

House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

The UK and Afghanistan

Government Response

This Government thanks the House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence for its report, which draws on a range of expert opinions at an important time for the Government's relationship with Afghanistan.

Please find below the Government's response to the Committee's recommendations and conclusions. The Committee's text is in bold and the Government's response is in plain text. Paragraph numbers refer to the Committee's report.

The UK & Afghanistan from 2014

1. In 2001, following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC, master-minded by al-Qaeda, which was based in Afghanistan and enjoyed the protection of the Taliban administration, the country became a top UK foreign, defence and development policy priority. From 2010 its relative prioritisation as a national security issue slipped, partly in response to external factors, such as the increasingly disruptive international role played by Russia (including its activity in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine from 2014) and the rise of ISIS. The protracted and intractable nature of the Afghan conflict and a lack of public support for an ongoing combat mission were also factors. (Paragraph 28)

2. While the priority afforded by the UK to Afghanistan has fallen since 2014, the scale of the challenges facing the country, and their potential impact on UK interests, have not diminished significantly. Terrorist groups including al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province operate in Afghanistan. The country is the source of 95% of the heroin in the UK. The Afghan state remains very fragile, with limited control of territory, and the Taliban's insurgency continues. (Paragraph 36)

Afghanistan remains a priority for the Government. The UK Government continues to focus on counter terrorism as a primary security objective in Afghanistan, but our objectives have become much broader over the last 20 years. Regional stability and human and economic development are interconnected with reducing the threat from terrorism and the impact of illicit economies. Conflict in Afghanistan drives illegal migration and allows serious organised crime to continue, and makes access to services more difficult for the Afghan people.

Afghanistan remains the world's largest producer of opiates and the assessment that 95% of the heroin in the UK originates from Afghanistan remains accurate. The significant increase in Methamphetamine production in Afghanistan is cause for concern. There is already evidence of established heroin routes being used to traffic this drug towards Europe. The humanitarian impact of an explosion in

Methamphetamine use in Afghanistan and the surrounding region cannot be underestimated.

Afghans remain in the top 10 nationalities for irregular migration into Europe and the UK. Irregular migration is facilitated by criminals operating along well-established routes, with migrants often suffering some form of exploitation during their journey.

The insurgency, terrorists and criminals share an interest in having a safe space to operate. Peace in isolation will not reduce the serious threat of organised crime to the UK and its interests. Narcotics traffickers and those that benefit from the illicit economy will continue exploiting political and financial instability regardless of the security situation.

Climate change and Covid-19, issues the UK Government is at the forefront of tackling globally, exacerbate the challenges for people and the government in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, the UK has provided significant support to the people of Afghanistan; this has in turn helped to protect the UK. The UK has worked closely with our NATO Allies and international partners to ensure that international terrorists cannot use Afghanistan as a base for terrorist attacks.

The UK continues to prioritise Afghanistan. The Government committed to provide further development and security support for 2021-22. Afghanistan remains one of the UK's largest active overseas military deployments, one of the main recipients of UK security and development assistance, and one of our largest and most active diplomatic presences overseas. Afghanistan is still a human rights priority for the UK. It is a key focus for campaigns on Girls' Education and Media Freedom.

3. The Government wishes to safeguard what it describes as the UK's legacy in Afghanistan since 2001. It wishes to strengthen the gains made in this period, and defines its legacy in terms of improvements in human rights, particularly of women and girls, and the strengthening of the Afghan state since the fall of the Taliban administration. (Paragraph 37)

4. There is a real risk that the principal national security challenges still posed by Afghanistan, namely terrorism, narcotics and regional instability, could worsen, and the gains made since 2001 could be lost. (Paragraph 38)

The UK has made an important contribution to Afghanistan through military and security assistance. The UK's policy approach to Afghanistan changed over time. This is reflected in the UK's support for Afghanistan's development into a self-sufficient state, with the capabilities to provide for its own security. The UK military now being part of a non-combat mission. Our continued support and training of cadets in the Afghan National Army Officer Academy has strengthened the ability of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) to protect these gains. That and other capacity-building work are aimed at increasing the self-reliance of Afghan forces in the fight against terrorism and other threats. Despite significant challenges, Afghan forces have led security in Afghanistan since 2015 and progressed in a number of areas.

UK assistance to humanitarian work and development continues to support the improvement of human rights and freedoms in the country. UK aid is providing education for girls and life-saving healthcare for countless Afghans, as well as promoting human rights across the country. Our efforts have helped the Afghan state to progress in its development. Afghanistan has successively held presidential elections to lead the country, and the constitution stipulates a 25% quota of allocated seats for women to ensure inclusion in political decision making.

The insurgency and current security situation are the greatest threat to human rights gains in Afghanistan. A political settlement which leads to a sustainable peace offers the best chance of sustaining the human and development gains made since 2001. That is why we are supporting current peace efforts, including through technical, financial and diplomatic means. However, a political settlement is a far from certain outcome. If conflict continues in Afghanistan, the result is likely to be increased regional instability, continuation of narcotics and terrorism, and overall a worse outcome for British interests. The risk to the UK would rise as a result.

The Afghan government has the capability to lawfully investigate and prosecute terrorism, organised crime and corruption. These gains have been achieved through a decade of multinational investment and are designed to operate alongside wider initiatives to address economic reform, poverty and agriculture. A loss of these capabilities would be irreversible and undermine any UK or international efforts to strengthen the Afghan state.

The UK is committed to protecting the legacy of our human rights work and the improved role of women, as is the government and civil society of Afghanistan. The UK will continue to actively champion and defend human rights work.

5. We regret the further delay to the Integrated Review, and the Government's decision to announce commitments on defence spending and official development assistance in advance of the publication of the review. It is essential that the final document demonstrates how Afghanistan fits into the UK's long-term strategic aims for national security and foreign policy. (Paragraph 41)

6. We ask the Government to provide us with a detailed breakdown of how its new commitments on defence spending will be allocated. (Paragraph 42)

While we await publication of the Integrated Review in March, we would not want to prejudge its outcomes and comment on Afghanistan within the Review. The Integrated Review when published will contain: a vision for the UK in 2030; an assessment of the international context and; a Strategic Framework setting out the Government's major national security and international policy objectives including defence, diplomacy, development and national resilience, setting direction for more detailed strategies and departmental activity in the coming years. The announcement on official development assistance made last year was one of the first outcomes of the Integrated Review, and is based on its findings. We are now in the final phase of the Integrated Review, which is all about aligning ambition to resources. The full conclusions of the Review will be announced later this month.

