



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan, HC 685

Tuesday 25 January 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 January 2022.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Liam Byrne; Neil Coyle; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Andrew Rosindell; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 460 - 523

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Ministry of Defence; and Admiral Sir Ben Key KCB CBE, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, Ministry of Defence.

II: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for South and Central Asia, United Nations and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; and Nigel Casey MVO, Director for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran Directorate, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/40069/html/>



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ben Wallace MP and Admiral Sir Ben Key.

Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Unusually, and very gratefully, we have this afternoon the Secretary of State for Defence and the First Sea Lord, then Commander of PJHQ, who are going to be talking to us about Afghanistan. I am very grateful to you both for coming. Just as a declaration, I used to work with the First Sea Lord when he was principal staff officer to the Chief of the Defence Staff and I was the military assistant. We are going to start very briefly with two questions about Ukraine.

Q460 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you very much for appearing before us today. I have two quick questions for you. We have seen a significant increase in attention on the situation in Ukraine. What do we expect to see next in the Russian playbook over the coming few days

Ben Wallace: We have seen within Ukraine individuals already in that country who are linked to the Russian state in ways that are not conventional. That should give cause for concern. The Russians will continue with the narrative that somehow Ukraine is the offender here. We have already seen some narrative coming out in Donbass that somehow there is a Ukrainian offensive going on, which there is not. They will continue to play the line that apparently NATO is encircling Russia, even though about 6% of Russia's border has a NATO ally. That is the narrative that is going to be played for the Russian audience.

For the record, there is no plan for NATO to have a base in Ukraine or for the US to site strategic weapons in Ukraine, which are two fears that are quoted by the Russians. For the record, there has not been and there is not that plan. I do not have to tell this group of colleagues that NATO is not a state that enlarges; it is in fact an alliance, and by definition it is made up of people who choose and seek to join and then are allowed to join by its broader members.

Q461 **Alicia Kearns:** Last week, we as a Committee went to Ukraine. We had the privilege of being briefed by a number of brigadier generals and generals in the last held Ukrainian territory before you meet Russian troops. I have two questions. First, I was concerned by what appeared to be a division between what western intelligence thought the Russians would most likely do, which varied from crossing the control line or ultimately going straight to decapitate Kiev, and what I was hearing from the Ukrainians, which was that they would not cross the control line but would go across the Belarusian border or down through the Crimea, where there is far less architecture built up and therefore it is far more difficult to stop. We would be grateful to understand your assessment of that, if you are able to share it.

Secondly, there is united concern around whether or not our European colleagues are stepping forward to do what they need to do, not least



HOUSE OF COMMONS

with the concerns about the fact that we had to fly our support to Ukraine not over Germany for fears that Germans would call us out over it. Can we be reassured that, perhaps aside from what we are seeing publicly from our European partners, behind the scenes there is better private support being provided than what might be publicly known?

Ben Wallace: First of all, on the intelligence pictures that you described, it would not be helpful or correct for me to speculate on our assessment of how the Russians would go into Ukraine, if they were to do it. Suffice it to say that any crossing into Ukraine, whether small or large, would be viewed as a breach of sovereignty, against international law and an invasion. You cannot be half-pregnant. You are either invading a country or you are not.

I would not want people to think that somehow there is a plan or an off ramp that allows people to breathe a sigh of relief because Putin has only invaded part of the country. The reality is that what he has done in Crimea and Donbass is unacceptable, and he should return that back to the sovereign state of Ukraine. Anything further would be viewed as exactly that. I am sorry. What was the other part of the question?

Q462 **Alicia Kearns:** It was on our European partners. Are they privately doing more?

Ben Wallace: Yes, I also need to put something on the record. There has been a lot of speculation about the German air route. When we were planning the deployment of lethal aid to Ukraine, we needed to do that with a significant amount of operational security. Therefore, the timelines were tight when we decided that we had to clear those routes. The indication from my planners and the impression I had was that the German system would take nearly two weeks to do, and therefore there was no point asking to do that.

We did not go and ask and they did not rebut us. Yes, it is in the public domain that the Germans are very against the use of lethal aid in Ukraine. We have a different opinion, which is why we have done that. No, it was not the case that we asked and they rebutted. That is not correct. We wanted the quickest way—I do not mean in terms of geography but in terms of clearances—to get the weapon systems into Ukraine.

Q463 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** We do not need to rehearse the reasons why Germany does not want to give defensive equipment, but it is stepping in to prevent some NATO countries providing equipment to Ukraine that may be German-made or may have originated in Germany. What assessment has the Ministry of Defence made of that? If that capability is needed by Ukraine, we would all want Ukraine to have that capability. In short, in addition to what the UK has already given, if we need to give more, will we give more?

Ben Wallace: I can answer that question. It is not for me to comment on Latvia and Germany or Lithuania and Germany, but we are open to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

exploring what more we can do to help the Ukrainians. It is absolutely right that we stand by them and help them defend themselves, which is a very important principle of what we stand for.

If I may, in terms of what we think about the next Russian steps that we might see—this is just to get the exact wording for you, because of course this is important—we are becoming aware of a significant number of individuals who are assessed to be associated with Russian military advanced force operations who currently are located in Ukraine. That is what we expect to see, and that is what we are seeing now.

Q464 **Neil Coyle:** It would be remiss of those of us who were in Ukraine last week not to pass on the gratitude and support from the Ukrainian officials and civilians, who said how valuable the UK defence training and support has been. All credit where it is due; well done to you and your team on this.

In your statement last week, you said that the best way to keep Putin in check was to stand up for our values. To what extent has the US and UK withdrawal from Afghanistan given the green light to Putin in Ukraine and elsewhere?

Ben Wallace: I said at the time that this is not 1922; it is 2022 and the world is more connected and more global than ever before. We are a globalised world. Afghanistan matters, because other people are watching. It matters because China is watching what happens in Afghanistan. The Middle East watches. Wherever you have been on your trips since Afghanistan, you will notice that those countries mention it. They notice it and it matters.

It was also why, when we had the build-up last April around Ukraine, some of the messaging that I was saying to the likes of the United States was, "It matters because China is watching". The United States often talks about its concerns around Taiwan, etc. I would not use the phrase "green light", but leaders like President Putin look at resolve. NATO is only as good as our resolve. If they doubt it, the lesson of what can happen is perhaps what is happening right now.

Q465 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that series of answers. I would like to go back to why you were invited, which is to assess the response of the Foreign Office at a time of national emergency in August last year. Did the Foreign Office do enough to support the MoD on the ground during the evacuation? What was the impact of the withdrawal of diplomats early on, leaving soldiers to handle the visa applications?

Ben Wallace: Did they do enough on the ground? What I would certainly say is that it became decidedly a military operation at the time we authorised it on 10 August, when we started really deploying. As the CJO will be able to tell you—I am sorry; Admiral Ben was the CJO, the Chief of Joint Operations, at the time—way back in February 2020 we started making plans to evacuate in different scenarios. It was not about the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Office/MoD. When the baton passes to us, it passes to us and in we go, in co-ordination with our other allies. That is what happened.

If the question is about processing the people on the ground when we were going through all the Op Pitting and ARAP individuals, it was certainly the case that, for probably about 48 hours, when there was really no one on the ground from consular services who was able to process them, we were not able to process as much as possible. We are not talking thousands, but we certainly had a gap. That was about a 48-hour gap. My civil servants stayed for the duration and did the best they could at that time.

Q466 **Chair:** There was an MoD source who told *The Times* that the Foreign Office had gone straight into panic mode after the Taliban takeover and took a really long time to respond to this as a crisis. Do you agree with that assessment?

Ben Wallace: I did not get any sense of that at all. Everyone was dealing with a very fast-moving and deteriorating situation. The assessments had clearly not matched what actually happened. We were then in a position where the Taliban turned up on the outskirts of Kabul far quicker than the indicators would have given us cause to believe, but that is how these things played out. We were planning on a 11 September departure. If you remember, the United States moved the original May departure date. President Biden had a discussion and extended it. The charter aeroplanes were also coming in.

