



House of Commons  
Foreign Affairs Committee

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**Missing in action:  
UK leadership and  
the withdrawal from  
Afghanistan: Government  
Response to the  
Committee's First Report**

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**Second Special Report of Session  
2022–23**

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## Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and its associated public bodies.

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# Second Special Report

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The Foreign Affairs Committee published its First Report of Session 2022–23, [\*Missing in action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan\*](#) (HC 169) on 24 May 2022. The Government's Response was received on 18 July 2022 and is appended below.

## Government Response

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### INTRODUCTION

1. The Government is grateful to the Foreign Affairs Committee for its report on the UK's 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Government agrees that there are fundamental lessons to learn, and to act on, from this experience and the feedback received. The Government accepts that there were areas of its crisis response which need improvement, and is determined to raise standards in its preparedness for, and response to, future crises. The FCDO specifically is committed to implementing those lessons, as it seeks to do after every major crisis. The Lessons Learned section of this response sets out the steps the FCDO is taking as a Department both to deliver, and to monitor delivery of, that commitment.

2. This response seeks to address the Committee's recommendations both in the order in which they appear in the 'Conclusions and Recommendations' section of the Committee's Report, and chronologically. It covers first the period from the February 2020 US-Taliban Doha Agreement to August 2021; then the evacuation, including questions around resettlement policy and implementation; and, finally, future UK engagement in Afghanistan.

3. Some of the Committee's recommendations cover issues that are specifically for the FCDO to address departmentally. Others are for the Government as a whole to act upon. Throughout the two decades of our military engagement since 2001, UK policy on Afghanistan has been made across Government, co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office, working to Cabinet Ministers in the relevant Cabinet Sub-Committee. The creation of the National Security Council and National Security Secretariat in 2010 were in part a response to the perceived need for strengthened central co-ordination of UK international engagements involving the interests of multiple Departments—particularly those, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, which included long-term UK military deployments. Since 2010, the National Security Council has been the principal Ministerial decision-making body on Afghanistan policy, supported by the National Security Secretariat, which has led policy co-ordination, and has overseen its implementation, at senior official level.

4. The Government's response to the crisis last August was one of the most challenging, intense and complex overseas operations those who worked on it had been involved in, and the largest air evacuation operation in recent memory. The Government remains profoundly grateful to all those who took part, military and civilians alike, for the courage and commitment to public service they showed, and is grateful to the Committee for the recognition it gave them in its report.

5. The Afghan people have suffered the devastating effects of violent conflict for decades. The Government agrees with the Committee that the UK must remain engaged, working

with our international partners, to alleviate humanitarian suffering, to address potential threats to the UK, and to try to promote a more stable and better future for all Afghans. The third section of this response addresses the Committee's specific recommendations for this new phase of UK engagement with Afghanistan.

## THE PRE-CRISIS PERIOD AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 1:** *The manner of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan was a disaster, a betrayal of our allies, and weakens the trust that helps to keep British people safe. It will affect the UK's international reputation and interests for many years to come. There were systemic failures of intelligence, diplomacy, planning and preparation, which raise questions about machinery of Government, principally the National Security Council:*

- *The UK Government failed effectively to shape or respond to Washington's decision to withdraw, despite having had 18 months' notice.*
- *The UK Government failed to predict the speed of the Taliban's takeover. The fact that this came as a surprise to many, including the militants themselves, does not excuse the UK's failures, but rather makes it more urgent to identify where its intelligence gathering, analysis and planning fell short. The failure to heed warnings from the Kabul Embassy points to systemic shortcomings in drawing on officials' in-country knowledge. Despite this, the FCDO has sought to avoid responsibility, and the parameters of its internal review have been set to avoid the topic of intelligence altogether.*
- *The FCDO failed to make the necessary preparations for withdrawal, in terms of laying the groundwork for an evacuation with third countries, considering and planning for which of the UK's in-country partners should be prioritised for evacuation, and putting in place a robust timeline to evacuate the Embassy that could adapt to fast-changing scenarios.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 2:** *Once the US decision was announced in February 2020, the UK Government should have immediately taken steps to develop a clear and coherent policy on who it would prioritise for evacuation; to gather and securely store information on eligible locally employed staff, including biometric data; and to build contacts with neighbouring countries to facilitate any evacuation. It did none of these adequately. Though the UK Government saw a rapid collapse in Afghanistan as a plausible scenario, the FCDO failed properly to prepare for it. As the situation deteriorated, the Foreign Secretary should have taken the lead on contact with third countries, making intensive efforts to put in place evacuation routes. Instead, he delegated meetings to junior ministers, only stepping into action once Kabul had fallen. It is unacceptable that Afghans who supported the UK mission were put at risk by the failure to secure sensitive documents held by the British Embassy. This points to serious problems with the FCDO's ability to process and act on intelligence about the deteriorating situation, and to put its evacuation procedures into action. Embassy staff—who faced personal risk in a high-pressure situation—should have been supported through clear, timely and realistic procedures for closing the Embassy that were capable of being put*

*into action within hours, as became necessary. The department's apparent failure adequately to test Embassy close-down plans is a derogation of its basic responsibility to staff.*

6. The April 2021 decision to withdraw NATO forces, and the subsequent course of events to August 2021, were set in motion in substantial part by the US-Taliban Doha Agreement of February 2020. That Agreement was negotiated bilaterally between the previous US Administration and the Taliban, and there was a parallel bilateral agreement between the US and the then Government of Afghanistan.

7. At the heart of the Doha Agreement was a pledge by the Taliban to enter negotiations with the then Afghan Government, with the aim of agreeing the establishment of a new power-sharing Government, as a means of finally ending Afghanistan's multi-decade conflict, and in return for a pledge to withdraw US and other NATO forces by a specific date. This marked a fundamental change from the conditions-based approach to security transition in Afghanistan that NATO allies had followed until then.

8. From the time that the Doha Agreement was announced in February 2020, cross-Government discussions began to consider the implications for the UK's involvement in Afghanistan. A series of National Security Council (NSC) meetings were held on Afghanistan in 2020 and 2021. As with all NSC meetings, these were attended by Cabinet Ministers across Government and informed by assessments of the situation and prospects made centrally by the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), drawing on all available sources, including reporting from our Embassy in Kabul.

9. These NSC meetings considered the prospects for the peace process envisaged under the Doha Agreement, and how the UK could help maximise the chances of its success, as that outcome was judged to be likely to best serve UK long-term interests. In parallel, they also set in motion contingency planning for a range of scenarios, reflecting the outcomes judged most likely by the JIC. Planning for a possible military withdrawal named "Operation CATTALO" started in March 2020, including provision for Embassy closure and withdrawal of people and equipment if required. Standing plans for a military-led civilian evacuation were reviewed and updated from Spring 2020, alongside planning for potential military withdrawal. This became known as Operation PITTING in January 2021, and this planning was further accelerated following the April 2021 decision to withdraw NATO troops.

10. Over this period, the Government engaged the US Administration on multiple levels and channels, including military-to-military, to try to shape the evolving US approach, and to try to increase the chances that the peace process envisaged by Doha might succeed. The UK agreed to lead in particular on work to try to improve the strained relationship between the Afghan Government and the Pakistani Government. The UK also advocated to the Pakistani Government to press the Taliban to commit in earnest to the negotiations with the Afghan Government envisaged under Doha. In responding to the Doha Agreement in this way, the Government had no illusions about the chances of success, but it wanted to do everything possible to try to avert the sort of outcome that eventually followed.

11. The Government does not agree that it failed to plan for a possible evacuation, or that the FCDO failed to plan for the possible closure of the British Embassy in Kabul. Those issues are covered in the sections below titled 'Kabul Embassy Compound Closure' (paragraphs 43–56) and 'The Evacuation' (paragraphs 57–71).

## RESETTLEMENT POLICY

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 3: *Most damning for the FCDO is the total absence of a plan—developed in conjunction with the Home Office—for evacuating Afghans who supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government. The Government was never going to be able to evacuate all—or even many—of these people. But it failed to deliver the bare minimum that we owed them: a well-considered plan for who would be prioritised for extraction, and clear communications to those seeking help. The lack of clarity led to confusion and false hope, hindering individuals from making the best decision for themselves based on a realistic understanding of their situation. The UK has a responsibility to those who it encouraged and funded to take on high-profile roles that place them at risk from the Taliban, but the FCDO did not consider whether or how to evacuate these individuals until after the fall of Kabul in mid-August. This is a serious failure.***

12. The Government recognises the strength of the Committee's view that the UK had a responsibility to Afghan nationals beyond those who had worked for HMG directly, and notes the parallel recommendation from the International Development Committee about those who work on UK aid-funded programmes overseas. That specific question is covered in the section below on the Evacuation and Resettlement policy (paragraphs 72 - 84).

13. The Committee's report raises the important wider question of whether due consideration was given across government in this period to whether, in the light of the Doha Agreement, the Government could and should offer resettlement in the UK to Afghan nationals, and whether the necessary plans were put in place to deliver on that.

