



Foreign Affairs Committee

From the Chair
Alicia Kearns MP

Rt Hon Lord David Cameron
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
SW1A 2AH

[by email]

14 December 2023

Dear Foreign Secretary,

Follow-up from the 17 October session on Afghanistan

On behalf of the Committee, I want to thank Lord Ahmad again for appearing before us on 17 October to discuss outstanding issues following the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan. I wanted to follow-up on a series of issues that were raised in the session where we would appreciate further clarification.

Lack of cross-departmental co-ordination

The Committee conducted an inquiry into the Government's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2022, one conclusion of which was that the lack of clear lines of authority and lack of coordination between the three departments which jointly ran the operation were responsible for many of the subsequent policy and operational failures.

Planning for the follow-up session on 17 October highlighted the degree to which departmental co-ordination on Afghanistan remains a problem. When planning the session, we were unable to obtain consistent information on which department held responsibility for the many aspects of the Afghan Resettlement Schemes, with the result that we were unable to identify and question the relevant Minister. We also understand that the ongoing opacity about departmental responsibility has led to poor communication between departments, with subsequent detrimental impacts on applicants to the resettlement schemes.

In the light of this, we ask that you publish a document setting out departmental responsibilities on Afghanistan, so Afghans and stakeholders know who to contact. This should include information on which Department is responsible for each resettlement scheme and the pathways within it; who is responsible for processing applications; who is responsible for applicants in third countries; and who is responsible for integration on arrival to the UK. It would be helpful if you could also clarify the mechanisms for interdepartmental coordination of the schemes.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)

ACRS Pathway 3, which we understand to be the responsibility of the FCDO, initially had an eligibility cap of 1,500 people. As of 17 October, the Government has agreed to exceed the cap by considering all applicants who had been assessed as "eligible in principle" under the first 'stage'. However, only 70 of the initial 1,500 have yet to be resettled in the UK. The Government is far below its targets in processing and resettling eligible Afghans to the UK; why is this the case? And what are you doing to ensure the processing times are significantly accelerated?

In September 2021, the Government announced that “beyond the first year [of ACRS Pathway 3], the Government will work with international partners and NGOs to design and deliver Pathway 3 and allow us to welcome wider groups at risk”. In response to this letter, please set out details of the timeline for the opening of the second stage of ACRS Pathway 3 and the eligibility criteria under this second stage. What right of appeal will there be for those who meet the criteria but are turned down for resettlement?

Eligible candidates still in Afghanistan and other countries

In October, the Pakistan Government announced that it intended to repatriate all Afghans and other foreign nationals living unlawfully in the country from 1 November. According to the British High Commission risk assessments, staff had warned the Government that they would be unable to protect Afghans in Pakistan after the 1 November deadline despite “engaging intensively with the Pakistani authorities at senior level”. Similar risk assessments were made with regard to increased danger to Afghans in Tehran since Pakistan’s announcement. The Government has since announced new relocation flights to bring those Afghans waiting in Islamabad for resettlement to the UK. Will similar measures be put in place for Afghans in Iran who are awaiting relocation flights? How confident are you that you can avoid deportations that will send vulnerable people back to Afghanistan? What more is the Government doing to speed the resettlement of those currently waiting in third countries?

It would be helpful to have a response by 8 January.

I have copied this letter to Lord Ahmad for his awareness regarding questions that fall within his ministerial remit.

Yours,



ALICIA KEARNS

CC Lord Ahmad, Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Commonwealth and United Nations



Foreign, Commonwealth
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Our ref:
Your ref:

17 December 2023

Dear Alicia,

Thank you for your letter of 12 December about Afghanistan, following your session with Lord Ahmad on 17 October.

You asked about cross-departmental co-ordination. I agree that in this complex area, born in crisis and covering defence, foreign, immigration and housing policy, the position has not always been as clear to those outside government as we would have liked. Nevertheless, I believe that recent improvements, including the appointment of the Minister of Veterans' Affairs to co-ordinate efforts across government, are showing real results. Departmental ministers meet monthly under Mr Mercer's chairmanship and senior officials meet weekly to identify and resolve issues. The recent progress on bringing people to the UK is testament to the resolve and ability of all departments to work together effectively.

I attach a document that sets out departmental responsibilities as you requested. As you can see, overall responsibility for the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) sits with the Ministry of Defence, and that for the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) with the Home Office. The FCDO is responsible for the support offered by HMG to ARAP Eligible Persons (EPs) in third countries such as Pakistan, including the relationship with the governments of those countries. The FCDO is also the referral partner for the Home Office for the first stage of ACRS Pathway 3. That means we are responsible for processing the Expressions of Interest and allocating places to those Chevening Scholars, British Council Contractors and GardaWorld employees who meet the eligibility criteria. Our casework team supports ACRS EPs until they reach a third country. They are then supported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Home Office.