The Ministry of Defence secured £16.5 billion additional funding in the 2020 Spending Review. While this will help address existing pressures, we will still need to make changes and take difficult decisions to ensure financial sustainability and adapt to current and future threats. We will decide on the allocation of the settlement funding as part of our normal Departmental financial planning and budgeting process. The financial settlement, alongside the Integrated Review, will allow Defence to meet its priorities and commitments on a sustainable basis. The full outcomes of the Integrated Review will be published in March 2021.

Afghanistan will continue to be important to the UK's interests including on countering terrorism, promoting defence and resilience, as well as maintaining the UK's role as a force for good, promoting open societies and engaging in conflict resolution and dispute management.

7. The UK's interests in Afghanistan are not unique and distinct: they are bound up with those of its allies, led by the US. The UK has had limited opportunities, and has shown little inclination, to exert an independent voice and, along with other NATO Allies, has followed the US's lead. This is regrettable, not least in view of the UK's very substantial commitment to Afghanistan, both financially and militarily. The Government should seek to reinforce the need for a multinational approach, and be precise about its aims, including regional stability, counter-terrorism and countering narcotics production and trafficking. (Paragraph 46)

The interests of the UK and our NATO Allies are shared and mutually dependent. The UK is committed to, and encourages, a multinational approach to protecting those shared interests in Afghanistan. As the fifth largest troop contributor, the UK has a strong voice within NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. UK Ministers regularly engage US and NATO Allied counterparts on Afghanistan.

The UK plays a leading role in a number of areas of the multinational approach. UK forces lead assurance of security in the capital, Kabul, working alongside NATO Allies. This is vital for the security of the Afghan government and diplomatic presence, and is highly valued by NATO Allies and international partners. All decisions on the shape and future of the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) are taken collectively by NATO Allies.

Beyond military engagement, the UK has been a leader in coordinating the international community's humanitarian and development support for Afghanistan, including by playing a central role in the 2020 Geneva Conference. The UK Government co-hosted an anti-corruption side event with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Afghan government at the 2020 Geneva Conference. The UK is working closely with the Afghan government to increase accountability and tackle corruption.

The Government's international response to Counter Terrorism and Serious and Organised Crime is set out in the 2018 CONTEST and Serious and Organised Crime Strategies. We recognise the benefits of engaging multilateral initiatives, at international and regional level, as they provide for effective and trustful engagement on addressing CT and SOC issues such as violent extremism, narcotics production

and trafficking. Collaboration with individual international partners, and groupings such as the Five Eyes community and multilateral agencies are central to the delivery across our strategies. This approach enables HMG to develop meaningful cooperation with the foreign law enforcement community and recent successes include Turkish National Police Narcotics agreeing to participate in a multilateral meeting with Afghanistan, Pakistan, facilitated by NCA. Similarly, NCA continues to work closely with partners in other transit countries to intercept illicit drug trafficking, including the UNODC. The UK also continues to closely engage with the wider NATO mission in Afghanistan, delivering tangible Counter Terrorism outcomes. We therefore agree with the committee's recommendation that the UK should seek to reinforce the multinational approach, and we will continue to do so as an integral part of our wider strategic approach to Counter Terrorism and serious and organised crime overseas.

8. The UK Government should ensure that all Afghan interpreters who worked for the UK military, including those now resident in third countries, are aware of, and able to access the provisions of, the ex-gratia scheme. (Paragraph 49)

The Intimidation Policy and Ex-Gratia Scheme (EGS) were approved by the National Security Council in 2013. Both are administered primarily by MOD on behalf of HMG.

The Government's Intimidation Policy is designed to ensure current and former locally engaged staff are not at risk as a result of working for us, ideally living safely in and contributing to their country. The UK is the only nation with a dedicated investigation unit in country to investigate and provide solutions to any intimidation, including the right to apply for relocation to the UK. Our Intimidation Policy is open to all our former local staff in Afghanistan, irrespective of date, role or length of service.

HMG's Ex-Gratia Scheme offers a range of options to eligible local staff, including relocation to the UK to those staff that have been made redundant or resigned and served more than a year. In addition, there are two generous ex-gratia in-country options: a finance package equivalent to 18 months' salary; or, 5 years' funding for training including a living stipend.

On 29 December 2020, the Defence and Home Secretaries announced the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy; a new scheme that will offer relocation or other assistance to current and former locally employed staff in Afghanistan to reflect the changing situation there. Depending on uptake, this scheme has the potential to be bigger than the existing schemes.

Under the new scheme, anyone facing a serious risk such as intimidation or threat to life will be offered priority relocation regardless of their employment status, rank or role, or length of time served. Local staff who work or worked and who could be at risk as the security situation evolves will be relocated to the UK on a routine basis, and those not eligible to move will be offered other support such as security advice and relocation within Afghanistan. This new scheme is expected to be launched following changes to the immigration legislation in April 2021; it is separate to the EGS that will remain open until November 2022.

The Ex-Gratia Scheme and Intimidation Policy currently available for Afghan locally engaged staff, along with the Relocations and Assistance Scheme to be introduced

later this year, require applicants to be currently living in Afghanistan where they are likely to face the greatest risk. The existing legislation does not allow third-country relocation. Similarly, it is expected that third-country relocations will not be possible under the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy, for which the legislation is currently being drafted by Home Office officials. The Government keeps Immigration Rules under regular review, and it has been agreed with the Home Office that officials will apply discretion to those in extraordinary circumstances outside of Afghanistan on a case-by-case basis. Only a small number of cases are expected to be affected by third-country relocations which is why discretion on individual cases is preferred to a complex legislative change. The intent is to help those at greatest risk, and we will continue to work with the Home Office on this issue.

The Afghan state and government

10. We request that the Government provides us with information on the support it has given to strengthen Afghanistan's democratic processes, particularly its elections. (Paragraph 62)

The UK has supported democratic processes in Afghanistan, particularly the state's capacity to run and manage credible presidential, national assembly and provincial council elections. We integrated diplomatic engagement, technical assistance and financial support through a United Nations-managed fund. This was accompanied by civil society engagement in order to raise citizen awareness of the importance of exercising the right to vote. Most recently, the UK supported the 2018 national assembly and 2019 presidential elections. This support included financial support for £6.7 million. The British Embassy in Kabul worked closely with the Independent Election Commission to strengthen its capacity to ensure that voter registration lists were up-to-date, polling stations could open, and voter fraud at the ballot box was minimised. In the 2018 election, the UK was one of very few diplomatic missions that visited polling centres to encourage voter turnout and discourage malpractice. We commended the people of Afghanistan who turned out to exercise their democratic rights in the face of violence and intimidation.