14. That issue was considered in this period, on a cross-Government basis. As a consequence of this work, members of the National Security Council and Domestic and Economy Implementation Committee agreed in December 2020 the new Afghanistan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), which offered resettlement to current and former locally employed Afghan staff of HM Government who, as a result of their employment, face a high risk and imminent threat to life. Category Four of the ARAP scheme also made provision to consider, on a case-by-case basis, applications from Afghan nationals who had not been directly employed by HMG, but who had "*worked in meaningful enabling roles for HMG, in extraordinary and unconventional contexts*". ARAP was, and remains, a whole of Government scheme, not confined to the former Afghan employees of any single Department.

15. There was, therefore, by the end of 2020, a single cross-Government scheme, considered by members of the National Security Council and Domestic and Economy Implementation Committee and communicated publicly, through which resettlement would be offered to thousands of Afghans and qualifying dependants. It was agreed that the MOD and Home Office would jointly lead on the delivery of this new scheme, with

significantly reinforced teams based at PJHQ and in the Home Office, and a civilian team based at the British Embassy in Kabul to carry out critical parts of the applications process, notably the collection of biometric data and visa issuing.

16. Further details of how the ARAP scheme would operate were then worked up, and practical preparations made, for the scheme to open and begin operations as planned on 1 April 2021. Its implementation was accelerated as the crisis approached, enabling nearly 2,000 Afghans to be brought direct to the UK on charter flights under this new scheme before the military evacuation.

17. The FCDO was involved in the administration and delivery of ARAP throughout: assessing applications from Afghans who had been employed by the FCDO; supporting the delivery of the scheme in Kabul (including hosting and contributing staff to the MOD-led civilian team which processed applications in Kabul); and securing essential permissions and support from the then Afghan Government for charter flights to bring successful applicants to the UK.

18. The scope of the ARAP scheme reflected the collective view of members of the National Security Council and Domestic and Economy Implementation Committee of what was deliverable in practice, both in terms of the UK's ability to bring Afghans out of Afghanistan, and to resettle people properly in the United Kingdom. The Government has always been acutely conscious that the demand for resettlement in the UK will inevitably vastly outstrip its capacity to resettle people, and that difficult choices are therefore inescapable, if it is to help anybody in this way. All such UK resettlement schemes need to be developed on a cross-Government basis, with immigration powers resting with the Home Secretary, and responsibility for finding suitable accommodation with DLUHC. The FCDO does not have the immigration powers, experience, or resources, to design and deliver resettlement schemes of its own.

19. There was never a realistic alternative for the UK to evacuate Afghan nationals to any third countries without the promise of subsequent resettlement in the UK. No third country would have been prepared to admit Afghan nationals on the UK's behalf on that basis. This meant that, when it came to evacuation planning, the Government could only plan to evacuate those with a clear right to come to the UK, either as British nationals, or as Afghan nationals whose resettlement in the UK had been agreed in advance.

## PLANNING FOR THE PERIOD AFTER NATO TROOPS DEPARTED

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 4: *Managing a complex evacuation requires Government departments to work together seamlessly, including the FCDO, MOD, intelligence agencies, Home Office and Cabinet Office. The National Security Council is “the main forum for collective discussion of the government’s objectives for national security”. It failed to adequately coordinate cross-Government planning and preparation for the withdrawal from Afghanistan.***

20. The Chair of the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy wrote to Sir Stephen Lovegrove on 22 June seeking his response to these findings of the Committee's report.

21. The pace and intensity of cross-Government work on Afghanistan increased significantly from early 2021. Between January and October 2021, there were 11 NSCs or Ministerial COBRs on Afghanistan, usually chaired by the Prime Minister and attended

by Cabinet Ministers from across Government. There were three NSC (Officials) meetings. There were 14 official-level COBRs chaired by the National Security Adviser and 28 chaired by the Deputy National Security Adviser.

22. Following the decision in April 2021 that NATO forces would leave Afghanistan, the NSC examined the feasibility of the UK retaining a presence after NATO troops had departed. Ministers decided that the UK should seek to maintain an Embassy in Kabul for as long as possible, as a platform to continue to provide support to the then Afghan Government, to carry out priority development, counter terrorism, and serious and organised crime work, and to be able to deliver the ARAP scheme.

23. At the same time, Cabinet Ministers asked Departments to work up contingency options for continuing priority work, in the event that the British Embassy had to be downsized, relocated to a less vulnerable site, or closed entirely. Under the last of these potential scenarios, each Department was asked to examine whether and how it might deliver priority work remotely, either from the UK, or from the region.

24. In late April 2021, the FCDO established an Afghanistan Transition Task Force, led by Sir Laurie Bristow (before he became UK Ambassador in Kabul). Its focus was on the urgent practical challenges that needed to be addressed in order to be confident that the UK could safely maintain staff at the Kabul Embassy compound after NATO forces had withdrawn on the July timetable set by the Commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan.

25. From April to June 2021, the Government worked intensively with the US and other Allies to ensure that the necessary security and other critical enablers, to sustain the presence of Allied Embassies would be in place before NATO forces left. These included ensuring that Kabul International Airport was viable, maintaining the integrity of the Green Zone in which the British and most allied Embassies were located, and ensuring the availability of relevant enabling support. The Prime Minister received an assurance at the time of the G7 summit from President Biden that those enablers would be in place before the final departure of NATO troops.

26. Concurrently, over spring 2021, detailed planning led by PJHQ continued on updating and refining Op PITTING in light of the impending departure of NATO troops. PJHQ planners were deployed to Afghanistan in June 2021, joining up PJHQ with the British Embassy. Brigadier Dan Blanchford, who was to command Op PITTING in Kabul in August, visited Kabul during this preparatory phase, spending time with the British Ambassador and Embassy team.

27. In January 2021, the British Embassy started scoping locations in Kabul for an Evacuation Handling Centre. The Baron Hotel, just outside the airport perimeter, was chosen in April, and detailed talks began with the hotel management, resulting in the signature of a contract for the provision of the handling centre. This made the UK the only country to have made this critical preparation. Because the UK had done so, the Baron Hotel would become a centre for international co-ordination when it came to the evacuation in mid-August.

28. As the Taliban made progressive territorial gains through May and June 2021, and put regional capitals at risk, delivery of the ARAP scheme was accelerated, and the tempo of planning for Op PITTING increased. Parallel contingency planning for closing the British

Embassy compound continued. Through July and early August 2021, cross-Government discussions were held on options for evacuations, including how to encourage British Nationals to leave, and the scope of eligibility, if an evacuation were to take place.

29. A key part of the preparation of Op PITTING was the planning of evacuation routes. The FCDO and the MOD conducted a joint visit to Dubai between 2 – 6 August, which the Government planned to use as a ‘Temporary Safe Location’, a staging post for the evacuation of UK nationals and eligible Afghans. The Government secured a dedicated airport terminal in Dubai for the use of its evacuation flights, through an agreement signed with the Emirati authorities. This proved a second crucial element of our advance planning, enabling the UK to move all those evacuated on UK military flights during Op PITTING quickly on to the UK, rather than being held for lengthy periods in third country processing centres, and also to run frequent RAF flights to and from Kabul. This operation ran smoothly, and evacuated individuals were provided with comfortable facilities. Minister of State, Lord Ahmad, visited Dubai on 4 September 2021 to thank the cross-government team and the UAE Government.

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 5: *When engaging in fragile environments, the Government should keep better records—securely held—on locally-employed staff to ensure that any evacuation can be carried out more effectively. It should devise a policy, based on clear and fair principles, about the assistance that will be offered to local partners in the event of a security deterioration, and report to us when it has done so. In its response to this report, the FCDO should explain why its Lessons Learned review only covers the period from April 2021 onwards, and why it does not cover intelligence matters. We ask the Government to share with this Committee the results of its internal investigation into the failure to destroy sensitive documents at the Kabul Embassy. The FCDO should review its procedures for evacuating embassies and destroying sensitive documents and data, and report back to the Committee on the steps it will take to avoid a similar failure happening again.***

30. The Government agrees with the Committee on the need to keep accurate, up-to-date records, securely held, on locally employed staff.

31. The Government’s response to the question of whether it should offer resettlement to local partners not directly employed, in the event of a security deterioration, is set out in the answers to the Committee’s recommendations 3 and 8, above and below.

32. The main tool the Government has to assist partners in making informed judgements about the safety and security of their staff is FCDO Travel Advice. The Government recognised the likely heightened risks to British nationals in Afghanistan arising from the withdrawal of NATO troops, and strengthened FCDO Travel Advice accordingly. Before 21 April 2021, FCDO Travel Advice was to avoid all travel to Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan, with the exception of the Enhanced Security Zone in Kabul, the international airport, the city of Bamyán, and Panjshir province (to these latter places we advised against all but essential travel). On 21 April, FCDO Travel Advice was changed to advise against all travel to anywhere in Afghanistan, and to advise British Nationals to consider leaving the country by commercial means. The British Embassy in Kabul contacted British NGOs, security companies, and others with an expatriate presence, to ensure they were aware of this advice, and to encourage them to act on it. The FCDO further strengthened Travel

Advice on 6 August to advise UK nationals to leave immediately, while regular scheduled flights were still available. There was seat availability on these flights right up until 15 August when the capital fell.

## FCDO LESSONS LEARNED REVIEW

33. In September 2021, the FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary asked a senior official to lead an internal Lessons Learned review. The review was considered by the FCDO Board of Management in January. The review team carried out over 70 one to one interviews, 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. Recommendations were made under eleven broad categories, as set out in Sir Philip Barton's 9 March letter to the Committee.

