pitting. In that respect, the ACRS has already begun. What has not yet opened are applications under the second and third pathways of the scheme.

Q424 **Chris Bryant:** What I think really happened is that Ministers were desperate to please. They weren't courageous enough to say, "I'm sorry, there's a limit to what we can do." There wasn't enough preparation done from last year, let alone from April this year, to be able to do a proper evacuation of the numbers that we really knew we were likely to have to evacuate.

We offered the prospect, hope and expectation for lots of people that they might be able to come to the United Kingdom—cruelly, in all honesty—and then, when Ministers had hundreds and hundreds of emails from lots of MPs, the Foreign Office in effect collaborated in ensuring that Ministers could say, "Yes, we've ticked every single box," even though, in truth, not a single one of those names was ever properly considered. That's what happened, really, isn't it? That's shameful.

Sir Philip Barton: I don't think that is an accurate characterisation. As I said earlier, it was not ideal, but it was right to try to get people out. We did bring 500 out during Op Pitting, as Nigel just set out, and another 400 have left since then. We will honour our commitment to those people who were called forward. We are working intensively with the Home Office. The Home Secretary has already made one statement to the House and will, no doubt, make further announcements about the future resettlement scheme.

Q425 **Bob Seely:** I'm sorry to go back to this, but I want to clear it up. Yes and no would be great, because it is getting late. In Mr Marshall's evidence, he says, "The investigation also found that everyone evacuated was eligible according to the three relevant criteria with one specific exception, where criteria had not been followed. This was the result of a ministerial decision taken elsewhere in Government." This is quite clearly a reference to the Nowzad Noah, or whatever we are calling him, and his dogs.

He—the ex-marine—is saying the Government didn't help him and he's slagging off the Government. His mate Danny Dyer—sadly, not the east end actor—is boasting of his friends in high places and how he had to pull strings to get these Nowzad animals, the animal sanctuary animals, out. Was there a ministerial instruction or was there an instruction from on high, from somewhere, as Raphael alleges, to get these animals out and to prioritise them over, in this case, Afghans who would have served with us?

Sir Philip Barton: There was no prioritisation of animals over people, as I said earlier.

Q426 **Bob Seely:** Did you have a ministerial instruction or a political instruction to aid in some way?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not aware of the decision making on this. As Nigel explained earlier, the decision to be involved was around facilitation of a charter flight, chartered by other people, once the evacuation of people had come to an end, as per the agreed timetable.

Q427 **Bob Seely:** The problem is you are not saying yes or no, and that makes me think that actually you don't want to say either, because there was something or there was an indication. So if I can go to Nigel, was there an instruction—a political instruction—to aid or prioritise in some way?

Nigel Casey: Pen Farthing was eligible to come to the UK as a British passport holder. That was never an issue. His dogs were not an issue, obviously, for a scheme for people. And as I explained earlier, they left Kabul only after the end of the civilian evacuation, at which point it was no longer possible for us to evacuate any more civilians, for the reasons Laurie has explained.

Q428 **Bob Seely:** There are two questions from that. You are saying that at no point did that drama, which played out in the British media, inhibit any Afghan humans that we were trying to save from getting out. At no point did that push to help the animal sanctuary, inhibit your ability to help

humans. Is that what you are categorically saying?

Nigel Casey: That's right.

Q429 **Bob Seely:** Okay. Then I come back to my question: was there ever a ministerial instruction or a political instruction to help these people in some way?

Nigel Casey: Well, there was clearly a ministerial-level decision to help, in the narrow sense of agreeing that the UK military would facilitate the landing and departure of the charter aircraft which Pen Farthing's organisation had chartered.

Q430 **Bob Seely:** So there was a ministerial or political decision made to help them, which was received by you or the Foreign Office—that is correct? Because that's what you have just said.

Nigel Casey: It wasn't received by me personally, so I'm not sure—

Q431 **Bob Seely:** No, no, but you collectively. You are here not just because you're a lovely individual, but because you are part of a collective team. So there was a ministerial decision, a political decision, to aid and support—yes? And that may not have come to you directly, but it came to somebody and got passed down to you.

Sir Philip Barton: It is important to be clear: the decision making was around facilitation of the flight. Clearly, the airport and our presence there was being run by the military.

Q432 **Bob Seely:** That's fine. I get that. All I am trying to get to is that there was a political decision made to support this group or this individual, and that came to you—to somebody in the Foreign Office—and it didn't come by Foreign Office Ministers. That is correct?

Nigel Casey: What needed to be done was to secure flight clearance for Pen Farthing's aircraft, which was done, I believe, at the direction of the Defence Secretary—quite properly, since it was the military who were running the evacuation operation and had to execute that.

Q433 **Bob Seely:** Okay, so you're saying that Ben Wallace gave the instruction to support the animal sanctuary folks.