On ACRS Pathway 3, I can report that the first Home Office/IOM charter flight for ACRS Pathway 3 arrived from Pakistan on 13 December with 246 EPs on board. Another should

be in the air during our meeting on 18 December. Those two flights will mean that almost all of the most vulnerable undocumented EPs will have left Pakistan before the Government of Pakistan's deadline of 31 December, and that over a third of all those due to come to the UK under this first stage of ACRS Pathway 3 will have got here before the end of the year.

Plans are in place to bring the remainder of those now in third countries to the UK early in the New Year, leaving only those still in Afghanistan, of which our estimate is there are less than 700. How quickly we can bring the remainder from Afghanistan is difficult to predict as it depends partly on them securing the necessary Afghan documentation for the Taleban to allow them to leave, and partly on securing visas from third countries such as Pakistan to allow them to cross the border.

It will be for the Home Secretary to set out the details of subsequent stages of the ACRS in due course.

Finally, you asked about the measures we are taking to try to ensure that none of those eligible for UK resettlement are deported back to Afghanistan. I would stress that we have been very active in addressing this risk, particularly with the Government of Pakistan. I met the Pakistani Foreign Minister most recently on 30 November and he repeated the assurances he had given my predecessor that our cohorts would not be targeted. On a practical level, we have worked with the Government of Pakistan to issue identification letters to every family under our care, together with guidance on minimising risks and an emergency hotline number if necessary. We are also working with UNHCR, who have taken similar measures to try to protect those eligible for resettlement under ACRS Pathway 2.

While we cannot take the same collaborative approach in Iran, FCDO staff in the Embassy in Tehran and across HMG are working to relocate ARAP and ACRS families there to the UK as quickly as we can, prioritising those whose Iranian visas have or are about to expire. The same risk-based approach is guiding the government's efforts to relocate those EPs in other third countries around the world.

I am not complacent, but to date we do not know of any ARAP or ACRS Pathway 3 EPs being deported back to Afghanistan. There has been one case under ACRS Pathway 2, which predates the start of the current deportations in Pakistan. We continue to work hard to try to ensure there are no further cases.

I hope this letter provides the reassurances you were seeking. I look forward to our discussion on 18 December.

Yours,
David

HMG DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR AFGHAN RESETTLEMENT SCHEMES

Rt Hon Johnny Mercer MP, Minister for Veterans' Affairs in the Cabinet Office, will oversee and monitor the delivery of the overall plan for resettling ARAP and ACRS eligible people from third countries to the UK

Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)

Lead Department: Ministry of Defence

Eligibility Decisions: Ministry of Defence, supported as necessary by FCDO and other sponsoring departments

Support for Eligible Persons in third countries: FCDO

UK Entry Clearance including security checks: Home Office

Relocation of EPs to the UK: Ministry of Defence

Reception Arrangements and provision of UK accommodation: Ministry of Defence

Integration support: Local Authorities

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)

Lead Department: Home Office

Pathway 1 (Those called forward for flights to the UK during Operation Pitting)

Eligibility Decisions: Home Office

Support in Third Countries: FCDO

UK Entry Clearance including security checks: Home Office

Relocation of EPs to the UK: MOD/Home Office

Reception Arrangements and provision of UK accommodation: Home Office

Integration Support: Local Authorities

Pathway 2 (Refugees in third countries)

Eligibility Decisions: UNHCR acting for the Home Office

Support for Eligible Persons in third countries: UNHCR acting for the Home Office

UK Entry Clearance including security checks: Home Office

Relocation of EPs to the UK: UNHCR acting for the Home Office

Reception arrangements and provision of UK transitional accommodation: Home Office

Provision of some settled accommodation through Local Authority Housing Fund:

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Integration Support: Local Authorities

Pathway 3 Stage 1 (Chevening Scholars, British Council Contractors and Garda World employees.)

Eligibility Decisions: FCDO

Support for Eligible Persons in third countries: IOM acting for the Home Office

UK Entry Clearance including security checks: Home Office

Relocation of EPs to the UK: IOM acting for the Home Office

Reception arrangements and provision of UK transitional accommodation: Home Office

Provision of some settled accommodation through the Local Authority Housing Fund:

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Integration Support: Local Authorities