34. The FCDO is committed to seeing through the full implementation of these recommendations. Progress on this will be reviewed by the FCDO's Audit and Risk and Assurance Committee in November 2022, and then by the Management Board. The FCDO will update the Committee on progress early next year.

35. Lessons had also been learned from the Covid-19 repatriation response, including on contingency plans for charter flights.

36. The FCDO has drawn directly on the Afghanistan experience to inform our planning for, and implementation of, our response to the Ukraine crisis. Among the things the FCDO has done as a result have included:

- i) Reinforcing senior crisis leadership capacity. Early institution of a “two-gold” system of crisis senior supervision, separating the policy and operational response, and early identification of alternates for each role, to provide resilience.
- ii) The embedding of Human Resources staff into crisis planning from the outset, expediting security clearances and IT for staff asked to work on the crisis, matching staff skillsets into roles, and a greater emphasis on induction processes for staff to orient them quickly into crisis roles.
- iii) A review of worldwide consular crisis policies, such as eligibility for evacuation assistance, to ensure that advice on what assistance is available, and to whom, is clear.
- iv) Generation of robust estimates of Eligible Persons for consular assistance, particularly British nationals in country, through use of local immigration data.
- v) Establishment of a new registration system for British Nationals in Ukraine. This gave a clearer understanding of who was there, and allowed the FCDO to send regular messages and information about how to access consular services, including provision of emergency travel documents and financial assistance to return to the UK.
- vi) Greater focus on planning jointly with the Permanent Joint Headquarters in Northwood, the deployable Joint Force Headquarters and Home Office/

UK Border Force, including joint reconnaissance visits. This included seeking early Home Office/UK Border Force policy steers on eligibility and visa waivers to inform planning work.

- vii) A greater focus upfront on identifying and agreeing a reasonable worst-case scenario that could be planned against across Government, to generate feasible courses of action.
- viii) Early engagement with regional posts to identify most likely exit routes and instructions for them to plan for field deployments/establish temporary presences at border areas.
- ix) Identification of key vulnerable groups (commissioning parents of surrogate babies, medical students, Orthodox Jewish communities). Outreach to those vulnerable groups.
- x) Extensive use of table-top exercises in the lead up to crisis to test plans, including with Kyiv, regional posts and seniors in London, including Red-Teaming to challenge optimism bias.
- xi) Following the example in Kabul, plans for post drawdown, including a fall-back office and operating base in Lviv, were all developed as part of contingency planning.
- xii) Improvements to systems for managing public and Ministerial correspondence. Work is still under way to ensure that systems for dealing with correspondence are able to cope with the volumes seen during the Afghanistan crisis, but urgent changes arising from the Afghanistan lessons learned report have enabled the FCDO to perform well on correspondence through the Ukraine crisis. So far, the Department has sent 3120 Ministerial and 3220 Treat Official responses, 98% within the 20 day target, and 70% within the three day target set by Ministers for Ukraine correspondence.
- xiii) Systematic and proactive engagement with Parliamentarians aimed at keeping them informed of FCDO work, including regular written and in-person briefings.
- xiv) New welfare measures for staff working on the crisis, including: a dedicated mailbox for staff to raise concerns/seek advice; a peer support group facilitated by a former Ambassador to Ukraine; regular listening sessions run by the FCDO staff counsellor; and tailored support for individuals evacuated from and remaining in Ukraine. Staff are also regularly encouraged to raise any concerns about the UK response with Gold leaders.

37. The FCDO will in due course conduct an internal lessons learned exercise regarding the Ukraine crisis, and will share its key findings with the Committee.

38. The Committee asked why the FCDO's Afghanistan lessons learned review only covered the period from April 2021 onwards. The FCDO wanted to learn and put in place operational lessons relating to crisis response as quickly as it could, ahead of the next major crisis, and needed to make the exercise manageable in scope. It wanted to look specifically at how the FCDO had responded in the period from the April announcement

of the withdrawal of NATO forces, up to the end of the evacuation. A wider review looking back at lessons from the UK's engagement in Afghanistan over the last two decades could not have been completed in the timescale set for this exercise.

## **INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS**

39. The Committee also asked why intelligence assessments were not covered in the FCDO's Lessons Learned review.

40. Government policymaking on national security issues is informed by all-source assessments produced by the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO), discussed and agreed in the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) with the involvement of relevant departments and agencies (reforms to the process of intelligence assessment and the supporting machinery were implemented after the 2005 Butler review). An updated JIC assessment on the issue under consideration is routinely briefed to Ministers and other members of the National Security Council at the beginning of each NSC meeting.

41. The FCDO's role in the production of these assessments is to contribute reporting from its overseas Posts, and any other relevant insights and expertise. The FCDO does not produce intelligence assessments of its own. The FCDO's internal lessons learned report on Afghanistan focused on decisions, processes, and systems within the FCDO, over which it had control departmentally. That is the reason why intelligence assessments were not within the scope of that exercise.

42. As the previous Foreign Secretary set out in evidence to the Committee, the JIC's central scenario was that there would be a steady deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan, but that Kabul was unlikely to fall in 2021. There was no inevitability about collapse, and even the most pessimistic external assessments did not predict that the Taliban would over-run the Afghan security forces so quickly. The rapid fall of provincial capitals from 6 August, and the fall of Kabul itself on 15 August, came as a shock even to the Taliban themselves.

## **KABUL EMBASSY COMPOUND CLOSURE**

43. The Prime Minister and NSC judged that the UK's national interest lay in continuing to do all we could to prevent a collapse of the Afghan Government. This was the main focus of UK effort in the months leading to the evacuation, alongside the contingency planning described above. The Government sought to shore up the then Afghan Government, to continue to deliver development assistance, and vital counter-terrorism work, and to deliver the newly launched ARAP scheme. Achieving this added significantly to the complexity of planning and delivering the shutdown of the Kabul Embassy in a safe manner; the Embassy had to be closed progressively while still in use, with corporate services and security teams being the last to leave.

44. The British Embassy in Kabul was a highly unusual, exceptionally large, and complex site, reflecting the breadth of UK effort in Afghanistan and the very difficult security environment. There were approximately 130 separate buildings, including all the accommodation units, several Embassy office buildings, residential houses, security posts, and amenities. In April 2021, there were more than 800 people working on the site, including UK-based staff from a range of Government Departments, Country-Based staff, life support contractors, and security staff. Staff were generally not able to use local

vehicles, hotels, or restaurants. All the life support for UK-Based staff members was on the Embassy compound, including a canteen, four large diesel electricity generators, and a water purification system.

45. There was a comprehensive plan for the relocation and closure of the Embassy. From April 2021 onwards, the Embassy started the process of reducing holdings of papers, surplus equipment, Government artwork, and sensitive material. In May 2021, the then Foreign Secretary agreed that we should reduce the maximum number of UK-based staff present at the British Embassy in Kabul at any one time from 115 to 75, to reduce our exposure. The FCDO drew up contingency plans for using the UK military facility at the airport as a fall back location for the Embassy.

46. The Government had to balance these risk reduction and contingency planning steps with the clear policy requirement to sustain work on the highest UK policy priorities, notably to try to shore up the then Afghan Government to prevent a collapse, to sustain vital counter terrorism efforts, and to deliver the newly launched ARAP scheme.

47. From June 2021, the FCDO put in place a system of weekly assessments from the responsible Director to the Permanent Under-Secretary of its ability to continue to fulfil its duty of care obligations to its staff at the Embassy, and their ability to continue delivering their work effectively in a deteriorating environment. These assessments were based on a careful review of changes in the situation on the ground, against a series of agreed triggers and indicators, monitored closely by the Embassy's security team and staff. These assessments incorporated the latest assessments of the security situation and prospects from the senior UK military officer in theatre.

48. Between 7 June and 4 August, the Embassy started progressively closing sections of the its compound, moving all staff out of housing and into accommodation "pods", accelerating the clearing out of papers and equipment, and reducing staff numbers to a small core team. The Embassy stored weapons and ammunition for its guard force, which had to be removed or made safe.

49. On 11 August, in the wake of the rapid fall of key provincial capitals, and a clearly growing threat to Kabul, this assessment system resulted in a recommendation by FCDO officials to the then Foreign Secretary that the FCDO could no longer confidently discharge its duty of care obligations for staff, and that it should enact its plan for complete closure of the Embassy compound, with the destruction of all remaining sensitive equipment and papers, and withdrawal of all staff to our fall back airport facility. The FCDO announced this on 12 August. On the same day, the US Embassy announced that it was likewise closing and relocating staff to the airport. The British Embassy shut down timetable had originally been scheduled to take 7–8 days, but, in view of the rapidly accelerating Taliban advance, that was at this point reduced to five days.

50. That timetable had to be accelerated again on 14 August. That morning, Admiral Vasely, the US Commander in Afghanistan, briefed Allies that he now assessed that the Taliban would launch an attack on Kabul within the next 24–48 hours. He warned that incoming US forces would not by then have arrived in sufficient strength to defend Kabul airport, should it come under determined Taliban assault. Admiral Vasely also warned that only 500 of the 40,000 Afghan Government troops in Kabul were assessed as being prepared to fight, should the Taliban attack the capital. This clear and imminent threat to

the safety of our staff obliged us to bring forward the complete shutdown of the Embassy compound and withdrawal of our last remaining staff to the airport by the evening of 14 August.