11. Afghanistan's system of government is highly centralised, but in practice there are regional and ethnic loyalties. Whether amendments to the constitution are required to address this important matter will be a matter for the Afghans themselves to decide, whether in the peace talks in Doha or thereafter. (Paragraph 66)

12. Ethnicity remains a potent political factor in Afghanistan, particularly at a local level, although its significance can be overstated. The Pashtun majority is largely dominant in politics, while the Hazara community and other minorities remain marginalised. (Paragraph 73)

The Government agrees that Afghanistan's system of government is highly centralised. As the Committee recognises, any changes to the Afghan Constitution are for the people of Afghanistan to decide.

Ethnicity remains a factor in Afghan politics. The UK Government has provided diplomatic support to minority groups. Ahead of the Afghan parliamentary elections

in 2018, the British Embassy in Kabul successfully lobbied the Afghan Government to increase security protection for Narinder Pal Singh MP, who stood as the sole Sikh candidate. He stood in place of his father, who was killed alongside other Afghan Sikhs in the horrific attack in Jalalabad on 1 July 2018. Following a terrorist attack on the Sikh Gurdwara in Kabul in March 2020, the British Ambassador engaged with the Sikh community, extending her condolences to Sikh parliamentary representatives. Members of the Hazara group, including women, are now active in politics, including Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh.

The Government supported the Afghan government's efforts to diversify political participation from different regional and ethnic backgrounds. This is notable in the 21-person Afghan government negotiating team for the peace talks in Doha. The team includes Afghans from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including seven ethnic Tajiks, four Hazaras and three ethnic Uzbeks. There are members from all seven regions and 18 provinces of Afghanistan, including Helmand, Panjshir, Kandahar, Bamiyan and Jawzjan. The team also represents all major political parties. Four women are part of the team. In addition, the High Council of National Reconciliation has a diverse leadership and recently formed a youth commission and a women's commission.

9. Power in Afghanistan remains personalised, factionalised and mired in corruption, despite some moderate improvements in recent years. Government appointments are regarded as a source of spoils, and warlords and militia leaders retain roles inside the state. Many are involved in the illicit economy, leveraging their access to state resources. (Paragraph 61)

13. Corruption remains endemic in Afghanistan. It has been significantly exacerbated by foreign funding. While the Afghan government under President Ghani has committed to tackling corruption and taken some steps, little progress appears to have been made. (Paragraph 83)

14. The Afghan government's accountability to its citizens is limited by its reliance on international military spending and aid, and very low reliance on taxation. This insulates the elite. (Paragraph 84)

The UK is supporting the Afghan government to strengthen public financial management and domestic resource mobilisation. UK budget support through the World Bank Incentive Programme is conditional against a number of indicators set by the Government. These focus on discrete but effective changes in policy and practice to improve tax compliance and increase the Afghan government's revenue base in a transparent manner. Examples include support to the implementation of value-added tax, and the use of technology by large taxpayers to reduce possibilities for fraud.

The UK played an important role in establishing Afghanistan's Anti-Corruption Justice Centre (ACJC) in 2016 to investigate, prosecute and adjudicate serious corruption cases. The ACJC has achieved notable successes. For example, on 6 February, three senators from the Afghanistan Upper House of Parliament were each sentenced to over ten years in prison by the ACJC on bribery charges.

President Ghani has remained committed to tackling corruption. In 2018, an Anti-Corruption Law was adopted that strengthens the legal framework for anti-corruption work in Afghanistan. In November, the President announced two significant anti-corruption measures: the establishment of a long-awaited Anti-Corruption Commission; and the development of a new long-term Anti-Corruption Strategy.

At the 2020 Geneva Conference, the UK co-hosted an anti-corruption side event with UNAMA and the Afghan government. UK Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, set out key anti-corruption actions which the UK wanted to see more progress on and for which the UK Government would continue our financial support. These included:

- prosecution of corrupt high-level officials and recovery of assets, essential to tackle the culture of impunity and to show citizens the government is serious about weeding out corruption;
- empowered civil society and media, that continue to call out corruption and patronage;
- improved donor oversight of our own funds to ensure that benefits reach all Afghans;
- political commitment to replace the current system of deals and patronage, with one of openness, inclusion and equitable governance.

In 2012, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Afghanistan joint last out of 176 countries. In 2020, Afghanistan ranked 165 out of 180 countries, a small improvement, but still a significant problem.

15. We welcome the UK Government's efforts to combat corruption in Afghanistan, including work with the EU in Kabul on this agenda. As a major donor of on-budget support to the Afghan state, the UK should be willing, with its international partners, to call out the corrupt practices of individuals within the government and others in positions of influence. (Paragraph 85)

The UK is a strong and consistent voice on anti-corruption in Afghanistan. The UK Ambassador to Afghanistan co-chairs the Ambassadorial Anti-Corruption Working Group in Kabul. In this role, the Ambassador has raised difficult issues, both publicly and in private meetings with senior government officials. The UK uses high level fora, such as the 2020 Geneva Conference, to shine a spotlight on commendable anti-corruption efforts, while also stating in public that far more needs to be done to safeguard UK funding for the benefit of the Afghan people.

The FCDO and the National Crime Agency support the investigation and prosecution of high-level corruption cases, and the recovery of stolen assets back to the state. The Government has recently initiated the four year TIFCA (Tackling Illicit Finance and Corruption in Afghanistan) programme. This brings expert UK mentoring to key Afghan institutions, to ensure an equitable and effective approach to anti-corruption law enforcement and justice. The UK focuses efforts on high-level corruption, calling out those in politics and with political networks who are involved. These efforts aim to prevent power and resources amassing in the hands of an elite few, damaging Afghanistan's development prospects. TIFCA UK advocacy support in this aim.

The UK was instrumental, alongside international partners - EU, UN, US, Denmark - in ensuring that anti-corruption was front and centre of the 2020 Geneva Conference, and that it is reflected in the resulting Afghan Partnership Framework (APF). The APF clearly sets out the principles, including adherence to international law, which any Afghan government must adhere to in order to continue receiving international assistance. The APF is still a fledgling agreement, but early signs show that the Afghan government is making efforts on the anti-corruption agenda set out in Geneva, including standing up the Anti-Corruption Commission, appointing Commissioners, and recent high-level corruption cases.

