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Tom Tugendhat MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
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Dear Tom,

AFGHANISTAN CRISIS: FCDO LESSONS LEARNED

1. When I appeared before your Committee on 7 December last year, I promised to share with the Committee the headline lessons of the FCDO's internal Afghanistan Crisis 'Lessons Learned' review. Following the completion of the process, this letter sets out: the context of the exercise; the process followed; an overview of the lessons learned; and the department's plans for implementation of those lessons.

The Context

2. The UK Government's response to the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021 was one of the largest, most challenging and most complex international crisis operations in recent decades. It involved the first HMG-led Non-combatant Evacuation Operation since that in Lebanon in 2006. The FCDO was formally in crisis mode for 47 days, with 1,336 FCDO staff rostered on to the crisis response. The response included the largest deployment of Rapid Deployment Teams (RDTs) in recent years, with 62 staff deployed in 11 different locations. The Department answered over 49,000 hotline calls, dealt with an unprecedented volume of correspondence, and chartered over 100 flights for onward transfer of those evacuated. Beyond the direct Afghanistan response, staff continued to deliver 'business as usual' work, in addition to a concurrent response to an earthquake in Haiti.
3. The Government facilitated the departure of over 15,000 people from Afghanistan during the crisis period. The FCDO is still working to assist Afghanistan. The Government has supported over 3,000 people to leave Afghanistan or come to the UK from third countries since the end of the military-led evacuation, Operation PITTING. While this support continued, it was right – as is standard practice following crises – to identify the lessons that the department could learn from its response.

The Lessons Learning Process

4. The lessons learning process focused on the systems, structures and ways of working involved in the FCDO's crisis response. Its objectives were to capture good practice, identify areas for improvement, and make prioritised recommendations for responding to future crises. It covered the period before, during and after the evacuation from Kabul.
5. The process did not consider wider questions on the use of intelligence, foreign policy considerations, or the details of the assistance given to Afghans arriving in the UK. Similarly, while the process examined and learnt much about how the FCDO worked with other government departments – including the Ministry of Defence, Home Office and Cabinet Office – it did not review those departments' responses.
6. The review team carried out over 70 one-to-one interviews, including with Ministers, Non-executive Directors and officials in the FCDO and other government departments; conducted over 50 group interviews and listening sessions; received over 230 responses to an online all-staff survey; and reviewed a range of emails and documents relating to the crisis. Following this engagement, the team produced a set of draft conclusions and recommended steps required to implement them. These were then considered by members of the FCDO Executive Committee and the FCDO Management Board.

Findings

7. The lessons identified fall under eleven broad categories. I have set these out below, with an overview of the recommendations covered by each. Some recommendations are particular to complex evacuations, while others are more widely applicable. They range from technical solutions to improve policies and systems, to issues requiring deeper and more systematic review.
8. The review drew the following conclusions:
 - i. **Preparedness:** The FCDO was not unprepared for this crisis. Prior contingency planning and established crisis doctrine and crisis management structures provided solid foundations for the department's response. But these plans did not anticipate such a rapid collapse of the Afghan government, nor were the structures designed to manage a crisis of such unprecedented scale. When anticipating and planning for future crises, the department should ensure that worst-case scenario planning is more thoroughly developed and tested. It should also review the FCDO's crisis doctrine, considering how clearer crisis structures can be used and how more resource can rapidly be made available to respond to multi-faceted crises of such large scope and scale – so called 'mega-crises' – while ensuring the availability of the capacity and capability to manage multiple crises in parallel.
 - ii. **Platform operations:** Prior planning for the drawdown of staff from, and the secure closure of, the British Embassy in Kabul enabled an agile withdrawal of staff based on duty of care considerations, and a swift closedown of the Embassy in a matter of hours as the Afghan government collapsed far more quickly than expected. The discovery of papers at the closed Embassy site was acted on quickly and mitigations put in place to protect those who might have been affected. Closedown plans for posts in conflict areas should continue to be

tested regularly, particularly to ensure they can be enacted in compressed time spans. Clearer guidance should also be developed to support staff evacuated from post on their return to the UK, to give them clarity on their situation and how their expertise can be used in a crisis response, and also to maintain a duty of care.