They did not go into panic mode at all. Suddenly, overnight, both the MoD and the Foreign Office became effectively a mini-Home Office. We suddenly had thousands of people applying to schemes that had either not been designed or had been designed only in April for a pace that delivered 1,900 before Op Pitting started. I saw no sign of panic at all.

Q467 **Chair:** We will come on to the various schemes in a moment. First, during the planning stage of this operation, were Foreign Office officials included in your planning staff?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Absolutely, yes. I would reflect the Secretary of State's observations. At the level that we are used to doing this contingency planning, at every stage we had open and constructive dialogue. We did not always agree, but that is the same for any interpretation or judgment that has to be made in advance. There are well-established mechanisms to understand contingency planning for potential evacuations.

To build on the Secretary of State's observations, we were running two sets of plans from 2020 onwards. The first was our plan to withdraw as part of that NATO effort, against which were some uncertain military outcomes, but there was a determination to maintain a British diplomatic presence on the ground. Not surprisingly, because we were unsure where or how relationships between the Government of Afghanistan as it was at



the time and the Taliban would end up, it would have been imprudent of us not to have worked out how we might also have to do an evacuation once the NATO military footprint had left. This is what Op Pitting was all about.

Using well-established processes, which we use with the FCDO and other partners across Government, Brigadier Dan Blanchford and the Joint Force Headquarters built a number of contingency plans around that, as we do for other parts of the world that are in crisis, whether that is for political or environmental reasons. I do not have any sense that anything other than the normal standards and procedures were being followed to work through the plan, which was necessarily going to require Foreign Office support because there was going to be a regional footprint required somewhere in the Middle East in order to enable the evacuation. That is consistent with our established practices for anything of this type.

Q468 Chair: First Sea Lord, I am just going to press you on that. If Foreign Office officials were part of your planning team and part of Brigadier Blanchford's planning team at a different level, the question that raises itself for us is about why the Foreign Office appeared more surprised in August, in terms of evacuating the Embassy, than the MoD did.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: This comes back to the speed. We have to be very clear that there is a difference between considering the potential of having to evacuate personnel—inclusive within that, therefore, would be the Embassy—and the speed at which suddenly we found the Taliban at the city gates in Kabul, as has been much discussed, which was quicker than any of us expected.

Q469 Andrew Rosindell: Good afternoon, Secretary of State. Last year was quite shocking. The speed of what happened took us all by surprise. Was the Foreign Secretary at the time, Dominic Raab, right to say that the military intelligence was clearly wrong? In July, you said that the game was up. If that was known, why did it take so long to act? Why was something not done in advance to begin evacuating the people we needed to get out of that country?

Ben Wallace: First of all, if you remember, we started evacuating people back in April. The ARAP scheme brought 2,000 people before the whole house came tumbling down, so to speak, in Afghanistan. We had recognised that there was a draw-down. The Doha deal had announced that everyone was leaving in the May, so there was notionally 14 months to start that programme. We got on it in respect of the people the MoD were responsible for, the ARAP people.

5 July was when I took a view. Intelligence is not an option paper. You read your intelligence, you take a view and you make an assessment of your own from that view. It is there to guide you, inform you and to help you understand. The application of that intelligence to your judgment is really up to you as an individual, and it becomes the subject of a discussion, which is often what happens in things like NSCs, any other



HOUSE OF COMMONS

meetings or indeed on this Committee. If I put the same bit of intelligence in front of all of you, you would all come to a slightly different judgment, because you would marry it to what you know in other areas.

I took a view on 5 July at the NSC that the game was up. I thought the danger for all the countries in Afghanistan, not just the United Kingdom, was the idea of, "One more heave", and that somehow this peace deal was going to hold. It was clear by then that it was not.

Q470 **Andrew Rosindell:** Were you a lone voice on this in Government? Did anyone else have the same view?

Ben Wallace: I am not going to discuss the inside-outs of what happened at the NSCs, but, fundamentally, lots of people realised it was coming to an end, including the Foreign Office. The judgment was obviously around how fast.

The luxury I have in the Armed Forces is that we are not providing a customer-facing service. The Foreign Office has to deliver a service to its diplomats; the diplomats have to deliver a service to the Afghan Government. We were no longer in operations, because of the Doha deal. Effectively, I had the luxury of having a huge support staff and the CJO, as Admiral Ben was then, to plan contingencies, get them ready for whatever happened and move at very short notice. I do not know what our shortest notice period was. Was it 24 hours?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: It was 24 hours.

Ben Wallace: I have that luxury, which Foreign Secretaries probably do not. They have to engage with the host country right until the end in a way that we did not really have to. What I would say is that I felt the game was up. We had already started the plans. I said, "We should just start moving forward". We were always going to be last anyhow. It was always going to be us rather than the Foreign Office. It was always going to be Defence, so we might as well make sure we are there. I would rather be cautious than caught short.

Q471 **Andrew Rosindell:** At the time the British public felt that we were playing catch-up while other countries like France seemed to be ahead of the game.

Ben Wallace: France did not really have anyone in the country. France ceased being part of the Afghan deployment in 2014.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Yes, it was about then. It was when the original NATO deployment finished.

Ben Wallace: They left with the NATO deployment. I would say it is the opposite. Wherever I go in Europe, people say, "Thank you very much, Britain, because it was your Baron Hotel". There were only really two entrances at the airport where people were being processed. One was the North Gate.



Admiral Sir Ben Key: That was the American entrance.

Ben Wallace: Yes. The other was the Baron Hotel, which we ran. Brigadier Dan had recced it and started the set-up. We ran all the others through. It was really us leading far more than anyone else and helping countries that had far fewer people through the system.

Q472 **Andrew Rosindell:** When the evacuation was taking place, we have been told that there was not one command and control cell between the three Government Departments—that is, FCDO, MoD and the Home Office—that was dealing with this. Could you give some explanation on that?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I am sorry. Could you just clarify the question? Are you saying there was not a single command and control cell?

Q473 **Andrew Rosindell:** Exactly, yes. There was not a single unit dealing with command and control for the evacuation across the three Departments.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I am not sure I recognise the reality of that at all. Once the evacuation had begun, once the Defence Secretary had authorised it on 10 August and Op Pitting was stood up, from then and very soon after, certainly by about 14 or 15 August, it was very clear to me that I was the supported commander. We had liaison nodes in the Foreign Office and in the Home Office, because of the Border Force contribution. Dan Blanchford was co-located alongside the ambassador in country with his headquarters. We just had a function of mass and understanding that meant the other Government Departments had to be part of our effort.

I do not recognise any characterisation that there was more than one node running this. We then reported in our various perspectives to the daily meetings being run by the National Security Adviser or subsequently Prime Ministerially-chaired NSCs or COBRAs. The fact is that every single body involved with this was not in one place. We may not have had that form, but in terms of function we were acting as one.

Q474 **Graham Stringer:** Secretary of State, I listen to that, but there have been well-attested reports in the press that there was counter-briefing from your Department and the Foreign Office about the effectiveness of both Departments. The Joint Committee on National Security Strategy said it was “unedifying”. What is your response to that?

Ben Wallace: My response to that is to say that we should look at our outcomes. There was a rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. We were not alone: most of the international community did not predict that at all. The outcomes were that we brought out 15,000 people. There was a very tense weekend around 13, 14 and 15 August where no one really knew what was going to happen. We effectively had Taliban insurgents, who up until a few hours before had been mortal enemies, racing towards Kabul. We had an Afghan Government that went off into the night. We



had Brits, diplomats, civilians, aid workers and Afghans who would be vulnerable on the ground trying to get out. It could have been that our aircraft flew in to be shot at. It could have been a hot, dangerous situation. We had done all the planning for those sorts of issues.

In that environment, the people on the frontline—that is, the Foreign Office officials, the MoD and our military—did an amazing job at delivering quite an outstanding process. If you remember the footage, thousands of people were all over the airport. First of all, the charter flights were stopped because they were all trying to get on. Then it became the military aircraft. The outcome was actually an extraordinary achievement. You would not get those achievements if some of the reports in the newspapers were true. If we really were at each other's throats, you would not have got that outcome.