51. The FCDO's Embassy closure plan adjusted according to the situation, putting significant additional pressure on the corporate services team to increase the pace of destruction, in an increasingly hostile security environment. The closure team made an inspection of each of the 130 buildings for sensitive documents, including those with staff names.

52. Following the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, a journalist from The Times visited the former Embassy compound and reported finding documents, which he said contained names and details of several Embassy country-based staff members. The FCDO was not shown these documents. On hearing of the names, the FCDO took immediate steps to ensure the safety of the people listed. Four out of the six named individuals were already in the UK.

53. An internal FCDO review concluded that the documents seen by the journalist were most likely to have been held by a contractor organisation, possibly in the Residence Manager's office. The review concluded with very high confidence that all physical documents and IT systems containing classified information had been either removed or destroyed prior to the closure. In respect of unclassified documents containing personal data, the review concluded that almost all will have been removed or destroyed, but there was no absolute guarantee. The review has made recommendations for strengthening the processes for holding sensitive documents, and documents containing personal data, in conflict posts; and for bolstering the provision of equipment for document destruction and ensuring adequate staffing levels in corporate services teams in conflict posts.

54. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) investigated this incident. They considered the case under the UK's GDPR regulation and decided that regulatory action was not required. The ICO made a number of recommendations for follow up action, including that the FCDO should implement the recommendations of its internal review, that it should streamline access to document destruction policy for staff, that it should more regularly review data protection measures for contractor organisations, and that data protection training compliance rates should be maintained for the FCDO and for contractor organisations.

55. The Government deeply regrets that some Afghans were put at risk by the documents that were left behind. The FCDO takes seriously its responsibilities to its staff, and in the light of this incident, has put in place robust plans to make sure that other Posts at risk of a crisis are able to remove or destroy everything needed.

56. The FCDO's own lessons learned review found that prior contingency planning and established crisis doctrine and crisis management structures provided solid foundations for the department's response. However, 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. The report from the FCDO's Lessons Learned review recommended that, when anticipating and planning for future crises, the department should ensure that worst-case scenario planning is more thoroughly developed and tested.

## THE EVACUATION

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 6:** *The absence of the FCDO's top leadership—both ministerial and official—when Kabul fell is a grave indictment of the attitudes of the Government, representing a failure of leadership across the board in the Foreign Office. In particular, the fact that the department's top civil servant did not return until the civilian evacuation was over, while staff across the department struggled to implement a poorly-planned evacuation process under intense pressure, is difficult to understand and impossible to excuse. While it is essential for those at all levels in Government to take leave, this must be tempered at the most senior level by the need to exercise leadership in a crisis. Despite expressions of regret from the then-Foreign Secretary and Permanent Under-Secretary, there was no discussion of this point in the department's Lessons Learned review. In addition to the absence of the FCDO leadership in London, there was a gap on the ground in Kabul: the Government withdrew all FCDO consular staff from Kabul as the evacuation operation began and there was a 48-hour wait before their replacements arrived. This mismanagement and under-resourcing of the evacuation effort in a crucial period likely cost hundreds of people their chance to leave the country, and as a result likely cost lives.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 7:** *The effort to evacuate UK and Afghan nationals after the fall of Kabul represented a heroic effort by the individuals involved, with many—both inside and outside Government—working under enormous pressure to save lives. We commend the bravery of the military and civilian personnel on the ground in Afghanistan during the evacuation, and the hard work and dedication of those coordinating it from elsewhere, including many dedicated civil servants in London. We regret that their sacrifices were undermined by deep failures of leadership in the system they were working within.*

57. The Government thanks the Committee for the recognition they have given to those military and civilian personnel involved in our crisis response. Operation PITTING, the name given to the evacuation of UK civilian and military personnel, British nationals, and eligible Afghans, was led by PJHQ. It was planned and delivered as a cross-Government exercise, and was supported by FCDO and Border Force civilian staff on the ground in Kabul and in the UK. The Government remains profoundly grateful to all those service personnel and civilian staff who took part in the operation, which succeeded in bringing significantly more people out of Afghanistan than had been thought possible in its planning.

58. On 12 August, Herat, Kandahar, and Ghazni fell to the Taliban. The FCDO formally moved into 'Crisis Mode', which meant the establishment of a crisis team in the FCDO's Crisis Centre, supported by staff across the FCDO's home and overseas network, with liaison staff seconded in from PJHQ, the MOD, and Border Force. Operation PITTING was launched on 13 August, when the MOD announced the deployment of 600 troops to Afghanistan.

## FCDO LEADERSHIP AND CROSS-GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING

59. The FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary gave evidence to the Committee setting out the summer leave cover arrangements which he put in place before he took annual leave last August, with both an Acting Permanent Under-Secretary in the normal way, and

a Director-General nominated specifically to lead in parallel on our Afghanistan work. The FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary stayed in touch with the Department all the way through August. He has acknowledged to the Committee that, if he had his time again, he would have come back from leave earlier.

60. In his evidence to the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy in October 2021, the National Security Adviser set out the structures across Whitehall that allowed for the continuity of senior leadership during the crisis period. Decision-making during the crisis was coordinated through daily three star level meetings chaired by the NSA or his Deputy. Cabinet Ministers met frequently during the evacuation in COBR format, setting the strategic direction, which was then implemented by officials and the military. The Minister of State for South Asia, Minister for the Armed Forces and the Minister for Immigration also initiated a daily operational meeting with teams on the ground in Kabul to address key issues, which worked well.

61. The FCDO does not agree that the decision to temporarily withdraw its staff, with the exception of our Ambassador and a small number of Embassy colleagues, to Dubai overnight on 14/15 August, represented mismanagement. Throughout the build-up the evacuation, the safety and security of staff had been one of the Department's key concerns. FCDO staff in Kabul were civilians, not military. That did not mean being risk-averse: throughout the period 2001–2021, UK civilian staff in Kabul had always faced physical dangers, which the FCDO invested a lot of time and money to mitigate to an acceptable level. Diplomats, and diplomatic premises, were regularly targeted by terrorist groups in these years. As the Taliban advance accelerated, the FCDO was obliged to constantly retest its ability to discharge its duty of care for its staff, and to mitigate reasonably foreseeable risks to an acceptable level, in order that staff could continue to do their jobs.

62. As set out in the previous section, the situation appeared radically more threatening on the morning of 14 August. The alarming new assessment contained in US Commander Admiral Vasely's briefing to Allies that morning (paragraph 50 above), as well as the assessment from the UK's own senior military commanders on the ground, were briefed into the daily cross-Whitehall co-ordination meeting, chaired by the Deputy National Security Adviser. These assessments represented a significant rise in the threat to the lives of Embassy staff, and it was clear that our ability to mitigate that threat had dramatically reduced.

63. As a direct consequence of that new assessment, FCDO officials recommended to the then Foreign Secretary that FCDO staff should be temporarily withdrawn from Kabul airport to Dubai, until Kabul airport was sufficiently secure to enable a team to return to support the evacuation of British nationals and eligible Afghans. The then Foreign Secretary agreed to the temporary withdrawal overnight on 14/15 August of FCDO staff, with the exception of the British Ambassador, his Close Protection team, the Embassy's Overseas Security Manager, and two members of the Embassy's Defence Section. On the same day, 15 August, President Ghani left Afghanistan, and the Taliban entered Kabul.

64. The temporary absence of more FCDO staff at the airport did not prevent the first Operation PITTING RAF evacuation flight departing later on 15 August, with 200 people on board, mainly British nationals and their families. FCDO Consular staff were able to support this flight remotely from our Crisis Centre in London. Nor did it make a material difference on 16 August, because the Kabul airport runway was overrun by Afghan

civilians that morning, and all flights in and out had to be paused. No country was able to operate any evacuation flights at that time. The security situation around the airport was not permissive enough to allow the UK Evacuation Handling Centre at the Baron Hotel to operate that day.

65. Overnight on 16/17 August, the US and UK military successfully cleared the airport runway. On 17 August, military flights resumed, allowing the remaining British and US military forces to arrive and to secure the airport, and the evacuation to begin in earnest. Senior staff from the British Embassy Kabul and an FCDO Rapid Deployment Team flew back to Kabul from Dubai overnight on 17/18 August – at the earliest opportunity to do so safely. On arrival, they established themselves at the UK's Evacuation Handling Centre at the Baron Hotel, and immediately began work processing British nationals and their families. Border Force colleagues subsequently joined them, providing crucial professional capacity to assess travel documentation and make decisions on eligibility on the spot, which significantly speeded up processing times.

66. From 16 August, in recognition of the humanitarian crisis, the Home Secretary agreed to relax temporarily aspects of the Immigration Rules (English language and financial requirements) to facilitate visa waivers for the qualifying family members of British nationals, for the period of the military evacuation. This significantly eased processing times, and also increased the number of British national family members potentially eligible for military evacuation.

67. The UK team at the Baron Hotel worked in shifts, 24 hours a day, to process as many eligible persons as possible. This involved meeting Ministers' direction on eligibility and security checks, and seeking visa waivers from the Home Office where necessary. Many of the UK nationals at the Baron Hotel had extended Afghan family members, sometimes with partial or out-of-date documents, or no documents at all, and some were in vulnerable categories. It often took time to determine their eligibility and pass them to military colleagues for boarding onto a flight.