16. There has been significant improvement in human rights in Afghanistan in the past two decades, particularly in Kabul and other urban areas. Witnesses highlighted improvements in women's rights, freedom of speech, freedom of association and access to information. (Paragraph 99)

17. Our witnesses said the expectations of Afghan citizens about human rights and participation in governance had changed for the better, making any future attempt to roll back these freedoms more difficult. (Paragraph 100)

18. However, significant human rights challenges remain as a result of weakness in the rule of law and a lack of political will to enforce legislation which protects human rights. We are particularly concerned by reports of the lack of accountability, and sometimes impunity, of senior officials, militias and security forces, and ongoing threats to minorities, journalists and human rights defenders. (Paragraph 101)

The Government welcomes the committee's conclusion about the significant progress on human rights since 2001, particularly on women's rights, freedom of speech and access to education. For example, the Afghan Constitution, established in 2004, grants equal rights for men and women, protects the rights of ethnic and religious groups and provides legal provision for free speech.

The Afghan people, particularly women, minority groups and the younger generation born after Taliban rule ended, now expect to retain and build on these rights and freedoms, which enable them to work and worship in a free, democratic society.

The Government agrees with the Committee that fundamental human rights challenges remain. The Afghan government has committed to protect human rights, but implementation and further progress is constrained by a range of factors. These include:

- continuing conflict;
- lack of institutional capacity;
- Taliban control over many parts of the country;
- societal conservatism;
- even with improvements, access to justice, particularly for women, is not guaranteed;
- weak accountability in the justice system;

Widespread disregard for the rule of law and official impunity for those who commit human rights abuses are serious problems. The government does not consistently or effectively prosecute abuses by officials, including security forces.

Recent government proposals for a new law to regulate Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organisations raised issues and have been challenged by the UK and like-minded donors. The initial law constrained CSO and NGO rights to independence, neutrality and freedom of association. UK and international pressure has resulted in government delaying the law pending the rewriting of key sections in negotiation with CSO and NGO groups.

The UK continues to work with others to ensure that human rights agreements that Afghanistan has endorsed are upheld. This is part of the principles in the Afghanistan Partnership Framework which sets out the conditionality for international donor support.

Afghanistan is an FCDO Human Rights Priority Country. The UK regularly raises security concerns with the Afghan government. Government Ministers and the Foreign Secretary regularly make public condemnations about targeted killings, and violence against minorities and human rights advocates, calling for transparent investigations. The British Embassy in Kabul maintains good relations with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and engages positively with human rights defenders. Such engagement helps us to stay updated about their concerns and signals the UK's support for the rights of those defending human rights in Afghanistan.

19. We welcome the UK's support for civil society and human rights institutions in Afghanistan, which have contributed to fostering a more open society and greater media freedom. (Paragraph 111)

20. We welcome the BBC World Service's provision of impartial news and information in three languages in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 112)

The Government welcomes the Committee's conclusions about the UK's important contribution towards an open society, with greater media freedom and accessible information. The expansion of a free, diverse, and vibrant media sector in Afghanistan is a major success story of the last 20 years.

In January 2020, with UK support, the Afghan government signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom, as part of its commitment to improve media freedom. In July 2020, following pressure from the media and diplomatic communities in Kabul, the Afghan government rejected proposed amendments to the Mass Media Law, which would have inhibited Afghan press freedom. This ensured the Afghan media has remained independent. We welcomed the government's decision to consult with the media on any future changes. In January 2021, the UK and Canada marked the first anniversary of Afghanistan joining the Media Freedom Coalition, the partnership of 44 countries that defends media freedom wherever it is threatened. The UK is proud to be a co-chair of the Coalition.

The UK works with BBC Media Action on a range of projects in Afghanistan, including Open Jirga radio (in both Pashto and Dari) and television debate shows. This provides a platform to discuss topical issues with an inclusive audience, promoting open discussion and encouraging the questioning of political leaders. Topics have included the role of women in public life, the peace process, and the rise of extremism, with women playing a significant role in the panels and studio audiences.

21. We regret that UK efforts to improve the rule of law and judicial institutions appear to have had limited impact. We request that the Government provides its assessment of why this is, and how limited progress in Afghanistan compares with the output of similar UK programmes to support the rule of law in other countries. (Paragraph 113)

In many countries, particularly those still experiencing conflict, the process of improving rule of law and judicial institutions takes time. When the Taliban was overthrown in 2001, there was no functioning government or civil service in Afghanistan. The UK and international partners helped Afghanistan to build more accountable and democratic institutions, including the establishment of government ministries and introduction of anti-corruption laws. The UK has worked with the Afghan authorities to strengthen institutions for governance, rule of law and human rights. The Government recognises that sustainable progress in Afghanistan will only be as strong as the political institutions that underpin it. Much has been achieved, but there is still more to do.

In other developing countries, the UK funds Rule of Law Expertise UK to strengthen the rule of law by providing high-quality pro bono legal and judicial expertise. This programme has been successful in several countries; but work on governance and institutions takes time. It is a difficult process, relative to the context of each respective country. The Afghan state judiciary lacks resources and facilities and is weakened by corruption and other issues. Most Afghans find access to justice difficult and costly with many disputes settled through the informal system such as local jirgas (a traditional Pashtun assembly of village elders, to make decisions based upon consensus) and shuras (another type of council or advisors used for consultations, mainly religious figures or Islamic clergy). The Taliban have installed their own judiciary in areas they control. Minorities face discrimination in the justice system. Women, affected by violence, have found it particularly difficult to access legal services. Contributing factors include:

- limited awareness of their rights, compounded by the high illiteracy rates among victims;
- confinement to the home/locality preventing access to legal information;
- deeply conservative societal attitudes in rural areas where women are discouraged from seeking legal advice;
- impunity of perpetrators.

Many cases, including domestic violence, are resolved through community-based justice systems such as family mediation. The UK has continued to fund gender-based violence response services including referrals to legal services.

In Afghanistan, corruption has hindered attempts to improve the rule of law and judicial practices. The UK Government's TIFCA (Tackling Illicit Finance and Corruption in Afghanistan) and CSSF-funded Integrity programmes promote long-term peace and legitimacy of the Afghan state. The UK Government supports the Afghan government to tackle high-level corruption and illicit finance and to recover the proceeds to enhance the national budget. TIFCA and Integrity operate together through the provision of key equipment, capability and research. These programmes commenced on 1 January 2021, a UK commitment to continue to support the Afghan government to tackling corruption and strengthen its rule of law and judicial institutions.