Q475 Graham Stringer: Yet it is not just from the newspapers. We have had a whistleblower in front of this Committee, who has given us written evidence, who told us that the Ministry of Defence was using different criteria for prioritising special cases to the Foreign Office, that there was poor co-ordination between the two Departments during the evacuation process and that the poor co-ordination and different priorities undermined Operation Pitting. I assume his belief was that this led to the counter-briefing. Was the whistleblower who came here not giving an objective assessment?

Ben Wallace: The first part of what that person says is absolutely true. We were running a different scheme. The ARAP scheme was set up previously. It was a scheme designed for people who had been employed or indirectly employed by the MoD. I can write to the Committee with the exact parameters of what it was. It was for people who were vulnerable or who would have been vulnerable under the Taliban but were linked, mainly, to the military effort and the security effort in Afghanistan. That was our scheme.

If you remember, at the time there were lots of other calls around people from the British Council, people from the gay community and all these things that were not part of the original ARAP scheme. Of course there were two schemes, effectively. What was initially tried was to make it possible to wave people through under category 4 of the ARAP scheme. That was what they were trying to do. They used the scheme that was in place before they developed their own scheme. There is not anything wrong with the fact there was a separate scheme; it is just that we were operating one as well.

As far as the other point about the processing of people, I will have to turn to the then CJO and now First Sea Lord to make clear how that affected us on the ground. On the ground, the operation was, "Get people to safety; process them; take them through the hotel; take them onto an aeroplane". As to whether there was any backup to that, I never got that impression. We can argue afterwards. The Border Force was out really quickly. They came out on 17 August. The Border Force came from the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Home Office. The Home Secretary leant in and Border Force was deployed really quite quickly. We were getting it through.

Q476 **Graham Stringer:** Can I just follow up before the Admiral comes in? The accusation was not just that there were two schemes but that the Foreign Office scheme was arbitrary, and that that undermined the process because there was no co-ordination between the different Departments and their two schemes.

Ben Wallace: Under all our schemes at that moment, if people came under certain categories, they were referred to me by specialist parts of the Armed Forces and I short-cut the system, because time was of the essence. I sat down and I signed off 2,800 people through the ARAP scheme. I signed off 570 principals on a case-by-case basis. That is how I cleared any backlog, got people processed and took the responsibility.

You cannot design an immigration scheme on the hoof. You just cannot. We are all politicians here. We know how difficult immigration is, full stop, no matter what party or organisation you are in. I thought, "Well, I will take responsibility. I will verify who these people are. I will make sure they are identified properly. If they have been rejected, I will find out why". Where the scheme was uncharitable and they had been rejected for something minor, I thought, "They are now at risk".

Here is the other difference between before and after this happened. The whole risk profiles changed. There were people who had been dismissed, but the Taliban were not running the country and therefore it was not a situation where it was between their life or bringing them home. It was a situation where we could give them better protection and assistance, but they did not need to come here. That is how I dealt with the backlog. I cannot tell you the inside of how the Foreign Office was running; that is for you to establish. That is how I did it.

Do you know what? I have no doubt that one day somebody will say to me that I signed the wrong person or that I should not have done it, but we were in a two-week thing and some of these people had risked their lives for us, so why should we not do it for them?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I would just add to that. The design work for the ARAP scheme began at the beginning of 2021. The design work was being led by a senior civil servant based in PJHQ but working across Government on some very detailed and difficult policy work to recognise that we would be making an offer to people to come back to the United Kingdom who had served alongside us, recognising that the NATO mission was going to be coming to an end at some point in 2021.

That was announced by the Defence Secretary and started to withdraw people from April onwards. We had people applying for assessment and eligibility through that, and then there was a degree of processing that had to take place, agreed with the Government of Afghanistan, which limited the speed at which we could bring people out. When Pitting



HOUSE OF COMMONS

began, we had a certain number of people who we knew were part of the ARAP scheme, and then the other main source of people who we were seeking to bring out would be British nationals and entitled personnel, which was a Foreign Office decision, British passport-holders and their dependants.

I am on the record, and interviewed as such, as saying that at the beginning of that process we believed the total number would be between 5,000 and 6,000 based upon the database we had. As the collapse took place and as the Government of Afghanistan evacuated, two things happened. First, the number of people who attempted to make themselves available to apply for the ARAP scheme shot up. The amount of emails we were handling in PJHQ suddenly became very high. Equally, the Foreign Office suddenly had, either in the very small consular section, the RDT that was in theatre or back here, a huge number of people making themselves known because they believed they were entitled as they were British passport-holders. Then there was the third category, which was those people where we made political judgments as to areas where we felt it was necessary to support and protect the values and standards that matter to the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State has referred to that.

Suddenly, in a compressed period of time, we had to move from taking out a population of 5,000 to 6,000 to taking out as many as we could, under now very quickly-made judgments as to eligibility. It is well recorded that we did not bring out everybody we would have liked to. That is a matter of significant regret for me and everybody who was deployed forward. We were stopped from doing that by the Taliban. That was not our own willingness. That was controlled by others. As the Secretary of State has said, in that period some risk judgments had to be made on eligibility and screening processing in order to bring them out.

Therefore, we should not underestimate, because of the cold nature of hindsight, how frenetic all of that felt. You have seen the pictures of what it looked like outside the airport. You have seen and heard the stories about how long people were queuing just to try to establish their eligibility and waving documents that they believed would be sufficient. The processing system that was in theatre was supported by significant numbers of people back here, who were working their way through the data. In hindsight, it would be very difficult for us to have done much better with something that changed from being deliberate to crisis so very quickly.

Ben Wallace: Can I just give you an update on ARAP? There is a bit of a happier ending. There were 311 ARAP principals left. There were 311 people plus their families who had been cleared and who were waiting but never got out. Of those, 146 are now out with their families. On top of that, another 300 new applicants have been passed and brought out of the country with their families. Over 1,200 have come back since the closure of ARAP. We have stood by our commitment to keep ARAP open.



The MoD funds them to come back from third countries. We have been sending military planes to pick them up. It is continuing, and we will carry on doing it. From the Defence Secretary's point of view, standing by what we mean, say and deliver is really important. They are still coming back.

Q477 Alicia Kearns: All of us would probably be united in saying thank you for all the MoD did, particularly around the ARAP scheme. So many lives were saved. One of my greatest frustrations during those few weeks was the contrast in my experience when I dealt with the FCDO and when I dealt with the MoD. That is the kind of thing we are trying to draw out today: why were those experiences so acutely different? At this point I would like to praise your special adviser, who I will not name, unlike those who spent a lot of time on Twitter abusing hard-working individuals who I know got people out of Afghanistan for us.

I was a member of the RDT team when I was a Foreign Office civil servant. I have done the training. The training is very simple: we can get people out if they are British passport-holders or if they are from another country that we are supporting to evacuate. There are no complex systems of sorting and there is no judgment of how you get them out. Is the Foreign Office ultimately capable of running a special cases programme like the one they ran? Should that sort of complex analysis ultimately always sit with the MoD, who are set up to be an operational unit that uses intelligence in situations where quick decisions have to be made?

Ben Wallace: I cannot answer for the Foreign Office. I am here as the Defence Secretary of my Department. I cannot answer what the Foreign Office should or should not do as part of its processes. Part of your investigation is trying to understand that. While it has scaled down because the level of applications has reduced, we were also asking MoD civil servants to suddenly be consular civil servants. We went up to PJHQ to meet them. I went to see them. They ended up dealing with 105,000 applications for the ARAP scheme, many of which were also duplicates because they were in the other schemes, etc.

If you think about it, the normal day job of processing this in Government belongs to Border Force and the Immigration Service. I was talking to civil servants and military personnel who were not trained to work in the Immigration Service at Croydon. That is where it used to be, if my memory serves me right. They are soldiers and they are civil servants. They did an amazing job doing it. We set up systems, but in the long term it is not our job in the MoD and it is not the Foreign Office's job. The managing of those things in a crisis is the crisis management team in the Foreign Office backed up by the MoD and crisis response. Whether they should or should not is not a judgment for me.