68. This work on the ground was supported by the FCDO Crisis Centre structures in London. The FCDO was formally in crisis mode for 47 days in August and September, 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 FCDO answered over 49,000 hotline calls, received an unprecedented volume of correspondence, and chartered over 100 flights for onward transfer of those evacuated.

69. The terrorist attack close to the Baron Hotel on 26 August forced the relocation of the UK Evacuation Handling Centre to a fall-back facility inside the airport perimeter. FCDO and Border Force staff remained working there processing evacuees until 28 August, the final cut-off point set by PJHQ for UK civilian staff to leave Kabul, in advance of the departure of all UK and US military forces.

70. The UK's evacuation efforts have been misleadingly compared with other countries'. The UK evacuated significantly more people in August 2021 than any country, other than the US. The UK faced a challenge second only to the US in terms of the numbers of dual nationals seeking evacuation, some of whom, it emerged, had travelled to Afghanistan in the run up to the crisis to try to get their Afghanistan-based families out. The UK was

alone in planning, and securing in advance, an Evacuation Handling Centre in Kabul (at the Baron Hotel), and a regional hub for evacuation flights (in Dubai), both of which proved critical, not only to the UK operation, but also to other allies. When the evacuation began, many other allies asked to use the UK facility at the Baron Hotel. The Government estimates that over 30 countries were helped by the UK evacuations process. At times our evacuation process was additionally pressured as a result of US decisions about operation of the gate to their own processing facility.

71. Some European countries, such as France, arranged ad-hoc charter flights earlier in the summer to bring out several hundred of their nationals. This did not mean that they had completed their evacuation by mid-August. The UK did not arrange similar flights for British nationals at that time, because multiple regular scheduled flights were still running, with seat availability, until the evacuation. The Government used Travel Advice instead to urge people repeatedly to take advantage of these flights. The Government did operate charter flights to bring nearly 2000 successful ARAP applicants and their families direct to the UK in the months before the evacuation.

## RESETTLEMENT POLICY

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 8:** *However, on the strategic and humanitarian level the evacuation fell disastrously short. Shortcomings in ARAP, the scheme to evacuate Afghans who had worked directly for the UK Government, left many waiting for a response until it was too late. A total failure to plan how to help Afghans at risk due to their work to promote British values without working directly for the Government—the “Special Cases”—left many in danger. Some will have not taken other options, as they remained with false hope of a rescue that would never come. The Foreign Office wasted time by exploring the options for such a scheme only after the Taliban takeover. The hasty effort to draw up a list of those eligible for evacuation was poorly devised, managed, and staffed. In the absence of criteria that allowed for meaningful prioritisation of cases, the scheme seemingly relied on MPs’ interventions as its primary measure of the vulnerability of those seeking extraction. Given MPs’ responsibility to represent constituents, not to triage needs, this was never going to be a reliable way to deliver the right outcome—but only to attempt to silence criticism. The department failed to perform the most basic crisis-management functions, such as rostering an adequate number of staff to key teams, despite the fact that this Committee raised similar issues around the FCDO’s response to the pandemic. Underlying operational problems—such as a failure to integrate FCO and DFID IT systems—further undermined the effort. Junior staff were left unsupported to deliver a poorly designed policy, making life-and-death decisions with little support or guidance, at a cost to their mental health. While a degree of chaos is to be expected in a crisis, the mismanagement of this category of evacuations was inexcusable. The chaos and lack of preparation was not the sole responsibility of the department. A lack of seriousness, application and coordination at a political level across Government fatally undermined the task in hand. In short, ministers failed to provide adequate leadership at a time of international crisis. This betrayal of our allies is not only morally wrong, but has undermined the credibility of the UK with serious consequences for our interests around the world, damaging trust, encouraging challenge, and making it less likely that people in fragile states will be willing to engage with UK missions in future.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 9:** *The evacuation required clear decision-making, strong political leadership and tight coordination. We have seen little evidence of this. To the contrary, decision-making was so unclear that even senior officials such as the National Security Adviser could not be certain how key decisions were authorised. It is clearly unacceptable that neither ministers nor civil servants have been able to articulate the operational chain of command involved in conducting a major evacuation. The political leadership on offer vacillated so much that no clear priorities were set for who should be evacuated and in what order, giving many thousands of vulnerable people, to whom we owed a debt, a hope that could never be met. Although ministers claimed that they worked closely together, the decision to run the operation through three departments undermined coordination. This is particularly disturbing at a time when the UK faces significant foreign policy challenges, including in relation to Ukraine, Russia, the Balkan states, Yemen, and the Northern Ireland Protocol. Unity of purpose, clarity and coordination require serious intent and consistent political leadership.*

72. The Government agrees with the Committee's recommendation that, as far as possible, decisions should be clearly made, and communicated, in advance of any future evacuations about eligibility for evacuation. The FCDO's own lessons learned review found that *'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.'*

73. As set out above, in the case of evacuation from Afghanistan, an offer to evacuate an Afghan national could only be made if we were also prepared to resettle that person and their eligible family members in the UK. The only non-British passport holders or family members whom the UK could evacuate who did not have this established right to come to the UK were third country nationals (such as the staff of allies' Embassies, members of the British Embassy's contracted guard force or other contracted life support staff, who were able to take onwards flights home from our Temporary Safe Location in Dubai).

74. The Government recognises the strength of the Committee's belief that *'The UK has a responsibility to those who it encouraged and funded to take on high-profile roles that place them at risk from the Taliban'*. The Government notes that the International Development Committee has argued in its latest Afghanistan report that HMG has a particular obligation to workers in the aid sector whom it does not employ directly, but who deliver UK-funded programmes in fragile states.

75. The Government will consider these arguments carefully in planning for years 2 and 3 of Pathway 3 of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme. FCDO officials will be working with Home Office officials to develop proposals for years 2 and 3 of Pathway 3, and would be happy to discuss with the Committee how the FCDO should approach this.

76. The Government would note, however, that very broad commitments of the nature implied by the Foreign Affairs, and International Development, Committees' recommendations, would, unless significantly qualified, go well beyond in numerical terms the UK's practical ability to resettle people properly. Raising that possibility could also have significant unintended negative consequences. If the Government were obliged to offer in *extremis* resettlement to the UK to anyone working on programmes it funded

in fragile states where there was a risk of an evacuation being needed, that could severely inhibit the provision of funding to NGOs and INGOs delivering vital development programming.

77. Afghanistan may have presented a highly unusual set of circumstances, in the length and depth of our military deployment and cross-Government engagement. There are, however, a number of other fragile states where the British Government funds large-scale humanitarian and development programmes, where the risk of state collapse and the temporary evacuation of the UK presence is an ever-present reality.

78. The other consideration to note is the impact of public contingency preparations for evacuation on public confidence, and on fragile confidence in the survival of existing Governments, in situations such as in Afghanistan in 2021. In the run up to the evacuation, the Government faced some difficult choices, and had some sharp disagreements with the then Afghan Government, on the pace of ARAP resettlement, and its impact on the ability of key elements of the Afghan security establishment to hold off the Taliban advance.

79. As set out above, there had been cross-Government discussion in 2020 about who the Government should offer to resettle in the UK, the result of which was the ARAP scheme. As the Government planned Operation PITTING, it made provision to include those Afghans who had been accepted under ARAP, alongside British nationals and their families. There had not been consideration until shortly before the evacuation (when a consortium of British media organisations wrote to the Prime Minister seeking resettlement for their Afghan staff) of the possibility of widening this to offer evacuation and resettlement to other Afghans.

80. One of the main reasons for that was the formidable scale and complexity of the anticipated challenge of evacuating all those already eligible (UK civilian staff and the Embassy's large third country national contracted guard force and life support team; British nationals and their families; and ARAP qualified Afghans and their families), in what was expected to be a very dangerous, contested environment. The Government did not want at that stage to make additional promises to other groups which it could have no confidence it would be able to deliver on.

81. It was only once the evacuation had begun, when the number of flights PJHQ were able to operate into Kabul each day proved to be higher than anticipated, and the evacuation appeared set to continue for longer than originally thought possible, that it appeared that there might be some spare capacity on RAF flights to help anyone beyond HMG staff, British nationals, and successful ARAP applicants.

82. At this point, Ministers meeting in COBR indicated that any spare capacity on UK military flights should be used to help especially at risk Afghans. Home Office, MOD and FCDO officials engaged intensively to work out rapidly what legal routes were potentially available to operationalise this direction from Ministers. This led to the Home Secretary agreeing on 16 August to use her discretionary power to grant Leave to Enter the UK Outside the Immigration Rules ('LOTR') to certain additional groups if they were evacuated.

83. This was never envisaged as a large-scale new scheme, and Ministers remained clear that British nationals and successful ARAP applicants must remain the highest priorities. The Government was only ever going to be able to help a relatively small number in this way.

Ministers nevertheless asked officials to do what was possible, recognising the significant external pressure to do so, from Parliament, UK media organisations, and from others pressing for particular groups or individuals who did not meet the ARAP criteria to be helped.