22. The UK must be willing to speak out on human rights abuses. We are concerned by reports that the UK has turned a blind eye to abuses by the Afghan security forces and militias. (Paragraph 114)

The UK Government has zero tolerance to human rights violations or abuses by any of its partners. It delivers clear messages about this to the Afghan government and other organisations, making clear any allegations of wrongdoing should be thoroughly investigated.

UK funding is provided on the basis of the transparent and proper use of funds, and the protection of human rights is included in this. The UK Government has made clear to the Afghan government that funding will only continue if these conditions are met.

The UK regularly encourages the Afghan government to address torture and ill-treatment in places of detention. The Afghan government continues to take steps towards this; a move recognised in a UNAMA report in February, which recorded a reduction in allegations of torture compared to the previous monitoring period. However, the report found almost 30% of detainees interviewed providing credible accounts of torture and ill-treatment, highlighting the fact that further action is needed to eliminate the practice.

The UK leverages its investment in the security sector to strengthen human rights mitigations and sends clear messaging to the Afghan government on the importance of a human rights-compliant approach across the security sector. For example, the conditions set out at the 2020 Geneva Conference include specific references to the security sector i.e. 'training developed and piloted for law enforcement officers... for a more human rights-based and victim-centred approach.' UK police officers advise senior Afghan officials on human-rights compliant approaches to policing. UK-funded training courses for future leaders of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) include modules on key issues like preventing sexual violence and human rights.

23. The UK should publicly champion the rights of minority communities, such as the Hazaras. (Paragraph 115)

The rights of minority groups are legally protected in the Afghan Constitution, but many minority communities continue to face widespread discrimination and insecurity in Afghan society.

The UK Government condemns all attacks on minority groups and the targeting of people based on their beliefs. The Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, publicly condemned the terrorist attacks at the Sikh Gurdwara last March and in the predominately Hazara Shi'a city of Bamiyan in November, calling for an end to the violence. The British Ambassador in Kabul expressed UK condolences to the Governor of Bamiyan.

At the Universal Periodic Review of Afghanistan at the Human Rights Council in 2019, the UK recommended that the Afghan authorities establish an independent mechanism to thoroughly assess how security protection for all religious and ethnic minorities can be improved. Afghanistan accepted this recommendation.

Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19, the British Embassy in Kabul has maintained close contact with representatives of minority communities, including Hazaras. The UK's International Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, held a virtual roundtable event with members of Afghanistan's Hazara community in November to discuss the challenges they faced. In a virtual meeting with Afghanistan's former Human Rights Minister, Ms French reaffirmed the UK's commitment to improving the human rights situation and the need for any peace agreement to reflect the needs of society, including minority communities.

The UK supports minority groups in Afghanistan through aid programmes. The UK Government has, for instance, provided over £2 million to the UN Population Fund since 2016 to support gender-based violence support centres throughout Afghanistan including in the largely Hazara, Daikundi Province. This includes establishing family protection centres and providing response services to help vulnerable women. The UK Government has contributed over £100 million per year to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund that, for example, funds health clinics and girls' schools in Bamiyan Province. Up to 2019, these programmes in Bamiyan had led to a 13% increase in female literacy and a 40% increase in births assisted by a skilled birth attendance since 2007.

The UK Girls' Education Challenge Fund that has helped over 300,000 girls attend school in Afghanistan since 2013, supports education for children in Hazara communities in Bamiyan, Herat and Kabul. This includes our Leave No Girl Behind project that offers accelerated learning opportunities for children who do not attend school, to recover their education and reintegrate with the school system.

The UK Government continues to urge the Afghan government to protect the rights of all ethnic and religious groups, in line with the Afghan Constitution.

24. There has been considerable improvement in the participation of women in Afghan society, politics and the economy since the fall of the Taliban administration in 2001, particularly in urban areas. Progress has been impeded by a range of factors including the security situation, the limited reach of the Afghan government into rural areas, the persistence of misogynist norms, unwillingness to enforce legislation protecting women and a culture of impunity for cases of violence against women. (Paragraph 142)

25. We were concerned to hear that the promotion of women's rights appears to have become less of a priority for international donors to Afghanistan. We were reassured to hear from ministers that this remains a key UK priority. (Paragraph 143)

The Government welcomes the Committee's comments on issue of women's rights in Afghanistan and the improvements in this area. The Government recognises that more needs to be done. Afghanistan remains a Focus Country in the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and the UK will continue to champion women's empowerment as a priority area of focus. The Government's promotion of women's role in the peace process is outlined further in recommendations 93-97.

UK programmes and policy engagements will help ensure that the gains made over the last two decades are sustained and further empower women and girls equally in urban and rural areas.

The UK's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund Peace and Reconciliation programme enables women to become involved in community level peace building and reconciliation mechanisms. The UK contributes to the National Priority Programmes which aim to improve the delivery of core infrastructure, emergency support, and social services to participating communities through strengthening Community Development Councils (CDCs) in urban and rural areas. The programme promoted women's voice, participation, and influence in community decision-making by their inclusion in the CDCs.

The UK is a strong advocate for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, which is a priority for the Minister of State for South Asia, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, who is also the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict. The Gender Based Violence (GBV) programme provides medical and psychosocial assistance, referral to women's protection centres and legal assistance providers at the provincial, district and community level. The programme also engages with communities on the elimination of GBV.

Governance of the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), of which the UK is a major donor, includes a Gender Working Group to ensure that the rights of women and girls' remains a cross-cutting priority across the ARTF.

Peace efforts help put the issue of women's rights at the heart of international engagement and Afghan domestic political discussion. The UK welcomed the inclusion of women in the Afghan negotiating team and Afghan state peace structures.

26. The increasing number of girls in education is often cited as a success for the US-led coalition's engagement in Afghanistan. There has undoubtedly been a large increase in the number of girls enrolled in school, but we are concerned at the disparity between enrolment figures and both the number of girls who complete their schooling and the female literacy rate, which is just 16%. (Paragraph 144)

Girls' education is a UK Government priority, focusing not just on ensuring girls' access to schooling, but also on wider learning. The UK's Girls' Education Challenge

(GEC) and ARTF tackle persistent disparities in school completion between boys and girls, and work to ensure that gains in access and learning are not lost, particularly after prolonged school closures due to Covid-19.

In 2018, an estimated 30% of Afghan women over the age of 15 were literate, but for young women aged 15-24, who have been the beneficiaries of many girls' education initiatives in recent years, the literacy rate is 56% (UIS database). Evaluation of the UK's GEC projects in Afghanistan demonstrate high attendance rates, improved learning outcomes, as well as strengthened leadership skills for girls. During school closures, GEC projects have worked to maintain regular contact with girls, keeping them learning and supporting their safety and well-being. Now, as schools reopen, UK projects are working with communities to support girls at risk of not re-enrolling.