What I do know is that there are some excellent examples of the Foreign Office crisis management team deploying around the world, in tsunamis, etc., where they do an amazing job. They are sometimes dealing with



some quite horrendous jobs such as identifying bodies and things like that—things that really are not pleasant. We forget that it is a pretty arduous posting for some of them when they do it, as you will know.

Q478 Alicia Kearns: I would challenge that, because one of the issues at the Foreign Office is that there is often a view—I will not ask you to comment on this—that people look down on the consular roles. They are seen to be the least worthy postings, the ones that nobody else wants to do. There is a view that Foreign Office civil servants should be spending their entire time doing lofty policy making and diplomacy making, which ultimately is wrong. As this has proven, the ultimate responsibility of the Foreign Office is to protect British nationals when they are stuck abroad.

I will not ask you to comment, but it does seem that perhaps if every Department had had a Secretary of State personally approving things hour after hour into the darkest nights, the system would have worked faster. I have heard that the MoD had to pick up cases that had been dropped or lost by the Foreign Office. They had to sort them out very late in the process to get them sorted to get people out.

Ben Wallace: What we should observe or remark on is that this was an evacuation like no other in a 21st-century environment. One of the challenges for Admiral Ben's staff, the former serving personnel, was that everyone has access to people's emails and everyone had access to people's WhatsApps. We were being inundated, often to the point where it sometimes got in the way of the job. There were people in the headquarters forward in Kabul whose inboxes were full of all their ex-mates and ex-veterans saying, "Can you help X and Y?" That is perfectly understandable, but Officer A, whose job was—I don't know—running the runway did not really want to get up in the morning and find thousands of emails. Then they were shared by groups and groups and groups. We all had it in our own inboxes. We all had a lot.

We had an evacuation that, first, was in 24-hour colour film. Everyone was filming it all. Secondly, the communication amongst us and within the bureaucracy was huge. You had an awful lot of sifting out of duplication. That is something that is a new phenomenon that we should seek to plan to deal with in modern emergencies. It is no longer the case that you walk in, you are in charge and no one can—"interfere" is the wrong word—confuse the mission in front of you. We have to think about that in the future, because that is going to be the future. Someone described it as "Dunkirk by WhatsApp". Imagine you were in a little boat at Dunkirk in the 1940s, and on your WhatsApp one said, "Go left", and the other one said, "Go right", and the Admiral said, "Go to Le Havre". That is where we are at. We have to think about that.

In Defence, we can shut it all down in our security mindset for security. Other more civil-facing Departments will have that challenge. Do you want to add anything, Admiral? You saw what it was like.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Yes. I could not agree more with the Defence Secretary. You would expect me to say that anyway, sat where I am, newly in post.

Ben Wallace: Probation is not finished.

Chair: You do not have any further to go.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: What I would observe is the rapid nature of this and the amount of duplication in the system, which was created because everyone was very passionate about their individual. Part of the real challenge is that we found there were WhatsApp messages, emails and texts all relating to the same person.

The Chair knows, because he has lived out there, that it is very easy for misspellings to occur when you are going from Afghan languages into English. Modern 21st-century technology was contributing to that sort of confusion, rather than helping us clean it out. We certainly learned some lessons about how, in the future, from our perspective, across Government we need to make sure, for instance, that databases are completely compatible so that it is easy to move information between them. It is no state secret that every Department likes to build its own databases to suit its own purposes right up until that very unforeseen moment when you need to move information at speed between them. That sort of thing is where we need to understand what obligations 21st-century activity of this nature imposes on us in advance.

Chair: I am just going to stop very briefly. I am going to name Pete Quentin, who was an exceptional aid to many of us who were getting people out. A very personal thank you from me for the extraordinary work he did during that process not just for military officers. A very particular thank you to your special adviser.

Q479 **Neil Coyle:** Lots of us experienced those problems in particular with the Home Office and the Foreign Office. The MoD was far easier to deal with. Thank you again to you and your team. Can I pass on my constituent Hayatullah's thanks? I think he was one of the special cases that you signed off. He worked for the Afghan special forces and was brought here by UK forces. You saved his life. His brother was murdered the next day, and one of his brothers is still in hiding in Afghanistan trying to escape. That is the reality we are all dealing with.

One of the challenges that a retired general and others have told us about is the lack of biometric enrolment of those who were supposed to be eligible for ARAP. Is that an accurate portrayal of one of the barriers as to why people could not get out?

Ben Wallace: Again, the biometric database and the enrolment are in the Home Office, etc. Whenever we had a problem around that, I would speak to Priti Patel and she would lift it. I cannot tell you how good and supportive she was in lifting barriers. From my own experience as a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Security Minister, the Home Office would have been allergic to doing that in the past. She did move these things out of the way.

Exactly on biometrics, there was a moment where, because people could not use biometrics, the process would not pick them up and then you had to take risk. It was often around people who were the dependants of British passport-holders. The passport-holder was fine. They would turn up at the Baron. They would be a British passport-holder, but all the other people had either no documents or were Afghans and had not enrolled in anything. The Home Office could probably answer your queries about what exactly they did. They MACA-ed us, and we sent 50 military personnel overnight up to the biometrics centre in the north of England—I cannot remember where; it was Sheffield, if my memory serves me right—to help churn through as many people as possible.

Q480 **Neil Coyle:** That was when they got here.

Ben Wallace: No, that was before. That was so they could get here.

Neil Coyle: That was so they could get here. You said that from April 2021 evacuations began.

Ben Wallace: Under the ARAP scheme, yes.

Q481 **Neil Coyle:** Yes. Admiral, you said that preparations for that began in early 2021. Why did that begin so long after the US indicated that it would be leaving? When did the UK Government begin to gather that biometric data that was missing at the crucial time, which would have prevented your soldiers having to go and all that data being sought?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Let me step in. I can explain the process around the ARAP scheme. If someone applied, they would put in their application—this is pre the Pitting process—and then they would be called forward to the British Embassy in Kabul for biometric screening. As part of that, they would turn up with the dependants in order to try to verify that. Details were taken; these were then sent back to the United Kingdom to be processed.

Q482 **Neil Coyle:** When did that begin?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: That process began from April.

Neil Coyle: It was from April 2021.

Ben Wallace: That is when it opened.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: That is when it opened.

Q483 **Neil Coyle:** That is 15 months after the US indicated that they would be departing.

Ben Wallace: The US indicated that they were going to depart in February 2020.



Q484 **Neil Coyle:** That is 15 months. Why did it not start sooner?

Ben Wallace: There was a scheme beforehand. Under the scheme beforehand, you still could bring people back. There were not many who came back. We were the only country that had an in-country security team to help people who were frightened. In retrospect, you could say it was a deeply optimistic view that somehow this peace deal was going to bring stability from when it was launched. First of all, people were not applying in huge numbers to come back. Some people were saying, "I am under threat", and we would go and assist them. There was a scheme.

Q485 **Neil Coyle:** Did it use biometric data or not?

Ben Wallace: I would not link the two. I would not link your observation about whether there was enough biometric processing capacity in Op Pitting to the previous schemes, because there was no pressure in the schemes at that stage. There was plenty of capacity. There was no—

Q486 **Neil Coyle:** Pressure was foreseeable, given the US deadline. You have already said that you were expecting 5,000 or 6,000 applicants to ARAP. It has hit 106,000 according to—

Ben Wallace: Most of those are not legitimate applications. By the time Op Pitting happened, 1,980 people had applied and been processed—there were very few rejections—plus their families. That was before August or July, whenever it was. They had gone through the system. It was only really when the charter flights stopped, people could not get out and the Taliban were racing towards Kabul, and that only became apparent in mid-July or the end of July.

Q487 **Neil Coyle:** Was this the hiccup for GardaWorld, the embassy guards? The US managed to get theirs out but ours were turned away at the airport. Is it because the biometric data had not been collected in time?

Ben Wallace: I would have to find out why they were turned back, if they were turned back. We did get them out. We got them out. Yes, there you are. The ex-gratia scheme, the scheme before ARAP, was open from 2014 to 2021. We used biometrics and we got out 1,319 principals under that scheme.