- iii. **Leadership and capability:** The FCDO had a wide base of crisis skills and experience from which to draw. But the sheer scale of this crisis (and therefore the number of staff involved), a disruption to training as a result of preparations for EU Exit followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the unfamiliarity of some staff with crisis structures following the FCO/DFID merger meant that not all staff involved had received specialised crisis training. The department should refresh its crisis skills training offer to staff of all grades to increase overall levels of crisis capability and preparedness. Senior leaders should ensure they have undertaken crisis management training, and that they are familiar with crisis doctrine, ways-of-working, and relevant policies and procedures. Senior leaders built strong relationships with Ministers on the handling of the crisis. Nevertheless, clarifying and streamlining processes for working with Ministerial offices during large-scale crises would enable smoother working. These should be tested through annual exercises.
- iv. **FCDO working with cross-Whitehall partners:** The FCDO worked closely with departments across government during the crisis, both in the UK and at posts in the network. Collaboration improved through the crisis as better links and ways of working were established between departments, but in some areas these should be built on to ensure formal coordination mechanisms are comprehensive. The review of FCDO crisis doctrine for large-scale 'mega-crises' should consider the mechanisms available to the FCDO to coordinate its work with other government departments and to ensure the FCDO's role is agreed early in the crisis. This review should be coordinated with wider work underway to enhance HMG crisis capability. In addition, the FCDO's relationship with formal interdepartmental coordination mechanisms such as COBR, COBR(O) and NSC should be tested through an annual Foreign Secretary-led COBR table-top exercise.
- v. **Eligible person and evacuation pathway:** The policies determining the eligibility of evacuees and the process for their evacuation presented some of the most significant and complex issues of the whole crisis. FCDO staff worked in extremely testing conditions to respond to a very significant number of requests, both in the UK and on the ground in Kabul. Some lessons learned from the Covid-19 crisis, such as around managing inbound call handling and expedited mechanisms for civilian charters, helped improve the response. But the crisis tested every FCDO crisis response capability related to evacuations. The end-to-end evacuation systems, capabilities, policies and processes for managing an evacuation should be reviewed in conjunction with HMG partners to ensure they are fit for purpose for future evacuations. This should include the agreement of a cross-government approach to eligibility during international evacuations and an HMG evacuation doctrine. FCDO geographic departments should regularly refresh their understanding of and engagement with consular processes, particularly concerning the use of travel advice.

- vi. Deployments:** The FCDO's Rapid Deployment Teams (RDTs) played a vital role in increasing the department's capacity to respond to the crisis across the UK and the overseas network, deploying to eleven different locations. The teams faced challenges in deploying, due in part to Covid-19 reducing the numbers of staff with necessary training. The preparedness of these teams should be thoroughly assessed and refreshed to ensure the most can be made of this important FCDO capability. This should include work to increase senior staff involvement in RDTs, improve understanding in the network of RDTs' roles and reporting lines, and agreement on more structured ways of working with deployment teams from other government departments.
- vii. Resourcing and welfare:** The FCDO has established systems for mobilising staff resource to respond to a crisis, but the scale of the crisis meant that the necessary resource was not consistently delivered at the volume or for the duration needed. This resulted in staffing gaps in some teams for some periods, both in crisis structures and across the wider organisation. Hybrid working and the mobilisation of overseas staff in support of the UK-led crisis enabled more roles to be filled, but created other challenges related to access to technology, different terms and conditions for different groups of staff, and the difficulty of checking on colleagues' welfare in person. The impact of the crisis on colleagues' welfare was significant and requires continued support and engagement today, including with former Country-Based Staff relocated from Kabul and the many staff who were directly exposed to the situation on the ground and the pressure of dealing with large numbers of Afghans and Britons at a time of acute personal crisis. Differing welfare requirements for staff working on the crisis, both in the UK and across the network, were identified and addressed with tailored support for different groups, although some of this could have been introduced earlier. In future, the FCDO should ensure that the right systems are in place to support staff welfare and mental health ahead of, during and after crises, drawing on informal and formal support mechanisms. These changes should sit within a wider refresh of the crisis operating model and a shift to increase the agility of FCDO systems and culture, including an agreed approach to hybrid working in a crisis.
- viii. External stakeholder engagement:** International engagement in the lead up to the crisis was extensive. During the crisis, a specific team was established to lead engagement, and wider engagement in key Gulf posts, for example, was critical in delivering the evacuation pathway. Engagement plans are already built into contingency planning but these could be more detailed and given dedicated resource. This is necessary both to secure partners' cooperation in delivering the UK's strategic objectives, and to explain clearly to the public, partners and parliament the FCDO's role and response to a crisis. Although parliamentary engagement is an ongoing focus of the FCDO, more detailed plans should be developed as part of contingency planning and deployed earlier in future crises, including increased use of engagement tools such as Ministerial 'Dear Colleagues' letters and briefing sessions for parliamentarians.
- ix. Information management:** The FCDO possesses in-depth expertise both in managing crises and in information technology. These should be integrated more fully from the outset of a crisis in order to maximise their effectiveness. Bringing in information experts earlier, and as a formal part of the crisis response,