27. We recommend that the Government undertakes greater consultation with Afghan communities over its provision of education for girls and maternal health programmes, to ensure these are driven by grassroots priorities. (Paragraph 145)

Beneficiary feedback is critical to shape the direction of UK investments in maternal health programmes. The UK-funded government health programme, Sehatmandi, contracts a Third-Party Monitor to conduct an annual 'Balanced Score Card' of health facilities, which includes women's views on quality and attitude of service provision. Likewise, the UK funds the annual Survey of the Afghan People, to gather perceptions on health; in 2019 over 17,000 face-to-face interviews were conducted, 49% of which were with women.

28. The UK should put particular emphasis on funding women's health programmes across Afghanistan. (Paragraph 146)

The UK supports maternal health through multiple channels. The UK is one of the largest bilateral donors to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, which funds the Sehatmandi national health programme in all 34 provinces. The UK's investment in Sehatmandi includes the full range of maternal health provision through the Basic Package of Health Services and the Expanded Package of Hospital Services. In addition, the UK Government funds Family Protection Centres in 12 provincial hospitals, to provide health and psychosocial support services to survivors of Gender-based Violence. Through a separate programme, the UK Government is providing sexual and reproductive health services for women in 8 provinces through satellite health clinics at district hospitals, and mobile midwife and nurse teams to reach more remote locations.

29. We would welcome further information on the UK's work to challenge early and forced marriages across Afghanistan, and their effect on the education and future of Afghan girls and women. (Paragraph 147)

30. While providing services in Taliban-controlled areas presents considerable challenges, improving the lives of women and girls in rural areas is critical to achieving development in Afghanistan. We would welcome further information on the UK's policy on such support. (Paragraph 148)

The UK supports the Afghan government in its commitment to eliminate child, early and forced marriages by 2030 under goal 5.3 of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, the ARTF-funded the Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme – which in 2018-2021 received £3.6 million - addresses the issue of child and forced marriages of girls. The programme focuses on providing social protection to women and girls by addressing the legal barriers, including land ownership rights, access to loans and cash assistance. It provides training in literacy, business management and labour skills and promotes access to the creative markets. The programme is implemented by 10 Afghan government ministries, key for their contribution to women's economic and social independence and to enable women to overcome the social norm of child and forced marriages.

The Government urges partners funded by the FCDO to withdraw from any area they cannot operate in safely without acceding to requests on aid diversion or interference. The safety of staff and of beneficiaries is of vital importance, as is the need to ensure UK tax payers' funds are used for the purposes intended.

Community consultation on education takes place through school shuras (management committees) and Community Development Councils. All schools are required to have a shura to support school activities and children's enrolment. These include both female and male representatives as well as students to ensure that local priorities can be voiced and addressed. Through the ARTF, school shuras are being trained and provided with school grants to empower them to address needs within their schools. Girls' Education Challenge projects consult communities before establishing community-based education classes, then provide support to establish school shuras and facilitate them to play an active role during implementation. School shuras are a focal point for broader community engagement, working with parents to support girls' attendance, to address concerns e.g. safety on the way to and from school, and to encourage delaying of marriage. This community-based approach has resulted in a 20% increase in religious and community leaders mobilizing households to support their girls to attend school, delay marriage or return to school after marriage.

31. Depending on the outcome of the Doha talks and the prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan, the UK Government may need to recognise that the circumstances permitting returning asylum seekers to Afghanistan no longer exist. (Paragraph 160)

The future of talks and the impact they may have on the situation in Afghanistan is unknown. It is difficult to predict what that might mean for future considerations of asylum and human rights claims from Afghan nationals.

However, the Home Office regularly monitors and reviews the situation in migrants' countries of origin, working closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

All asylum and human rights claims from Afghan nationals are carefully considered on their individual facts and merits in accordance with our international obligations.

Each individual assessment is made against the background of the latest available country of origin information and any relevant case law. This is based on evidence taken from a wide range of reliable sources, including reputable media outlets; local, national and international organisations, including human rights organisations; and information from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

On several occasions, the UK courts have considered the situation in Kabul and Afghanistan more generally and, whilst noting the unstable security situation, have not concluded that it would be unsafe to return any Afghan national there.

The UK has a proud history of granting asylum to those who need our protection. Where someone establishes a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm in their country, they are normally granted protection and are not expected to return there. The Home Office only seeks to return those whose asylum claim have been unsuccessful. By definition, they do not need protection and are not at risk on return.

32. Decades of war and instability have resulted in large Afghan refugee populations in Iran and Pakistan, and one of the largest numbers of internally displaced persons in the world. Ongoing violence and poverty pose a significant challenge to safe and sustainable returns. (Paragraph 161)

33. As one of the core group of states supporting the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries, the UK should consider what further influence it can bring to bear on Pakistan and Iran on the protection of Afghan refugees' rights. We would be interested to receive further information on what role the UK's significant aid programme to Pakistan might play in facilitating resettlement. (Paragraph 162)

The Committee highlighted the immense challenge faced by Afghan refugees. There are 2.7 million registered Afghan refugees globally, though there may be up to 4 million Afghans in Iran and 3 million in Pakistan. The UK recognises the important role host governments play in providing for refugees.

The UK continues to provide humanitarian support to Internally Displaced Persons and returnees in Afghanistan through a multi-year humanitarian programme. Whilst the situation currently is not conducive to large scale refugee returns to Afghanistan, the UK will continue to work with UNHCR and respective governments in the region to ensure that returns are made with safety, dignity and are sustainable. The UK will use its membership of the core group for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) to drive this work forward and ensure a continued focus on the plight of Afghan refugees both supporting them in host countries and, when possible, helping to facilitate their safe return.

The Afghan economy

34. Afghanistan depends on international aid for around 60% of its budget. There are few prospects for domestic revenues to increase. Around 75% of the Afghan population work in agriculture, which accounts for just 25% of GDP.

While Afghanistan has significant mineral resources, the poor security situation hampers access, and the sector is largely unregulated and beset by corruption and rent-seeking. (Paragraph 172)

35. As a result of poor security and regional tensions, Afghanistan has missed opportunities to benefit from the trade and connectivity potential of its geographical position at the crossroads between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. It should be an objective of the Government's aid and other policies to help Afghanistan to overcome these obstacles. (Paragraph 177)

Afghanistan is endowed with a large and diverse mineral resources wealth. While several domestic mining companies have active operations producing fluorite, talc, coal, marble and other industrial minerals, these operations remain quite small and rudimentary. Afghanistan is also a major producer of precious and semi-precious stones, but this sub-sector remains largely informal. The development of the extractives sector has the potential to become a pillar of economic growth in the country. However, unlocking this potential will require progress on the legislative and regulatory framework, governance and transparency, and building capacity of institutions.