Q488 **Neil Coyle:** Just continuing on ARAP, is it the case that the ARAP system does not allow people to change their contact details? People had to change phone numbers and everything, given the changes to—

Ben Wallace: It does allow them to do that. When we had the data leak, every single one of them who was involved in that managed to change their comms and continue a level of communication.

Q489 **Neil Coyle:** Is the confidential information we have received on the Committee inaccurate in suggesting that this was part of the problem for some people? Changes to people's data causing them to reapply is not a situation you have seen.



Ben Wallace: In terms of the 65,000 that applied in the first “whoomph”, I cannot say whether there were one or two individuals. When we verified the people who had been on the data leak list, we managed to change their communication and verify it back. We were determined to do that.

Q490 **Neil Coyle:** When the Government narrowed the criteria for ARAP to people “at high and imminent risk”, how many people then became ineligible?

Ben Wallace: When did they narrow that?

Neil Coyle: I don’t know off the top of my head.

Ben Wallace: Do you want me to write to the Committee on the changes to ARAP? We have tried to keep the ARAP scheme as consistent as possible, with very few minor tweaks.

Chair: It was changed in December 2020, I think.

Ben Wallace: That change was more generous than the previous one. It was not a narrowing; it was a widening. That was the scheme that Priti Patel and I first moved on. If you remember, one of my predecessors had recognised the challenge. They had made an announcement about the change and only six people had applied, so we went back and looked at it. That is why in December we made the change.

Q491 **Neil Coyle:** How closely involved was the MoD in making sure that the design and the changes covered the groups that you would expect to include? Chevening scholars and judges have had a lot of coverage, but—

Ben Wallace: We would not have had any role in that.

Neil Coyle: You would have not had any role.

Ben Wallace: We would not have been the sponsor of that. ARAP was not a wider scheme. We now have the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. ARAP was not a wider scheme. It was the scheme to cover MoD personnel, those who had supported the military personnel both indirectly and directly. I can tell you the exact criteria. That is what I am responsible for. I am not responsible for the wider schemes administered by the Home Office or the Foreign Office. My work under this scheme was, when we designed the scheme, to work to get the Home Office to accept it, which they very welcomingly did. They were very supportive of our scheme.

Q492 **Neil Coyle:** The difficulty in accessing ARAP while escaping the Taliban is believed to have contributed to some pretty horrific circumstances, including a former Afghan soldier being one of those who died in the English Channel in December. Would you support a humanitarian visa scheme to try to support better those who worked for the UK in Afghanistan for the many years we were involved there?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ben Wallace: I would have to refer you to the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, which is being worked through right now. I do not know the full details of it.

Chair: Forgive me. We are going to move on from that.

Ben Wallace: The ARAP scheme is still retained. I can answer you on that.

Q493 **Chair:** Can I go on to ask a quick question about biometrics? It is quite clear that the MoD maintained many records of the people who have worked for it. Other organisations in the British Government had a harder job maintaining records and had fewer biometrics. I am thinking particularly of DFID and the Foreign Office for various reasons, who employ people in a rather different way. Is this a lesson that you have drawn, so that future deployments will include everybody who works for the UK Government in whatever capacity being identified on a single database?

Ben Wallace: Certainly, a lesson to draw is exactly that: that wherever we employ contractors, especially in areas that are dangerous and where there is an element of risk in them helping us, we should always be thinking forward about what happens if something goes wrong and making sure you maintain that. That is right. Op Pitting was a once-in-a-generation evacuation.

Chair: Let us hope so.

Ben Wallace: Yes, let us hope so. It happened at a pace that was very fast. You asked me about 5 July. One of the reasons why I thought the game was up was because my recollection of history is that the river always runs fastest at the end, in all of these regimes that collapse. It is the nature of intelligence—people forget this—that your resources start to dry up as a regime collapses, because, funnily enough, half of them have done a runner.

If you think back, there was the guy from the Saddam Hussein regime who took his beret off in the press conference, walked down the steps and disappeared off into a taxi. Until that happened, everybody still thought the regime was functioning. You can think back to the collapse of South Vietnam. The lesson is to not expect intelligence to tell you the final furlong, because your sources have all gone. You are starting to put your finger in the air and guesstimate. That is what my lesson is. It has always been that regimes fail much quicker than you think.

Q494 **Henry Smith:** Thank you very much indeed, Secretary of State and First Sea Lord, for appearing before us. This Committee has been told that “little was done” before the fall of Kabul to engage with Afghanistan’s neighbours in terms of possible evacuation routes. Would you say that is an accurate assessment?



Ben Wallace: Again, I am afraid I have to defer to the Foreign Office. I am not responsible for that. What I know is that we had an active and thriving defence attaché network, which has been incredibly engaged with Pakistan and some of the other neighbours before, during and after. Some of those countries are countries from which we have been allowed to take our ARAP people out, those extra 1,000-odd that I spoke about.

From a Defence point of view, we invest in our defence network and we have good relationships with the host countries. We have some advantages. You have to have some sympathy for the Home Office and the Foreign Office. It is often the case that Government Departments in these third countries also find it harder to deal with broader definitions of people coming through their countries. If you are working military to military, sometimes in some of those countries the military is the power in the land or they are quite able to just say, "I understand. I will take your word for it, and we will get on with it". I have the assets to then send an RAF plane to pick them up. There is a level of assurance that I can provide, which is harder for the schemes that are probably more subjective, if you know what I mean, in terms of those decisions.

Q495 **Henry Smith:** In terms of the military attaché network, you would say that was well established long before the final days of the regime in Afghanistan.

Ben Wallace: Yes. I am afraid I cannot reveal the countries for security purposes, but in contingency planning for a situation where it was all much worse, we were supported by many of those countries. That was facilitated through our networks of DAs. We did take advantage of some of that. We did have to use it, or we nearly did. There were no problems.

Q496 **Royston Smith:** Thank you, Secretary of State. We had a drama during Op Pitting about pets and animals. You were very clear that you would not prioritise pets over people. In fact, that was in the media on 24 August. On the morning of 25 August, at about 1.30, you tweeted that Nowzad's staff had been cleared for evacuation. How did you receive the news that they were being evacuated prior to tweeting that message?

Ben Wallace: That they were being evacuated.

Royston Smith: That is what you tweeted, is it not?

Ben Wallace: I tweeted, "Let us get some facts out there. No one, at any stage, has blocked a flight". I said, "I never said I would not facilitate. I said no one would get to queue jump". I said, "The issue, as these desperate people waiting outside the gates know too well, has always been getting processed through the entrances. It can take over 24 hours. There is no point turning up with a plan until the passengers/pets are airside". I am not sure which bit you are saying I did.

Royston Smith: Okay, we will move on from that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ben Wallace: Can I just say why I did tweet? I was getting death threats, as was my aide. I can read some out, if you would like to hear them: "You have got a price on your head after letting go these animals. Watch your back, cunt". I received a death warrant signed with the name of my special adviser on it. "I for one will join other animal lovers outside" my special adviser's home. "Blood is on your hands. It deserves to be extracted from you 10-fold". That was to me. "You are a vile human".

Q497 **Royston Smith:** Can I stop you there, Secretary of State? We all do get death threats like that. They are abhorrent, and they are unacceptable. We seem to be straying off the point as though this is a criticism. I am trying to get to a question that has been put to us by the whistleblower. The whistleblower suggested to us that the clearance for those to be evacuated came from someone other than you. Is that your understanding?

Ben Wallace: As my tweet said, no one had blocked any plane because no one had made an application to the air traffic control or anyone else for flight clearance. There was no plane requested to come in at that date at that stage even before then. It was a complete fallacy that somebody at the MoD, whether it was me, my adviser or anyone else, was blocking a flight, because there had not been a flight request.

When you want to charter a plane, the aeroplane company has to go to something called the CAOC, which is based in Qatar and which controlled the airspace, and ask permission for a flight. We have no records of a flight request at that stage and that date coming in. It is impossible for me or anyone else to have blocked it, given that there was not one.

Q498 **Royston Smith:** The whistleblower was wrong to say that there was an authorisation to allow that aircraft to land and then depart, because it was never blocked in the first place. The whistleblower is wrong.