84. The Government agrees that it should have considered the issue of whether the UK could or should have offered evacuation to wider cohorts of Afghan nationals beyond the scope of the ARAP scheme in advance of the evacuation. In view of the facts known at the time, it seems likely that, had the Government done so, Ministers would have concluded that in practice, the UK was unlikely to have had the capacity to evacuate and resettle anyone beyond its own staff, British nationals and their families, and successful ARAP applicants and their families.

## RESETTLEMENT IMPLEMENTATION

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 10:** *The failure to plan for the Special Cases evacuations, or to put in place a fair and robust prioritisation system, left the process open to arbitrary political interventions. This is illustrated by the case of the Nowzad animal charity. Amid intense media attention, its staff were called for evacuation at the last minute, despite not meeting the FCDO's prioritisation criteria, after a mysterious intervention from elsewhere in Government. Multiple senior officials believed that the Prime Minister played a role in this decision. We have yet to be offered a plausible alternative explanation for how it came about. Meanwhile, the charity's founder was allowed to use a charter flight to rescue his animals, absorbing significant Government resources in the midst of the biggest military airlift in decades. We make no criticism of the organisation, its staff, or those who campaigned on its behalf: they were open about their case and objectives, which were in keeping with their stated priorities. The same cannot be said for the Government. The episode highlights deep problems with Government decision-making. First, that it allowed its resources to be absorbed by media campaigns, rather than focusing on the humanitarian and strategic implications of the crisis. Second, that it made important policy decisions through informal, unaccountable means, which were later impossible to trace. Our concern is not so much with the fact that there was an intervention to overrule the FCDO's prioritisation process, which was itself deeply flawed, but with the fact that the department has been unable to trace the source of this intervention, and that, as a result, no one can be held accountable and the decision-making process cannot be properly scrutinised.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 11:** *The FCDO has repeatedly given us answers that, in our judgement, are at best intentionally evasive, and often deliberately misleading. On Nowzad, they only admitted that the case had been in any way unusual when faced with the evidence of whistleblowers. At best, the Permanent Under-Secretary displayed a worrying lack of knowledge of the department he leads, and a determination to avoid unearthing the facts that would allow him to answer our questions. Far from the routine process he initially described to us, this case involved an unknown decision-maker in Government completely overruling the FCDO's system for prioritising individuals for evacuation, triggering urgent last-minute consultations with some of the most senior people in Government, in discussions with no notes taken or decisions recorded. It seems unlikely that the Permanent Under-Secretary would not*

*have been aware of this at the time, particularly given the high sensitivity and media interest in this topic. It seems still less likely that he would not have become aware of it later, when preparing to answer our questions on the matter.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 12:** *Without the intervention of whistle blowers, we would not be aware that this intervention had taken place at all, despite asking many questions on the topic. Parliament can only perform its role of holding Government to account if it can be confident that it is receiving honest answers to its questions. The relationship between the Committee and department relies on a degree of candour and rigour, and this appears to have been sadly missing, with the integrity of the department's senior leaders called into question. Officials should not be expected to engage – nor be complicit – in obscuring the facts in order to shield others from political accountability. Under the leadership of a Foreign Secretary who took up her post after these events, the FCDO has had the opportunity to make a fresh start and re-commit to transparency and positive engagement with Parliament. On this issue, it has so far failed to do so. We look forward to this being rectified. Those who lead the Foreign Office should be ashamed that two civil servants of great integrity and clear ability felt compelled to risk their careers to bring to light the appalling mismanagement of the Afghan crisis, and the misleading statements to Parliament that followed. The department should carry out a review of its internal processes for officials to register concerns about policies, and report its conclusions back to this Committee. It should study the testimony provided to this Committee by both whistleblowers and determine how it will address the problems they raise.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 13:** *The FCDO failed to take the basic administrative step of recording its decisions. It is fundamental to any bureaucracy to know precisely what decisions have been made, by whom, with what authority, and when. This would be a serious failure at any time, but during the withdrawal from Afghanistan may have led to the loss of life. It is the responsibility of the Permanent Under-Secretary to ensure that this system operates effectively. The Committee has lost confidence in the Permanent Under-Secretary, who should consider his position.*

85. Following Ministers' direction to use any spare seat capacity on RAF evacuation flights for this purpose, FCDO, Home Office, and MOD officials rapidly agreed an implementation mechanism, in which certain groups would be recommended to Ministers, on the basis of their contribution to UK objectives, their vulnerability, and their sensitivity. The Government agrees that this approach was far from perfect, but that reflects the severe time pressures faced. The Government had to design an approach very quickly that was as rational, fair, and as capable of implementation as possible.

86. The Government accepts that the nature and scope of this effort to help Afghans who did not qualify for the ARAP scheme was poorly communicated publicly and to Parliament, and that, consequently, the limits of how many people it was likely to be able to help in this way, and the fact that this was not a new, application-based resettlement scheme, were not well understood.

87. The use of the LOTR provision during Operation PITTING was conceived as a short-term arrangement for the duration of the evacuation only. The Government recognises that it had many shortcomings. However it also enabled the Government to provide a safe haven for around 1,000 Afghans during and since Op PITTING. During the evacuation,

the Home Secretary announced that there would be a future resettlement scheme: the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). All three Pathways of the ACRS are now open.

88. The Committee has taken extensive evidence, orally and in writing, on the handling of the decision to prioritise, and to call forward for evacuation, the Afghan staff of the Nowzad charity, from the former Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, Minister of State for South Asia, FCDO officials, and the National Security Adviser, in addition to public comments by the Prime Minister and others. The Government does not propose to rehearse all that evidence here. Throughout this Inquiry, Ministers and officials have given evidence in good faith, on the basis of the information available to them at the time. At no stage have Ministers or officials sought to mislead the Committee deliberately. The FCDO wishes to reiterate the sincere apologies officials have given orally and in writing for inadvertently providing misleading evidence on this issue.

89. The Government regrets that it took as long as it did to establish what the decision-making process had been in this case, and how the decision was communicated internally to FCDO staff. The Government acknowledges again that the way the decision to call forward Nowzad staff for evacuation was made was exceptional. It agrees that, in this particular case, more care should have been taken within the FCDO in how the decision was communicated to staff. It acknowledges again that an error in the way the decision was communicated internally left some FCDO staff believing that the Prime Minister had made the decision. The FCDO agrees with the Committee on the importance of accurate record keeping, even in a complex, fast-moving crisis such as this.

90. The FCDO has comprehensive channels for staff to raise concerns, drawing on the best of legacy FCO and DFID internal processes. A whistleblowing policy statement was introduced on 2 September 2020 on the creation of the FCDO, which is clear on reporting routes and protection for whistleblowers. Staff are encouraged to raise concerns with their own managers or other leaders in the first instance, but there are a number of formal reporting routes and informal sources of advice available. Frequent messaging on the FCDO intranet and in all staff messages and meetings has reminded staff of the importance of raising matters that concern them, and of how to do so.

91. The FCDO has recently reviewed its whistleblowing policy against industry best practice and the wider Civil Service HR model to ensure that the new refreshed FCDO policy is robust, effective and in line with central guidance. In fact, the FCDO goes further than this in: the range of routes available; an increased focus on policy-making, noting the complexity of and moral and ethical dimensions to the environment in which the FCDO operates; and the role of the Staff Counsellor. The procedure has clear routes for escalation including to DG Finance, Corporate and Transformation and to the Permanent Under-Secretary.

92. The FCDO's Staff Counsellor is available for colleagues to talk to individually as well as being a key figure in open discussion groups. She has a particular focus on concerns of propriety, ethics or conscience and provides an informal and completely confidential and safe route to enable concerns to reach the right point for action.

93. A number of FCDO Nominated Officers are available to staff who would like to raise a concern. These are senior colleagues with whom staff can discuss concerns about

potential breaches of the Civil Service Code. They act as a confidential sounding board and recommend the best course of action to take. They are expected to provide challenge to other senior staff where appropriate; can recommend concerns are investigated; and can bring concerns to the Permanent Under-Secretary's personal attention.

94. The FCDO has a central Reporting Concerns phone and e-mail contact point for reporting concerns about wrongdoing of any nature, including breaches of the Civil Service Code, financial issues and safeguarding. All reports are investigated either by the FCDO, or by the implementing partner. Where staff are unhappy with issues relating to them personally they can consult fairness champions, dispute resolution caseworkers, HR Directorate or, again, the Staff Counsellor for support and signposting. There is a formal grievance route available to all staff. Where staff are unsure where to direct a concern, staff can seek advice through the HR helpdesk service or the Speak Up mailbox.

95. It is a matter of great regret that two colleagues felt that they needed to take their concerns outside the FCDO. Both old and new policies make clear that staff are protected from detriment when raising concerns or challenge in line with the procedure. The FCDO would always respect both Parliamentary privilege and the whistleblowing legislation in the treatment of staff and has not penalised, and would not penalise, any member of staff for raising concerns in line with the procedures and with the law. The Department will continue to remind staff of the existence of all of the internal options, and their safety, and to build trust in the system. The launch of the updated policy and procedure for raising concerns will be one such opportunity.

96. An FCDO Staff Advisory Board meets every month to consider the same agenda and papers as the Management Board, influencing and challenging the decisions being taken by the FCDO's senior leadership team. It helps to shape the organisation and enables teams across the FCDO to consult a diverse and representative body of staff before papers are presented to the Management Board, ensuring that decisions are informed by a wide breadth of views.