could facilitate the design and set-up of efficient data collection, sharing, protection and storage solutions. The roll-out of a single FCDO IT platform in 2022 will further improve the FCDO's crisis response and information sharing.

- x. **Correspondence:** The volume and rate of correspondence received by the FCDO during the crisis period were unprecedented: in a six week period, approximately 30,000 letters were received from MPs, compared to 14,000 Covid-related letters over a three month period in 2020. The total number of emails received by the FCDO into our crisis mailboxes between August and October was significantly higher. Responding to this challenge was a remarkable effort, but proved extremely difficult. A lack of clarity among MPs and members of the public about which Government department should be contacted regarding different routes to qualification for evacuation and resettlement in the UK, about the limits on our ability to offer evacuation to Afghan nationals, and on the best route to contact the FCDO, combined with technical and policy challenges with existing FCDO response mechanisms, led to systems being extremely stretched. Work began to improve these systems within the FCDO during the crisis. Building on this, the FCDO's interface with the public during future crises should be redesigned and streamlined, improving systems and setting clearer expectations amongst parliament and the public as to what level of response the FCDO can provide. Automation should be a central part of this, including through triaging, addressing simple enquiries and improving the speed of response.
- xi. **Transition through and out of crisis:** Following the end of the military evacuation, the focus of HMG and the FCDO remained on assisting eligible persons still in Afghanistan to leave via third countries. The unanticipated scope and speed of the crisis meant resource was unavailable earlier to plan for this post-evacuation phase. Revision of the crisis doctrine and wider work within the FCDO on workforce agility should consider setting aside dedicated resource to plan for the transition through different phases of a crisis, particularly ones of such scale and intensity.

Implementation

9. The FCDO Management Board considered and agreed these recommendations on 28 January, committing to their implementation.
10. Work has already begun to implement the recommendations and relevant lessons have been incorporated into the FCDO's response to the situation in and around Ukraine, including:
 - changes to the crisis management structure to allow greater senior focus on both diplomatic and operational issues;
 - greater central management of the supply and demand of staff allocated to the response;
 - changes to our consular response, including in-depth consular contingency planning enabling outreach to specific groups of vulnerable British Nationals;
 - reviewing the mechanism by which we process correspondence and implementing a new system that will ensure urgent enquires are prioritised, with processes streamlined to ensure faster responses;

- developing internal processes and ownership for processing large amounts of correspondence, including from MPs, should this be required; and
- from 1 March, the FCDO has held regular briefing sessions with MPs and issued daily written updates, reiterating the 24/7 hotline for Parliamentarians with urgent consular and emergency travel document constituency cases.

11. I have asked the FCDO's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, chaired by a non-executive Director, to review and assure progress on the implementation of these lessons in the autumn of this year. The Management Board will formally review progress at the end of the year. In addition, I have shared these lessons with colleagues in other government departments to support our collective crisis preparedness.

Conclusion

12. I remain proud of the efforts of FCDO staff during the Afghanistan crisis last year, not least their work alongside HMG colleagues to evacuate more than 15,000 people from Afghanistan within a fortnight. FCDO staff in the UK and across the world made outstanding contributions and demonstrated their commitment to public service. I am grateful too for the open and constructive way with which FCDO colleagues have reflected on their experiences to understand how our processes can be improved. The resulting lessons and recommendations allow the department to move forward with the confidence that we will emerge better-prepared and equipped to respond to international crises in future.

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