Nigel Casey: In the narrow sense of military facilitation of the charter aircraft which Nowzad themselves had chartered.

Bob Seely: Okay.

Q434 **Alicia Kearns:** Sir Philip, I'm just going to go back to the holiday thing one more time, because I note your refusal to tell us when you went abroad, but I note that you also said that some of your holiday was spent in the UK. In the absence of your confirming the date you left the UK, I am going to assume that you were on holiday in the UK at the point the evacuation started, but chose not to come back to London.

Sir Philip Barton: Look, I am not going to go into where—

Q435 **Alicia Kearns:** No. I am saying that that is the conclusion that I am going to come to.

Sir Philip Barton: I have said what I am going to say about my holiday. I said it earlier. I regret the fact—

Q436 **Alicia Kearns:** No. We will move on swiftly. That is the conclusion I have come to and it is the one that I am sure most of my colleagues will come to if you are unwilling to tell us the date you left the UK. You were in the UK at the time the evacuation started and you chose not to return to London.

Sir Laurie, at what point did you start considering your personal plans to return to the UK from Afghanistan?

Sir Laurie Bristow: From memory, probably a few days before.

Q437 **Alicia Kearns:** There are reports that, at the start of the evacuation, you boarded a plane and intended to leave before the evacuation had truly commenced.

Sir Laurie Bristow: I can categorically state that the first time I boarded a plane was when I left Afghanistan at the end of the evacuation.

Q438 **Alicia Kearns:** That's very helpful.

The final comment I would make is that we are reflecting on a very grave situation and, yes, we should be proud of the fact that 15,000 people got out, but a tragedy occurred because so many people were left behind. Today I don't think I have heard one answer that said, "Do you know what? We could have done better with the staff in the crisis centre," or that said, "No. We need to go away and reflect on that and learn from it. There was a failing there."

Given the severity of what we are discussing, that tenor is deeply distressing. Many of us here were for two weeks on phone calls at 2 o'clock and 6 o'clock in the morning, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and 10 pm trying to get people out. "Dunkirk by WhatsApp" was accurate. We would say that we have learned things and we could have improved. It is deeply concerning that it seems to sound as though, "We did a good job. The Foreign Office did its job well. What more did you expect of us?"

Sir Philip Barton: I am happy to repeat now that all of us wish that we could have got out more people. I am absolutely confident that there are lessons that we as a Department can learn. We are not saying we did a good job. We are saying that we evacuated 15,000 people.

Q439 **Alicia Kearns:** Will you share those lessons learned with us?

Sir Philip Barton: I would be happy to write to the Committee with the headline lessons when the process is completed.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you.

Q440 **Claudia Webbe:** I am just going to follow the points about those left behind. I seem to recall that the then Foreign Secretary, when he gave

evidence on 1 September, spoke of British nationals being left behind because they were with significant wider family networks. They were complex and/or difficult cases, to use the then Foreign Secretary's terms. Sir Laurie, what do you understand he meant by that? Is that why British nationals at the airport were left behind?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I will not attempt to interpret what the then Foreign Secretary said, but I will describe what we saw on the ground if that helps the Committee. At the beginning of the evacuation, relatively straightforward cases passed through as you would expect. They were the British nationals who were clearly documented and did not have family members in tow who were not clearly documented.

The complexity starts to arise when you have family members—children, spouses and quite possibly other relatives—turning up at the evacuation handling centre and it is not possible quickly to establish whether they are entitled to travel to the UK. A great deal of the effort that was taking place in the evacuation handling centre with our teams and the Border Force team there and with referrals back to the Home Office in London was about trying to establish those people's entitlement to evacuation. In some cases, the entitlement of other family members presenting could not be established and the British national lead person chose not to travel on that basis.

Q441 **Claudia Webbe:** Why not prioritise their safety, evacuate and sort it out later?

Sir Laurie Bristow: A degree of latitude was agreed with the Home Office early in the evacuation process. It is important to recognise that there are issues in tension here. One, of course, is around security screening, particularly for non-British nationals and for Afghans—do we actually want them in the UK?

Let me try to give an example. If you had an overage child, there was some discretion about how far our people could stretch the envelope on that, as agreed with the Home Office. But there comes a point when you have to say, "Look, these are the immigration rules. We have to apply them."

Q442 **Claudia Webbe:** These were British nationals who were deemed to be a priority for the flight, yet they were left behind.

Sir Laurie Bristow: No; I am talking about the accompanying family members who were not documented and, in many cases, were not British nationals.

Q443 **Claudia Webbe:** But they were travelling with a British national.

Sir Laurie Bristow: I am saying that there was a degree of discretion around that, but that discretion was not limitless.

Q444 **Claudia Webbe:** How many people who were eligible for the flight were left behind and subsequently lost their lives?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I have to come back to you on this. Left behind is different from choosing to stay behind.