97. The FCDO proactively invites staff to share their views through a number of fora and has challenge mechanisms in place and is actively building a culture where the staff voice can be heard. The FCDO How We Work statement (created with input from staff across the organisation and sponsored by the Management Board) provides a framework for the organisation's cultural ambition, and specifically includes being "open to challenge and take a sustainable long-term approach" and "transparent about the rationale for decisions and smart about taking and managing risks." Recognising that culture takes time to grow, work towards this ambition is ongoing: hard wiring cultural ambition into organisational design, HR processes (recruitment, promotion and performance management), governance and decision making processes (templates, board observer scheme and in business planning) and in developing leadership behaviours (new Director guidance).

## **OPERATIONAL ISSUES IN FCDO**

98. The Committee identified a number of FCDO operational issues that hampered the Department's crisis response, especially staffing levels in the FCDO crisis centre and separate legacy IT platforms within the organisation. Many of these areas were covered in the FCDO internal Lessons Learned review, and are covered in the Lessons Learned section of this response above.

## Correspondence

99. The Government accepts that systems put in place to respond to Ministerial and public correspondence during the evacuation period were unable to handle effectively the exceptional volume and rate of correspondence received by the FCDO in that period. Subsequent work identified some 41,205 pieces of correspondence from Parliamentarians alone, a figure that includes significant levels of duplication, as the same emails were sent to multiple mailboxes, and correspondence was subsequently transferred to other Departments. Public correspondence was significantly higher.

100. In response, the FCDO set up a crisis response system to go through all the cases raised by Parliamentarians, and responded by the end of September to all Ministerial correspondence which had been received by 12 September, in one reply to each of 650 MPs, and one reply to each of the Peers who had written. All Ministerial correspondence on Afghanistan received after 12 September was recorded centrally, and replies to Ministerial and public correspondence provided by a dedicated Afghanistan Correspondence Unit.

101. In parallel, work began to improve these systems and initial improvements made are outlined in paragraph 36 (xii) above. Moving forward, the FCDO plans to redesign and streamline its interface with the public and Parliament to better handle surges in public enquiries and Ministerial correspondence.

## Staff resources and welfare

102. The FCDO has established systems for mobilising staff resource to respond to a crisis, but recognises that the exceptional complexity and scale of the Afghanistan crisis meant that the necessary resource was not consistently delivered at the volume, or for the duration, needed. The FCDO accepts that this resulted in staffing gaps in some teams for some periods, both in crisis structures, and across the wider organisation.

103. The impact of the crisis on staff 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 distress.

104. As set out in paragraph 36 above, in future, the FCDO will 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 will sit within a wider refresh of the FCDO 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.

## IT systems:

105. The FCDO acknowledges that, during the crisis, the FCDO was using legacy IT systems from DFID and FCO, which made a unified FCDO crisis response more difficult. The roll-out of a single FCDO IT platform, Osprey, is underway, and this will improve the FCDO's crisis response and information sharing.

## OUR FUTURE ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 14:** *The Taliban takeover is a tragedy for Afghanistan, marking the single biggest reversal in the rights of women and girls in a generation. We welcome the Government's pragmatic engagement with the Taliban at official level: it is valid to withhold recognition, but attempts to isolate the new regime entirely may only worsen the situation for the Afghan people, reduce the UK's influence, and leave a vacuum to be filled by powers such as China. The Government should re-establish a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan as soon as it is safe to do so. It should coordinate its engagement with its partners to ensure that the international community delivers clear, consistent messages to the Taliban as far as possible, and should support international efforts to track and monitor commitments made by the Taliban, and hold the regime accountable for its actions. It should commit, and press other countries to commit, not to send male-only delegations to meet with the regime.*

106. The Government agrees with the Committee on the need for sustained, patient, and pragmatic UK engagement in Afghanistan, and that is the strategy it has pursued since last August. The Government agrees that any attempt to isolate the Taliban internationally would be unlikely to help the Afghan people. Since the withdrawal of our diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, the UK has established a temporary UK Mission to Afghanistan based in Doha, Qatar. The UK's Chargé d'Affaires there leads our engagement with the Taliban, supplemented by engagement from London-based officials. UK officials have visited Kabul for talks, as well as meeting Taliban representatives in Doha and other third countries. As with other G7 countries, UK engagement is conducted by officials, not by Ministers. The Government agrees with the Committee that it is important that women should be part of UK official delegations meeting the Taliban, and will ensure that wherever possible this is the case.

107. The Government agrees that the UK should re-establish a diplomatic presence in Kabul, as soon as security and political conditions permit. The security situation remains a serious concern, however, with ISIS Khorasan Province in particular having demonstrated the intent and capability to target the international community. The UK's ability to mitigate security threats to its civilian staff in Kabul has been dramatically reduced, with the withdrawal of NATO troops, the end of military flights, the limitations on the operations of private security companies in Afghanistan, and the lack of access to emergency medical facilities.

108. The Government agrees with the Committee that UK engagement should be coordinated with other international partners, to try to ensure consistency of messages. This has been a key UK objective since last August. In August 2021, the UK, as then chair of the G7, secured agreement on a set of common requirements for the Taliban if they were to proceed towards greater international recognition. The principles remain the core of the Government's approach today, and the FCDO tracks progress against them.

109. The G7 statement at the time said that *"Any future Afghan government must adhere to Afghanistan's international obligations and commitment to protect against terrorism; safeguard the human rights of all Afghans, particularly women, children, and ethnic and religious minorities; uphold the rule of law; allow unhindered and unconditional*

*humanitarian access; and counter human and drug trafficking effectively. We call on all parties in Afghanistan to work in good faith to establish an inclusive and representative government, including with the meaningful participation of women and minority groups.”*

110. The Government has been pro-active in its engagement with partners and relevant multilateral institutions. The UK Mission to Afghanistan engages in a structured way with international partners present in Doha and with the UN mission in Kabul (UNAMA). There are regular meetings of US and European Special Representatives on Afghanistan, and the UK engages bilaterally with other key countries, to co-ordinate directly with relevant policymakers in capitals. The UK has had substantive dialogue on Afghanistan with each of Afghanistan's neighbours. The Minister of State for South Asia has had extensive engagements with the UN and its agencies, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and near neighbours.

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 15:** *It is important for the UK's engagement with the Taliban to come alongside extensive and targeted outreach to Afghan civil society, particularly those active on the ground. It should consult these groups on its policies towards Afghanistan and support them where possible through funding and other forms of engagement. This is important to protect the country's civil society ecosystem, preventing the destruction of the progress it has made in recent decades; to ensure that their views are taken into account in the design of UK policy; and to show the Taliban that the world is watching its actions. In its response to this report, the Government should set out the steps it is taking to engage with Afghan civil society. In the longer term, we recommend that the Foreign Office should continue to invest in expertise on Afghanistan—drawing on that held by former DFID personnel—in order to inform its policy and ensure that we are ready when there is a change to re-engage with the country on a more profound level. This should include meaningful engagement with members of the British Afghan diaspora. The FCDO should also establish an atrocity and human rights abuse monitoring mechanism for Afghanistan.*

111. The Government agrees on the importance of helping sustain Afghan civil society, and that regular engagement and consultation should inform the UK's approach. Following the Taliban takeover, FCDO Ministers and officials have continued to meet a range of civil society representatives. The responsible FCDO Director holds regular NGO coordination meetings, attended by over 30 CEOs of NGOs operating in Afghanistan. NGO partners who are still on the ground in Afghanistan are vital delivery partners, and these meetings are an opportunity for the FCDO to get regular updates from them and discuss their practical concerns as well as wider policy issues. The Government agrees that the FCDO should continue to invest in its expertise on Afghanistan, and that such investment should include engagement with the British Afghan diaspora.

112. UK Conflict Stability and Security Fund programmes for Afghanistan for financial year 2022–23 will prioritise projects related to monitoring and reducing human rights abuses against women and girls and other at-risk groups; support to civil society and the independent Afghan media sector to sustain and amplify Afghan voices nationally and internationally; and enhancing Afghan capacity to reduce local-level tensions, including through conflict mitigation and de-escalation interventions.

113. The Government agrees with the Committee on the importance of atrocity and human rights abuse monitoring mechanisms covering Afghanistan. The UK has already worked with partners to establish multilateral atrocity prevention and early warning mechanisms for Afghanistan. The UK supported a UN Human Rights Council resolution that established a Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan, with a strong mandate to monitor and report on human rights. Richard Bennett was appointed to the role in April 2022, and has made a first visit to Afghanistan. He will report formally to the Human Rights Council in September. The UK also worked through the UN Security Council to strengthen the mandate for the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) in March, including increased human rights reporting and monitoring.

114. The FCDO also has its own internal processes for monitoring human rights abuses in Afghanistan, drawing on a range of internal and external sources of information to provide evidence-based analysis. The FCDO regularly compares its assessments with other likeminded countries, and has issued joint statements, for example on the issue of girls' education, and on the targeted killings and disappearances of former security and government officials.