Ben Wallace: He is totally wrong. No one ever blocked a single flight.

Q499 **Royston Smith:** He did not say they blocked it. He said it was ordered and that the authorisation to go was given by someone other than you. He is talking about the Prime Minister, presumably. You have no understanding of that being the case.

Ben Wallace: Are you talking about the flight that eventually happened?

Royston Smith: Yes.

Ben Wallace: In terms of the flight that eventually happened, when they did make a request, as I said in those tweets earlier, subject to them not jumping the queue and subject to the fact that it was able to come in and would not disrupt, we would give it clearance. That does not take much work; it does not take any effort. When the first request came in, I think the plane was not insured or something, so it was not certified. Then we



let it through. That is it. I gave the authorisation to make sure it was allowed through at the end of the process.

No one lobbied me. The Prime Minister did not ring up. At no stage did the Prime Minister ask me to make way for those pets. Not at all, never. I took the decision that, as long as people were not jumping the queue, at the end of that process, if a plane came in, not using our assets, not using the RAF, it would be given clearance. It was a simple matter of getting it through.

At the time you heard all the allegations that it was being blocked. Mr Dyer and co. were going out on telly saying that I was blocking it, which led to all these horrible emails. There had not been an actual request for a flight to the CAOC. At one stage, I instructed my officials to get in touch with them to ask what it was exactly that they were after, because every day on "Good Morning Britain" it was going on and on and on. I made sure we got in contact and tried to get to the bottom of what was happening, and that was it.

Later on in that week, they got a charter plane. As I said, if they applied, they would be given the clearance. I was not going to let it disrupt military operations. I was not going to let it interrupt the people. I certainly was not going to let them turn up and jump the queue. There were those awful waiting scenes that we saw. People were desperate. When all that was done, we opened a gate, at the very end, and they were allowed through. They got on their own plane and they left, and they were almost the very last people out. You cannot say in any way that they jumped the queue, and you cannot say we hindered them unfairly or did anything else.

Q500 Royston Smith: I do not have a view on this. I said in the last panel that we did that I thought prioritising animals over people was the wrong thing to do, and I still maintain that, but there are some people who say that the staff were evacuated using the special cases category, which means they will have gone out in the same category as journalists, judges, women's rights activists and that sort of thing. Is that the case? It did not sound to me as if those staff were in imminent danger.

Ben Wallace: I did not sign off the staff. Pen Farthing, the individual in question, had been legitimately called forward as a British passport-holder a few weeks before. He and his wife had been called forward. His wife, who is a Norwegian national, left. He chose not to go forward and to remain with his staff, which was his choice. The Taliban had been very clear that they would let him through but not the staff through and it was recommended that he makes his way. I perfectly understand that he wanted to stand by his staff, and he chose to bring them through.

Who approved them specifically? Was it through that process? I did not sit there and sign them off. I do not know. They came through. Like everyone else, they waited their turn. They did have a turnback. If you



remember, they turned up and then they turned back. Was it the day of the attack?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: There was the attack, but they also had problems getting across the city. We have to be clear that the staff were not evacuated with Pen. Pen Farthing came out with his animals on his charter flight, but his staff did not come out on that same charter flight. They were having problems getting across the city. By then the Taliban was being far stricter on Afghan nationals leaving, because with about 10 days to go the now Taliban leadership recognised that there was a risk of a brain drain. They were effectively saying, "If you are not a national of a third country, you may not leave". It was very difficult for people who were not British passport-holders to make their way across the city in those last few days.

I am just referring to my notes. To be absolutely clear, on 27 August the air component commander reported to me that they now had good sight of the Pen Farthing charter. It was expected later on that day and a landing slot had been booked, but the charter was cancelled and so the whole thing had been rolled to the 28th. He could not have got a landing slot without the facilitation of the UK air staff in the CAOC, because that was what was controlling the airport access. That was because, throughout the whole of that operation, once civil air control had collapsed or basically walked away soon after the mass evacuation had started, slots had to be very tightly controlled in order to maintain the flow of all the international nations that were flying in and out. It was not as if there were gaps in air traffic and you could take any time you wanted.

In fact, I have here a comment about how the US is slightly surprised at where we are. We had confirmed to the US the Secretary of State's very clear direction that we were preferring people over animals. This was towards the end of the evacuation, once we were effectively down to the last end not of civilian evacuation but of military withdrawal.

Q501 **Alicia Kearns:** I want to be very clear that when I ask this question it is not a criticism in any way of the MoD. How much of the Government's time was taken up by the Twitter spectacle of Pen Farthing and the appalling and repugnant attacks on yourself and the Government? Crucially, what was the opportunity cost?

Ben Wallace: It took up lots of time in stress and abuse to me, to my advisers and indeed in the media messaging. As the First Sea Lord just said, the actual flight came in on the 27th/28th, but they were starting to make claims that the flights were being blocked much earlier. That is why it was 1.30 in the morning when I tweeted that, because I had just finished my day's work. The last thing I like is to hear my staff being bullied, whether they are civil servants or not, and having allegations made against them. It was just time to try to get the reality out there.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I am afraid that in this case the media did not cross-examine the allegations that were being made. I used to sometimes go on the media round and hear the individuals making these claims. No one ever said, "Do you have any proof that it was blocked?" No one ever said that. They just let it run, which was then causing abuse into my office. I thought, "I have had enough of this". It added to stress and time. It became a whole distraction to saving some very desperate people.

I maintained throughout that we were not going to give them preference. Trudy Harrison did ring on the weekend of 21 August asking me to, and I said no. I just maintained that and tried to protect my military as much as possible from being diverted. Admiral Ben will be able to tell you how much of his time was diverted by it, but I tried to give it the minimum. For what it is worth, any time was too much time.

Alicia Kearns: Hear, hear.

Ben Wallace: These were men and women who were trying to protect people who were under threat. That is what my view would be.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: On that, I remember the Secretary of State and I had an exchange just before he did the tweet. It was in the wee small hours. I observed that on that day PJHQ was organising the largest European evacuation of Kabul. We were in command of the only carrier strike group at sea in the Western Pacific Ocean on that day. We were also overseeing the battle group that was operating in very difficult conditions in Mali. The majority of my time on that day had been dominated by managing the narrative and outcomes of Nowzad.

Chair: That is why they put an admiral in charge and not an air marshal.

Q502 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Can I just pick up on a couple of points? Secretary of State, I would share the horror of the Committee about some of the stuff you read out aimed at yourself and especially at your special adviser. In terms of the Trudy Harrison call—Trudy Harrison was the Prime Minister's PPS at the time; I am not sure whether she still is—when did that call happen?

Ben Wallace: She rang me over the weekend of 21 August.

Q503 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Did she say on whose instruction she was making that call? Who was she acting on behalf of?

Ben Wallace: She is a fellow north-west MP. She never said, "I am ringing on behalf of the Prime Minister". I do not think she was. She had a connection with Pen Farthing and all that lot. As we know, some of our colleagues represent animal welfare issues; some represent other things. She rang and I said, "Look, it is not going to happen".

Q504 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You were quite specific. You said the PM did not lobby you at any point. Were you aware of him having an involvement in this decision at all?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ben Wallace: No. I had no sense in any way. What I do know is that after I said in the media “people before pets”, No. 10 got in touch to say that they absolutely agreed with me.

Q505 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You had no sense of the PM’s fingertips being anywhere near it.

Ben Wallace: No.

Q506 **Neil Coyle:** If it was people before pets, why did that flight take off with so many empty seats?

Ben Wallace: You are about to learn a lesson.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We are talking about the picture of the flight that was tweeted by Pen Farthing’s wife. I will go back to how the airport was being run. Landing slots had to be strictly controlled with a very predictable drumbeat of people landing and taking off, because there was only so much pan space for loading. Every plane was filled with people who were available to go on to a plane. We could not wait to make sure it was completely full before we sent it, because that was then occupying space that was required for an inbound flight.

From our particular experience, we also evacuated people from 30 other nations. At times some of our entitled personnel were flown out—Australia and New Zealand helped us with some of our stores, for instance—into the United Arab Emirates. We just had to keep the planes moving round and cycling. We were always going to be vulnerable to a half-full plane with a clever camera angle demonstrating that it was not as completely full as it could have been.