Q445 **Claudia Webbe:** Sure, but I am moving us on. How many of those who were eligible for the flight were left behind and subsequently died? Do we have that information?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I cannot put a figure on that.

Q446 **Claudia Webbe:** Can anybody put a figure on that? Maybe Nigel.

Nigel Casey: I am not aware of anybody who has been targeted for any kind of retribution since the evacuation because they were associated with a British national family.

As Laurie says, the Home Secretary—during the evacuation, and exceptionally—allowed us to issue visa waivers for the spouse and under-18 children of a British passport holder, but people were presenting at the Baron Hotel with much wider family groups of people without documentation, who we could not be sure were relatives at all. Some did not fit into the agreed category of spouse or under-18 children, and we had to draw the line somewhere. We had to be able to make decisions; otherwise, we would not have been able to help anybody.

Q447 **Claudia Webbe:** Is anybody keeping a record or an account of people who are in danger, have been left behind and meet one of the three criteria? Is anybody keeping an account of those who were eligible to be in the UK because of all the dangers that were presented, but who are now not alive?

Nigel Casey: We are in touch with everybody who has registered their presence since the end of the evacuation, and we have sent five or six messages to that group. As I said earlier, we have identified 200 people who are eligible to travel to the UK and ready to travel with the members of their family who are also eligible.

As Laurie says, some have chosen to stay because their family members are not eligible. But yes, we are in touch with that group, and we will bring out those who are eligible as soon as capacity allows. Two hundred or so have already come out on Qatar flights and others through Pakistan and elsewhere.

Q448 **Claudia Webbe:** What are the Government doing in terms of their communication with those who are left behind?

Sir Philip Barton: Nigel just said that we are in touch with British nationals whom we are aware of. We have been in regular contact with them to make sure that those who want to, and are able to, come to the UK are ready and willing to do so as and when capacity becomes available on the Qatari flights. We are in touch with those groups.

Q449 **Claudia Webbe:** The whistleblower evidence that we have heard said there are possibly something like 75,000 to 150,000 who are eligible to be here in the UK. It also said that only 5% of those eligible are here.

How are we maintaining contact with those remaining?

Sir Philip Barton: There are not 75,000 to 150,000 people who are eligible to be in the UK. There are three categories. There is the ARAP scheme run by the MoD for people who used to work for us, which, as Nigel said earlier, is open. We are in touch with people we knew about during the evacuation but were not able to get on a flight, and those who have applied since the end of the evacuation period. There are the British nationals I've just been talking about. As you know, there will be a resettlement scheme, which the Home Secretary and the Home Office are in charge of.

Q450 **Claudia Webbe:** You don't think, in terms of the resettlement scheme, that vulnerable people in all the categories we spoke about—women, LGBT people, different professions—haven't got to a significant number that is verging on 75,000 to 150,000. How are we maintaining contact with all of those?

Sir Philip Barton: I understand the question. The Home Secretary made a statement to the House in September about bringing 5,000 Afghans a year, a total of 20,000. There are those we have already made a commitment to, and some are already here. There are then those who assisted our efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for democracy, women's rights and freedom of speech. Then there are the vulnerable, including women and girls, and members of minority groups. There will soon be a further announcement on how that scheme, which will be a referral one, will work in practice.

Q451 **Claudia Webbe:** You have heard evidence from MPs, charitable organisations on the ground and other organisations, which says that there is a range of people whose lives are in danger. You have also heard that directly from those people, because emails have come into the Foreign Office, transferred to the Home Office, and the Ministry of Defence. How is communication being sustained with all of those people and their families?

Sir Philip Barton: I recognise that the situation in Afghanistan is very dangerous and difficult for many Afghans. Of the three types of people, we are keeping in touch with the ARAP scheme people, the FCDO are in touch with British nationals, and then there is a future group under the resettlement scheme, which has yet to be determined.

Nigel Casey: If I may add to that, as I mentioned earlier, we have since the evacuation created a tri-departmental unit called the Joint Afghanistan Casework Unit, which is specifically there to pick up the cases of all those to whom we have made a commitment, so that is those people who have been accepted for ARAP or were called forward for evacuation under the leave outside the rules provision. Every day of the week, that team is in touch with that community and helping, wherever possible, to get people out of Afghanistan to a third country, and from third countries to the UK.

Chair: One last question from Mr Bryant and then I will close.

Q452 **Chris Bryant:** Sorry about this, but I've just been sent a copy of a letter that Trudy Harrison, the Member for Copeland, who at the time was PPS to the Prime Minister, wrote to Paul Farthing on 25 August. Writing as PPS to the Prime Minister, she says, "Dear Paul, I am writing to inform you that I have received confirmation from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence, that you, your staff and their dependants are permitted to travel to Hamid Karsai International Airport."