FCDO supports the Afghan government through Inter-Governmental Forum on Mining and Metals (IGF) to adopt a minerals fiscal regime that can capture a fair share of extractives revenue for the government while remaining attractive to investors. The UK-funded Extractives Hub provides on-demand short-term technical assistance to the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MoMP) to inform its policies on tackling illegal mining.

Future peace and security is critical to Afghanistan realising its economic potential and self-reliance. The Government recognises the importance of trade and regional connectivity as a key driver of economic growth in Afghanistan and the wider region. Supporting a more stable and interconnected Central Asia and South Asia is in the UK's national interest. The UK implements a number of active programmes and policy engagements aimed at advancing regional connectivity and trade, and supports strategic investments in critical trade and infrastructure projects and regional market-building.

The FCDO co-finances with the World Bank and other donors, the Central Asia South Asia (CASA) electricity trade project. CASA-1000 will facilitate the transmission and trade of surplus summer hydropower from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to energy-deficient Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The UK, in partnership with the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), provides technical assistance to increase trade and investment across Central and South Asia. The objective of this programme is to identify and design projects which improve cross-border transport, energy, and IT infrastructure, as well as tackling red tape and regulatory bottlenecks.

The UK's Pakistan Economic Corridors Programme (PECP) and CSSF Pakistan Regional Programme both have regional connectivity spill-over benefit for Afghanistan, and have allowed the UK to play a leading role in keeping trade flowing

between Afghanistan and Pakistan during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has helped to minimise economic pressures and maintain price stability of essential food and medical supplies.

36. Afghanistan is the largest source of heroin in the world. It is also a source of hashish, methamphetamines and ephedrine. (Paragraph 187)

37. The drug economy is a crucial part of Afghanistan's power dynamics: warlords, border officials, security forces, the police and the Taliban are engaged in the trade. (Paragraph 188)

38. Opium poppies are a high-return cash crop, and many rural jobs and livelihoods depend on their cultivation. It is estimated that three million Afghans benefit directly or indirectly from the drugs economy. Reducing dependence on the drugs economy is a long-term development issue. (Paragraph 189)

39. The UK has devoted significant efforts to combating the Afghan drugs economy. Most recently, this has included work to develop the intelligence and investigative capability of the Afghan authorities. (Paragraph 201)

We agree with the Committee that Afghanistan is the largest source of heroin in the world and that the opium trade is an integral part of power dynamics in Afghanistan. As stated by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon when giving evidence to the Committee, links exist between illegal drugs profits and other forms of criminal activity. Opium poppy cultivation is part of the rural economy. We agree with the Committee that reducing dependence on the drugs economy continues to be a long-term development issue. The 2018 Serious and Organised Crime Strategy aims to address, in a conflict-sensitive manner, the socio-economic, governance and criminal justice factors that inhibit the ability of countries such as Afghanistan to counter serious and organised crime and provide adequate economic and educational support to communities most at risk of SOC activity. It is particularly important to continue our commitment in this field as increased poverty due to the Covid-19 pandemic contributes to regional instability and inhibits other economic prospects.

39. The UK has devoted significant efforts to combating the Afghan drugs economy. Most recently, this has included work to develop the intelligence and investigative capability of the Afghan authorities. (Paragraph 201)

40. UK and international counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan have ultimately failed. The level of cultivation of opium poppies has not fallen, and Afghanistan remains the source of 95% of heroin on UK streets. (Paragraph 202)

HMG's approach to tackling serious and organised crime overseas is set out in the 2018 Serious and Organised Crime Strategy. Our international work focuses on disrupting and prosecuting serious and organised criminals upstream, illicit financial flows, as well as the underlying conditions that drive it. We draw on all our levers (including political, law enforcement, diplomatic and military) to help dismantle the business models of high harm transnational organised crime groups. This includes

operational cooperation with foreign law enforcement agencies and capacity building support to those agencies where required. The NCA, HMRC, Immigration Enforcement, Border Force and the CPS have international networks to facilitate this, with over 300 officers deployed overseas. We also work to build resilience in countries vulnerable to transnational crime and tackle the underlying drivers and vulnerabilities that perpetuate it.

We agree with the committee that the UK has devoted significant effort to combating the Afghan illicit drugs economy. The referenced timeline does not clearly represent UK efforts as we have been building investigation capabilities with US partners for over a decade. We do not judge that UK and international counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan have 'ultimately failed' but we do recognise the many challenges which continue to inhibit all such efforts. As stated by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon in the evidence reference by the committee in the report, the UK has worked closely with Afghan authorities and international partners to disrupt criminal activity. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon is right to state that the NCA has achieved considerable success in the capacity building of Afghan authorities, as seen in the referenced success of operations in the UK which are a product of the successful building of intelligence and investigative capabilities in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Committee's helpful evidence, findings and recommendations will be closely reflected on as we continue to design and refine our future strategic, programmatic and, or, operational interventions in-country, including bilateral and multilateral engagement.

41. The UK's presence in and funding for Afghanistan appears to contribute little to the UK's identified national security interest of countering the narcotics trade. The problem is seemingly intractable, in the context of ongoing conflict and insecurity, the dependence of millions of rural Afghans on opium poppies for their livelihoods and the involvement of multiple powerful actors in the drug economy. (Paragraph 203)

42. Nonetheless, addressing the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics must be a priority for the UK's engagement on Afghanistan's agricultural, economic and rural development, and UK public safety. Effective action will only be possible once a greater degree of security in the country is achieved. It should be an objective of UK Government policy that any post-Doha Afghan government is committed to reducing and eliminating this trade, to help that government to achieve those aims, and to co-operate with Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Pakistan and Iran, in enforcement action against this illicit trade. (Paragraph 204)

Addressing the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics is a UK priority for both Afghanistan's state development and UK public safety. We will continue to work with international partners on this and seek to secure commitment from a post-Doha government to prioritise reduction and elimination of this type of trade, including strengthening law enforcement cooperation with their neighbours where this is practical and feasible. It remains up to the people of Afghanistan to decide upon whether the post-Doha government continues through to an agreed political settlement. We will continue to encourage them to make this a priority. We agree

that instability and violence work to the detriment of progress in counter-narcotics and development. Yet against this backdrop, our work has helped to protect the UK for over a decade and there has been successes in capacity building across the region as a whole to address counter narcotics. As underlying security issues are what enables this trade, our work in supporting Afghan security forces is key to our counter-narcotics objectives.