Q507 **Neil Coyle:** It is not just that, though, is it?

Ben Wallace: Just let the First Sea Lord finish.

Neil Coyle: They claim they offered those seats to people and they were not taken up.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Who claimed they offered seats?

Q508 **Neil Coyle:** That is in the public domain. The suggestion was that they had offered those seats to anyone who needed them. If that is not the case—

Ben Wallace: You mean on their charter plane.

Alicia Kearns: They claim that.

Ben Wallace: You are talking about the photographs of our planes that are half-empty, not their charter plane.

Neil Coyle: No. I am talking about the plane with the animals on board.

Ben Wallace: You mean the very last plane when he left.



Alicia Kearns: Yes.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: At the point at which he departed, he was either just ahead of or just after the last UK planes that left. We were down to our own military personnel plus the Ambassador and his immediate support staff. We had seats on our own planes. We had closed down by that point our ability to evacuate others, because we were withdrawing our own presence on the ground.

Ben Wallace: The gates were closed.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: There was no ability at that moment in time for that sort of co-ordination, short of Mr Farthing and his people wandering around and sweeping people up, but that was a decision he chose not to make.

Ben Wallace: The photograph that was originally tweeted with the statement, "These planes are empty. Why can't our animals be in them?" were of our planes. It is important to understand the propaganda that is being spouted out. It was nonsense.

Alicia Kearns: Yes.

Ben Wallace: The reason they were empty in the photograph is that behind those photographs was freight. Where we did not fill up the planes with people, we loaded the freight on. You would find that some seats were empty at the front of the plane, because there was a truck or a car or ammunition or something in the back. That is simply why: when our planes were taking off, if we did not have the people who had been processed to put on them, we simply put freight on them.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Perhaps I can counterbalance that. Where we had more people to put on to a plane, we would overload. There were some really sophisticated risk judgments made by young air crew about how many people to take, including on four occasions not just the authorised exceptional circumstance overload but exceeding that again because it was quite clear that there were family groups that we needed to pull out.

Chair: Before we close, can I just personally put on record my enormous thanks, through you, Secretary of State, and you, First Sea Lord or then CJO, to your extraordinary teams on the ground? They performed the most extraordinary feats at a very difficult time. I also want to place on record my thanks not just to your special adviser but to the Home Office team of the Home Secretary. I was in touch with her almost constantly for several weeks. As you correctly say, she made sure that the rules that applied were those that were absolutely necessary and no more than were absolutely necessary. In doing so, I have no doubt in saying that she saved lives.

However, there are sadly still people—I know you know this—who have been left behind, including people from vetted units that we worked with.



I know many of us are still working on that today. Because I have spoken to colleagues of yours, possibly not with your knowledge, I know some of your people are still working on that. We will remain extremely interested in what further actions are being taken. On that basis, let me say thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and Nigel Casey.

Q509 **Chair:** Welcome back to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are very fortunate to have with us Lord Ahmad, Minister at the Foreign Office, and Nigel Casey. Nigel, it is nice to see you again. We had just now the Defence Secretary and the First Sea Lord, who was of course at the time Chief of Joint Operations, before the Committee raising various points. One of the lessons that we were drawing out was the need for better preparation, should this ever be required again, and the ability to know who is working with the UK in its various guises. Different Departments were better able to provide full lists of who had contracted to the UK over the past 20 years. Is that something you are working on already?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We are. First of all, Chair, I am pleased to be here. I want to record my thanks to the Committee for the work it is doing on this important issue. It is something that I have been focused on. It has taken up a great deal, understandably, of my own bandwidth as a Minister.

On the specific point you raise, yes, absolutely. One major learning from the whole exercise is better co-ordination in terms of planning. That said, Operation Pitting did show, certainly from an operational standpoint, good co-ordination between the three key Departments from what I saw and from what I was involved with. That was certainly appreciated. There is an extensive report being done by a senior diplomat, which I have not yet seen but I have contributed to. I have certainly been very full-on in terms of my assessment.

Q510 **Chair:** When are you expecting that to report?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: It is imminent. It is with our senior officials at the moment. I am expecting that. Sir Philip has also agreed to write to you on—

Q511 **Chair:** Forgive me if I am terribly blunt. As you know, we are very pressed for time. I do not mean to be rude, but we are trying to rush through quite a lot.

One of the points that was raised by General Sir Nick Carter was that the UK lacked a good understanding of politics on the ground. Would you agree that this influenced planning assumptions for the worse?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: You will know from your own experience that Afghanistan is a complex mix of different tribes, different people and



different communities. There is a real read-across to other countries in the near vicinity, including Pakistan. When I assumed responsibilities for South Asia after the general election, I engaged quite extensively with the different members of different communities within Afghanistan and also, importantly, with its near neighbours. Understanding the context of the landscape that we are operating in, and indeed seeking to influence it, is very important for our own understanding of the policies that we need to deploy.

Q512 Chair: One of the points that came up quite a lot earlier were the various absences at the time of the evacuation. I know various people have spoken about this. Do you regret your own moment of absence?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I would not call it an absence. As someone who was engaging quite extensively, I met with, for example, President Ashraf and indeed Hanif Atmar. I did not go anywhere. I was in the UK. That was a deliberate decision on my part. I have a young family and a very understanding wife, but, at the same time, Covid had taught us to be very operational using the various technologies that we have at home. At all times during the time that I was away from the office—if it could be put that way, even though I was in my own office—I was fully engaged.

For example, there was an attack on the 11th when I was technically on leave, which I put out a statement on. Again, I was in touch privately with, for example, Foreign Minister Atmar and I conveyed my condolences directly to him.

Chair: Your absence was presence.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: That is one way of putting it.

Q513 Chair: We have been told that little was done before the fall of Kabul to engage with neighbouring countries on evacuation efforts. You certainly were engaging immediately afterward. Would you agree with that description of what happened previously?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I was the Minister responsible, and I was certainly engaging with the President since taking on the portfolio towards the end of 2019. I am still in touch with the brave and courageous Dr Abdullah, who I am in regular contact with. He was another interlocuter. Of course, I am in touch with Hanif Atmar, the Finance Minister in Afghanistan.

Apart from that, I had already made two visits to Pakistan, one in 2019 and one in June 2021. The 2021 meeting was focused on Afghanistan. I met with Prime Minister Khan. I also met with Foreign Minister Qureshi during this time in July. Just three and a half weeks before the fall of Kabul, I was in Tashkent. I engaged quite extensively with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and a whole range of other countries—I could carry on with the list—including Turkey as well.

Q514 Liam Byrne: Just very quickly, the Secretary of State for Defence has



just told us that it was clear the game was up in July, which is presumably when contingency plans for the evacuation and who would be evacuated were accelerated. Could you let the Committee know when the Prime Minister reviewed those contingency plans and when he signed them off?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I will write to you with the specific detail, but I know the Prime Minister was fully engaged on the situation in Afghanistan. For example, on my recommendation, he had also spoken directly to President Ghani. It is also interesting, just to share with you, that when I met with President Ghani a few weeks prior to the situation that happened—the domino effect of the fall of the various cities in Afghanistan, particularly the regional capitals—he was certainly giving the reassurances to all partners that they would fight to very much their last breath. That was very much the message that came out of that conference. Equally, for example, I met with US Special Envoy Khalilzad directly on this issue.

Reflecting back on my direct engagement with near neighbours, the missing link was more direct engagement with Pakistan. Pakistan was a near neighbour. It took a heavy toll, with 70,000 people directly killed by the Taliban. There was a vacuum not on our part but by other partners. I also communicated that engagement and the message of engagement to the new US Administration.

Q515 **Liam Byrne:** We would be grateful for that letter, because the eligibility criteria for those evacuated moved around in the midst of what was a very hot phase of this crisis. It is important to know that the person in charge of co-ordination between the three Departments, otherwise known as the Prime Minister, was absolutely on top of the contingency arrangements and had signed off the criteria.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: With your permission, Chair, I will just bring in Nigel.