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 16:** *The UK's engagement in Afghanistan over the last two decades ties us to the country. The overriding goal of our policy towards Afghanistan should be to reduce the impact of the humanitarian disaster unleashed by the international withdrawal. Humanitarian aid is vital, but will not be enough to avert catastrophe if the economy remains paralysed. A functioning economy is needed for delivery of aid at any scale, and for ordinary Afghans to support themselves. The current liquidity crisis is, in large part, created by the international community's measures against the Taliban.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 17:** *The UK should try to mitigate the impact of the Taliban regime by thinking creatively about the provision of aid. For example, online classes accessible from home and alternative measures to help the most vulnerable Afghan citizens should be considered. These should include working with partners, including the US, to consider how to release the Afghan reserves, and support efforts to deliver technical assistance to the central bank. We agree with our colleagues on the International Development Committee that the UK Government has been too slow to find ways to unblock the Afghan banking system. Regional partners, such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan, will also be key in rebuilding the economy. The UK should aim to resume bilateral development funding to Afghanistan when feasible, working in concert with partners, and drawing on the examples of delivering aid to countries where the government faces sanctions, or lacks legitimacy, such as Myanmar, Yemen and Syria. Now is not the moment to restore this funding, but withholding assistance indefinitely will not serve anyone's interests.*

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 18:** *The halving of UK aid to Afghanistan in 2020/1 is an example of the harm done by aid cuts that were designed to reduce spending at speed, rather than considering wider UK strategic interests. These cuts, made at a time when Afghanistan was facing the withdrawal of international troops, speak to a disconnect between the UK's development aid and its wider goals—something the merged FCDO was founded to overcome. The Government should commit to greater assistance to Afghanistan within the current three-year spending review period. Its forthcoming International Development Strategy should set out principles for delivering*

***aid in hostile states where the UK's strategic interests are so deeply engaged, drawing on the Government's wider country expertise to devise an aid strategy integrated with wider goals. The UK should place Afghan women at the heart of its policy towards the country, ensuring that they are consulted, and that aid reaches those in the country. The Government and partners should make a unified clear commitment to supporting and allowing female aid workers to operate in the country.***

115. The Government agrees with the Committee on the importance of doing what it can to help mitigate the impact of the humanitarian crisis on the Afghan people. This has been one of the UK's highest priorities since last August. The Government delivered on its pledge to spend £286 million in financial year 2021/22. The Government agrees on the importance of sustaining aid to Afghanistan, and has committed the same amount again for this current financial year. Afghanistan is the UK's largest bilateral ODA programme, and is likely to represent about 30% of the UK's total humanitarian spending this year.

116. The Government has worked closely with partners, including international and national NGOs and civil society groups, to adapt its approach to the situation inside Afghanistan and to inform its response. This has included drawing on experience of delivering aid to countries in conflict, and of dealing with regimes that lack legitimacy.

117. The UK Government has played a leading role in mobilising wider international resources for Afghanistan. In March 2022, the UK co-hosted an international pledging conference for Afghanistan with the UN, Qatar, and Germany, which raised \$2.4 billion for the humanitarian response this year. The UK has been a leading voice in encouraging the rapid repurposing of the \$1.5 billion which was left in the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund at the World Bank, helping build a consensus to make that money available both for the humanitarian response and to support basic services.

118. The Government agrees with the Committee that now is not the right time to resume direct bilateral development funding. Other leading donors agree. For the year 2022–23, the UK will maintain emergency humanitarian support through UN agencies, whilst increasing programming to NGOs who will support health, agriculture and livelihoods; and, where girls are going to school, education. The UK will also build capacity in local NGOs involved in its response, recognising their ability to reach remote locations, access vulnerable groups, and increase the capacity and sustainability of local partners.

119. The Government agrees with the Committee on the importance of trying to help restart the Afghan economy, to try to avoid a cycle of repeated humanitarian crises. The UK is working closely with the US and other interested partners to identify ways to improve liquidity and the wider economy in Afghanistan. This is not straightforward, as the commercial banking system in Afghanistan has historically had limited links to Western banks. Western banks need to make commercial decisions on whether to engage with Afghan banks, and the market offers significant risks and limited rewards.

120. The Government agrees with the Committee on the need to think creatively about aid provision, and the UK has been influential in the establishment of mechanisms to try to help ease Afghanistan's liquidity crisis. This includes co-leading a working group with the World Bank on Payment System Modalities for Humanitarian Aid Delivery in Afghanistan. The UN and World Bank, with US and UK support, have proposed a

Humanitarian Exchange Facility, a mechanism that would allow money to flow into, and Afghan businesses to send money out of, Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the Afghan Finance Ministry and Central Bank Governor have so far rejected this proposal.

121. The Government agrees on the need to keep working with the US and other partners to try to increase liquidity, and is exploring options for technical assistance to help re-establish a functioning, independent Afghan Central Bank. It is important to note that Afghanistan's foreign reserves can only be accessed by those who are entitled to give instructions on behalf of the Afghan Central Bank. The Government continues to monitor who is entitled to access Afghanistan's reserves, in accordance with international law. The UK wants to ensure that those reserves are used for the benefit of the Afghan people, and are not diverted. There are currently significant risks in facilitating the flow of reserves held overseas, arising from the Taliban's appointments to leadership positions in the Central Bank of unqualified and UN-sanctioned personnel, the loss of experienced staff from the Central Bank, and uncertainty around the Central Bank's implementation of anti-money laundering and anti-terrorist financing controls.

122. The Government agrees on the importance of putting Afghan women and girls at the heart of its policy. The Minister for South Asia has convened regular meetings with Afghan women leaders to inform UK policy and programmes. The situation for Afghan women and girls has deteriorated significantly since 15 August. The Taliban have imposed unacceptable restrictions on women's ability to move around freely, to work, and to access education. The Taliban have appointed no women to cabinet-level positions. Women civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders have faced harassment and detention. The UK regularly raises human rights, including those of women and girls, with the Taliban. The UK has repeatedly condemned the Taliban's decisions on girls' education and women's rights, including through statements from the G7+, from Foreign Ministers, and from the UN Security Council.

123. The Government is committed to giving a voice and platform to Afghan women, who face growing marginalisation inside Afghanistan. Ministers and officials engage regularly with a range of Afghan women and women's groups to ensure that UK policy and programming reflect their viewpoints and needs. Lord Ahmad chaired a roundtable with Afghan women leaders on 24 March. The Government continues to work closely with the Afghan Women Support Forum, established by Baroness Hodgson of Abinger, a longstanding advocate for Afghan women. It works with international partners to highlight women's rights in the multilateral system; for example, the UK co-chairs with Qatar the Group of the Friends of Women in Afghanistan in New York, which brings together Permanent Representatives to the UN.

124. The Government will continue to help Afghan women to speak out in defence of their rights. It will also directly support women's rights as part of the civil society component of the UK's Afghanistan Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) programme. The Government will continue to prioritise rights of women and girls in its engagement with the Taliban, and in its work with partners and allies. The Government agrees on the importance of equal access for female aid workers to operate in Afghanistan. This was one of the foundational principles which the UN insisted on securing Taliban commitment to in September 2021, as the basis for international humanitarian support. The Government will continue to work with the UN and other partners to insist that this principle is respected.

**Conclusions and Recommendations paragraph 19:** *The chaos and failures of the withdrawal and evacuation make it even more important—and morally imperative—that the UK commits to a serious strategy leading to future engagement with Afghanistan, in cooperation with allies and regional states. The withdrawal and the Taliban takeover have serious implications for British security and wider interests. It has heightened the terror threat and lessened our ability to identify and tackle these issues. In particular, remote counterterrorism operations run the risk of further damaging our interests in the country by causing civilian casualties. Along with traditional partners, such as the EU, the UK shares significant interests with countries in the region, such as China, in terms of regional stability, security, and avoiding state collapse. The UK should combine diplomacy, aid and trade in a concerted and strategic approach to future policy towards Afghanistan. This will mean patient committed engagement with the regime and with its domestic critics; investment in a substantial package of humanitarian and—eventually—development aid for the country; targeted support to rebuild the economy; and coordinated messaging towards the regime with both partner and antagonist governments.*

125. The Government's commitment to Afghanistan and its people is enduring. The UK's strategy for this period will be grounded in its enduring national interests in Afghanistan: preventing the return of terrorist threats to the UK from Afghan soil; protecting the UK from drugs, illegal migration, and other serious and organised crime; preventing humanitarian suffering; and preserving regional stability.

126. The Government agrees that it should combine diplomacy, aid, and trade in its strategy for Afghanistan. It will continue to engage international partners, including Afghanistan's neighbours with whom the UK has a shared interest in preventing regional instability and in countering terrorism and other threats. The UK will work closely with the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan and the new Special Representative of the Secretary General when appointed.

127. The Government agrees on the importance of pursuing a strategy of patient and pragmatic engagement with the Taliban, recognising that progress is likely to be slow, and that the immediate period ahead is likely to see further negative trends within Afghanistan. The Government will continue to press the Taliban to uphold the commitments they have made to their own people, to protect human rights for all, and to promote greater inclusivity of Afghanistan's many ethnic and religious groups. The Government recognises that this will remain challenging, often unrewarding work.

128. The Government agrees with the Committee that the international community should not repeat the mistakes of the past by disengaging from Afghanistan altogether, allowing national security threats to grow, and the suffering of the Afghan people to deepen. The Government thanks the Committee for the work which has gone into this Inquiry, and for its ongoing commitment to the people of Afghanistan.