That feels to me very much like a direction from the Prime Minister. She continues, "The Secretary of State for Defence has made it clear that all 68 persons will be provided with a flight by the Royal Air Force as part of the evacuation programme. The Secretary of State has also confirmed that animals under the care of Nowzad can be evacuated on a separate, chartered flight. The Ministry of Defence will ensure that a flight slot is available."

That does not equate with what you've told us, does it?

Sir Philip Barton: We have set out in good faith our understanding of the position. I am not aware of the letter you are talking about. I am happy to look at it, but we have not set out this afternoon to mislead you.

Q453 **Chris Bryant:** But my understanding of what you were trying to tell us was that there was no priority given by any Minister, nobody got involved in any shape or form. It was all just separately arranged like some kind of miracle, after all the evacuation plans had happened, that actually 68 members of staff were guaranteed flights on an RAF flight. That is a priority for a particular set of people who were not the other priorities. On top of that, the PPS for the Prime Minister is writing to notify Pen Farthing of that. The Prime Minister's fingers are all over this, aren't they? And you are just trying—I am hesitant to use the word "cover-up", but that is what it feels like.

Sir Philip Barton: I was not aware of the letter.

Chris Bryant: In which case, it again feels that nobody is ever aware of anything. Everything can happen at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the senior management, really, are a bit absent.

Q454 **Graham Stringer:** I will be very brief. Understandably, all the questions have been about people entitled to come here who should have been protected and did not come here, but you mentioned in one of your answers something I have been thinking about: the security risks. It must have been very difficult ensuring that people on watch lists, people who might be a danger to this country, were not allowed in.

Can you assure the Committee that your vigilance in this area was as good as it could be? There were reports of three people on watch lists who had arrived in this country. What would your estimate be of people who were potential security risks who came through the system?

Sir Laurie Bristow: I will ask Nigel if he wants to comment on that as well. My understanding of the processes in the Baron Hotel was that

everybody passing through who needed to be screened was screened by reference back to the Home Office. I should say, by the way, that there was a security screen on people coming into the Baron as well, but that was, obviously, a physical security screen to try to preserve the integrity of the evacuation handling centre.

Nigel Casey: What we were able to do in the evacuation handling centre was basic checks, biographical information and identity checks, on the basis of the documentation provided. What we were forced to do after we had left the embassy in the centre of town were biometric checks. That is the fingerprint checking, which is normally done when granting a visa to anybody from application centres around the world. Those had to be done in Dubai, which was our transit point, before people got on flights to the UK.

The Home Secretary was very clear that we absolutely had to do that, so that in the event that those checks threw up any concerns about security, those individuals could be dealt with when they arrived in the UK. Once we had put them on flights out of Kabul, we had accepted an obligation to bring them to the UK. We could not leave them in Dubai or return them to Afghanistan, obviously, but we did have that second line of checking which the Home Secretary was rightly very keen that we continued to enforce throughout the process.

Q455 **Graham Stringer:** Are you concerned about anybody who did arrive in the country?

Nigel Casey: I think there was media reporting of action against at least one individual as a consequence of the information that came to light when those security checks were done, yes.

Q456 **Chair:** We all want to go now and you have been extremely generous with your time, for which I am extremely grateful. May I just finish with a couple of quick questions just to clarify some points? The briefest possible answers would be very gratefully received. Special Cases: ultimately the responsibility of the Foreign Office or the Home Office?

Sir Philip Barton: It is a Home Secretary power.

Q457 **Chair:** Okay. You mentioned that you and others were in the crisis centre on and off. Were Ministers ever in the crisis centre?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Chair: Nigel?

Nigel Casey: Yes, the then Foreign Secretary was in the crisis centre. Lord Ahmad visited the Foreign Secretary in the crisis centre.

Q458 **Chair:** Fantastic. And, just as a last point, there are others who are leaving Afghanistan still today and they are being processed by an extraordinarily hardworking team in the High Commission in Islamabad. Who is the single point of contact responsible for these cases now—the Special Cases, as it were—the ACRS cases leaving Afghanistan?

Nigel Casey: In Whitehall, the single point of contact is the Joint Afghanistan Casework Unit, which I have mentioned.

Q459 **Chair:** Who is the lead civil servant and who is the lead Minister?

Nigel Casey: It is headed up by a Home Office civil servant who ultimately reports to the Minister for Afghan Resettlement, Victoria Atkins.

Chair: Okay. Thank you, all three of you, very much for giving so much of your time this afternoon. I think you have heard the concerns that have been raised. Could I ask you, on behalf of the whole Committee, to pass on enormous thanks to many of your team who behaved, frankly, extraordinarily courageously and with integrity through an extraordinarily difficult period, and who have continued to do so in high commissions and embassies around the world? With that, I will close this session.

Sir Philip Barton: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the sentiments in your final comments.