Nigel Casey: To your question, Mr Byrne, the National Security Adviser or his deputy were chairing regular meetings several times a week and every morning during the evacuation period itself with all the main players across Whitehall. You have just heard from Admiral Ben that he was briefing into that meeting every day. I know that the national security staff, the NSA and the Deputy National Security Adviser, would have been keeping the Prime Minister informed throughout that period, as those plans evolved.

Q516 **Liam Byrne:** Thank you, but the question I am posing is not during the evacuation; it is before the evacuation, when it was clear that things were going wrong.

Nigel Casey: Yes, those meetings were happening for months in the run-up to it. I am quite sure that they would have been keeping the Prime Minister regularly briefed.



Q517 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you both for coming, and thank you, Mr Casey, for coming for a second time. You clearly enjoyed it so much that you are back for more.

My question relates to some evidence that we received from a whistleblower, of which I am sure you are aware by now. It is about the response you received as a Minister, Lord Ahmad, when you attempted to improve, shape or engage with the crisis centre and the processes that were in place. The whistleblower said that you were unable to instruct and ultimately only allowed to make requests. As a former Foreign Office civil servant, that seems to me to be slightly bizarre and slightly concerning. When you have operations in place at the MoD, Ministers instruct during those operations. I am not sure why it would not be the same at the Foreign Office.

It would be very helpful to understand your experience, as a Minister, of trying to shape this. We all know on this Committee how deeply you feel about this. Personally, I would like to thank you for the help you gave me to get certain people out of Afghanistan who otherwise, without you, would not have got out.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: That is very kind, thank you. First of all, the issue of ministerial direction needs to be much better defined in the structures of operations in a crisis. As Minister for South Asia, I was involved with the Covid evacuation of 17,000 people. At times, because of my language skills, I was ringing local superintendents to get people out.

When it came to Afghanistan, the important thing was for officials to understand what the chain of command was. I am going to be very upfront with you that, yes, there were times and moments of exasperation. To me, this was not a case with the normal turnaround of days; we needed to make decisions in a matter of minutes.

Frankly, that was the intent when I co-ordinated quite directly with James Heapey in the Ministry of Defence and Kevin Foster in the immigration team at the Home Office. Two days into Operation Pitting, we set up a daily call. If there were issues or these aggravations that you would have where something was being held up, we would unlock it. Of course, someone who you have just heard from, Admiral Ben Key, was involved with those meetings. We had someone senior, at least a silver or a gold, from the command centre. We also had someone from Border Force. We dealt with issues arising from the three schemes that were operating.

To say a word on those, there was the ARAP scheme. I know you have heard from Ben Wallace already. For the Foreign Office, our first responsibility—this was right—was to British citizens and their dependants. We were looking at that, but the dependants needed to be approved through the Home Office. Of course, the third scheme—this is nothing new to anyone who has been involved with the Home Office—was leave outside the rules.



There was good co-ordination. I remember speaking to the Home Secretary etc. There was a real challenge if a family appeared at the gate of the Baron Hotel and they qualified as a British national with dependants but a single dependent—there were instances of this—was over 18. They might be a 19 year-old. I put it on myself: would I leave my son or daughter behind? No, of course not. We needed something flexible and adaptable. I am grateful to Home Office colleagues, because we were able to stand up leave outside the rules, which did mean that there were over 400 people who we were able to get out of there, including, more broadly, the great leaders who we were supporting, such as the leaders within Afghanistan, the women leaders in particular.

Q518 Alicia Kearns: You are our key interlocuter with so many foreign nations. The length of time you have served in post is testament to that. I am concerned about the direction of travel in terms of the relationship with Pakistan. I am concerned that, following the evacuation, they were able to put across almost a propaganda coup that they have been helping foreign Governments, helping with evacuations and working hand-in-glove with the West against the Taliban. We all know that the Taliban has been hiding out in Quetta for 20 years. Without the explicit support or, shall we say, explicit ignorance of the Pakistani Government—I am sure you will not be able to agree with that—the Taliban would not have been able to thrive and ready to go back in. Where do we go on Pakistan policy in relation to Afghanistan and more widely?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We need structured engagement. One of the first meetings of the new Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, was an inward-bound visit of Foreign Minister Qureshi. It was also important that I engaged directly in that meeting as well to lay out quite clearly what our different structured dialogues were. We want to do more trade, for example, with Pakistan. The diaspora links between the two countries are very strong. Trust is important, and we need to build that element both ways.

Q519 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Lord Ahmad, I want to come to the Nowzad situation and the decisions around that. As far as you know, did the Prime Minister or anybody acting on his behalf intervene in the evacuation of Nowzad staff or animals?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: No. I can be very categoric. I myself was immersed in the evacuation exercise. At no time was I asked about this. I was certainly aware of what was happening in the media and the emails that were coming in to me, but, no, not to my knowledge.

Nigel Casey: No, not to my knowledge either.

Q520 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Committee has evidence that has been submitted to it of an internal email chain in which senior officials at the Department refer to “the Prime Minister’s Nowzad decision”. This is an email sent to multiple senior staff, including the Foreign Secretary’s private office and indeed yourself, Mr Casey. You were Crisis Gold, if I am



not mistaken. The Prime Minister has denied intervening. You have said that again to the Committee this afternoon. The Permanent Under-Secretary told us he was never aware of an intervention by the Prime Minister and that you, Mr Casey, did not receive any correspondence on the matter. The Committee has received evidence to the contrary. How is that explained?

Nigel Casey: Since you asked me the question last time when I appeared in December, I checked all my emails on the subject and I could not find any that referred to any Prime Ministerial intervention on the subject of Nowzad. If you have something that shows otherwise, I would be very interested to see it.

Q521 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think I am right in saying that the evidence is published by the Committee tomorrow, but perhaps I can just read you a quote from it, unless the Chair stops me. The key quote is from a Crisis Silver email on 25 August. This is an email to the Foreign Secretary's office and other officials, including yourself, Mr Casey: "Had an animal charity been put forward by my team on Monday night, I would not have considered vets working for an animal charity 'extremely vulnerable'. Having regard to the Prime Minister's Nowzad decision, the Foreign Secretary might consider"—redacted—"vets and their dependants should be included".

There is also here an email from a member of Lord Goldsmith's private office also on 25 August to two Crisis Bronzes. "Nowzad, run by an ex-Royal Marine, has received a lot of publicity and the PM has just authorised their staff and animals to be evacuated". Does none of that ring any bells?

Nigel Casey: I do not remember those emails. I would have to see them to refresh my memory. As far as I remember, the first time I became aware that a decision had been taken that the staff of Nowzad were eligible to be evacuated, under the leave outside the rules provision, was when the Defence Secretary tweeted to that effect at about 1.30 in the morning on 25 August.

Q522 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Do you have anything to add, Lord Ahmad?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: No. As I said, I certainly did not get involved myself. We live in the world of social media, so I was getting plenty of traffic on my social media account. Beyond that, I certainly did not get involved with it at all.

Q523 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Given all the attention it got and given how vociferously opposed the Secretary of State for Defence was, it would be quite extraordinary for this to be the case. Who could possibly overrule the Secretary of State for Defence, if not the Prime Minister?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: All I will say on that is, as Mr Casey stated, please do send that on to us.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It is also worth noting that the emails come from after the 1.30 am tweets. I will leave that there, Chair, because I am conscious of the Division Bell.

Chair: The Division Bell is going. It looks likely that there will be four votes. We will leave it there. We may call you back or follow up with a letter, as we have other questions to ask. We are not going to keep you waiting for an hour.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: If I may, I would like to give you some final thoughts from me. I want to say two things. One thing is that very clearly, from my perspective, yes, we got 15,000 people out, but, with all humility, the people we left behind should not be ignored. I can assure you and the Committee that I look forward to some of the questions about what we are planning, and I want to share with you the detail of what we are continuing to do.

Secondly, I always say that we put humanity at the centre of what we do. Without the support and insights of some of the people around this table, and indeed others, we would not have achieved the 15,000. For that, thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much, Lord Ahmad. Thank you, Mr Casey.