61. Opium remains the main source of income for the Taliban, accounting for up to 65%. The Taliban also profits from the taxation of economic activities, and other illicit trades, including illegal mining and logging. (Paragraph 279)

We agree with the Committee's assessment that both taxation and protecting opium are sources of income for the Taliban. As stated by the Committee's evidence, the Taliban's income has diversified but these two areas remain key components of their income generation.

43. Afghanistan is the most aid-dependent country in the world. Sixty percent of its budget is provided by international donors. Without this funding, the state cannot provide basic services. (Paragraph 210)

44. Reducing Afghanistan's aid dependence in a sustainable way, which does not damage an already fragile state or increase deprivation, will be a long-term process. (Paragraph 211)

45. The UK is a major donor to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which provides on-budget support to the Afghan government. This funding accounts for half of UK official development assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan. (Paragraph 222)

46. As the ARTF is provided as on-budget support (directly to the Afghan government), the UK is reliant on the financial management of the Afghan government for the delivery of 50% of its ODA. While the UK participates actively in World Bank oversight mechanisms for the ARTF, this situation nonetheless poses challenges to achieving the UK's development outcomes, given the weakness of the Afghan government and widespread corruption. Therefore, further consideration should be given to the allocation of ODA directly to NGOs and other recipients, rather than to the Afghan government via the ARTF. (Paragraph 223)

The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) mechanism coordinates international support for Afghanistan by underwriting the delivery of basic services, government operations and fiscal stability. The ARTF aligns donor and government priorities to maximise aid effectiveness and value for money. The World Bank's fiduciary controls protect UK funding and provide high levels of oversight.

The UK has influence with the Afghan government and with other donor partners, including because of the UK's technical in-country team at the British Embassy in Kabul. The Government has sought to include the use of varying delivery modalities into the ARTF structure. This works to ensure that aid still reaches the most vulnerable, whilst maintaining legal and political commitments.

NGOs are significant recipients of ARTF funds through contracts with the Afghan government. Health services and community development, currently planned to constitute about £460 million of ARTF funding over the next four years, are delivered through NGOs. An explanation of decisions about ODA allocations, which also relates to recommendations and conclusions 45-48, is given in response to the Committee's recommendation 122.

47. The UK is also a major humanitarian donor, including through the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF). Ongoing UK funding for the AHF will be required, given the scale of the humanitarian challenges facing Afghanistan, particularly the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Paragraph 224)

48. We welcome the Government's decision to maintain the level of aid to Afghanistan in the present financial year (2020–21), and its commitment at the recent Geneva conference to sustaining a substantial aid programme in the future. The Government should explore ways of funding smaller, locally-led programmes, particularly those devoted to health and education. (Paragraph 225)

The UK is committed to continuing to provide humanitarian support to Afghanistan. Using the main coordinated delivery channels of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and UN humanitarian response, enables implementation through capable partners and systems to manage risks to UK funding. It enables the UK to exert wider influence and impact beyond our own funding. Within these mechanisms, funds cover a number of locally-led programmes implemented by international and local partners. For example, the UK's support to the education sector includes targeted community-initiatives implemented by NGOs and the UN. UK support to the humanitarian response includes a number of locally-implemented initiatives supporting health outcomes. In addition, the UK supports several smaller initiatives at local level through the UK Aid Match programme.

49. Improving agricultural productivity is essential to Afghanistan's economic development (see paragraphs 166-8). The UK should maintain and improve its provision of official development assistance for agricultural development. (Paragraph 226)

The Government welcomes the recommendation relating to the importance of agriculture productivity for Afghanistan's economy. The agriculture sector is the backbone of Afghanistan's economy and provides jobs to 43% of those employed and encompasses 50% of Afghanistan's exports. Furthermore, over 80% of the Afghan population relies on agriculture for their livelihoods. The sector needs meaningful support to reach its potential.

The UK has been a major donor to this sector for the last two decades, including providing funding to bilateral and multilateral programmes to develop the sector. The FCDO continues to support agriculture development through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) agriculture portfolio, coordinating with other donors, multilaterals and development agencies, as well as through bilateral programming. ARTF supports a wide range of projects, including on irrigation,

livelihoods and agribusiness. ARTF's 'Opportunity for Maximising Agribusiness Investments and Development' project is set to be approved in November 2021 and will help the Afghan government to establish major agriculture infrastructure.

50. The cost of remitting money from the UK to Afghanistan, 12.7%, is unacceptably high. The Government should consider what actions it could take to lower the cost of remitting money from the UK to Afghanistan. (Paragraph 229)

51. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded Afghanistan's serious economic challenges. The country faces a humanitarian crisis, with alarmingly high levels of food insecurity. The poverty rate is expected to rise to 72% of the population, and it will struggle to meet a number of the Sustainable Development Goals. (Paragraph 236)

52. Afghanistan will need further humanitarian aid as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We welcome the UK's recent commitments to increase humanitarian provision in this regard. Rigorous oversight will be needed to ensure that UK resources reach their intended targets, represent value for money, and are not used to sustain warlords. (Paragraph 237)

We recognise deep, significant and continued humanitarian and development needs in Afghanistan, undoubtedly worsened by the impact of Covid-19 and the existing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, brought about by years of conflict and instability. We remain committed to supporting Afghanistan.

UK funds are subject to rigorous oversight to ensure they reach the intended recipient. Contributions are allocated to projects within an agreed coordination, monitoring and reporting framework, with clear accountability and risk management systems in place. 1.9% of Afghanistan's total remittances originate in the UK. The high cost of remittances encourages remittances to be sent via lower cost informal (illegal) channels such as the Hawala system. Lowering the cost of remitting money from the UK to Afghanistan would benefit the most vulnerable.

The Taliban and other security issues

53. It is difficult accurately to assess the scale of the territory controlled by the Taliban. Experts differ in their assessments, and ongoing clashes between the Afghan National Security Forces and the Taliban suggest that the situation remains fluid. (Paragraph 242)

This assessment is accurate. Accurately measuring the territorial, population and district control in Afghanistan is very difficult given the conditions on the ground. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) continues to improve its capabilities, and progress is being made. ANDSF continues to secure all of Afghanistan's cities and most populated areas. Violence levels remain unacceptably high, with casualties being heavily inflicted on the Afghan security forces, as well as civilians. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reported

that Taliban violence has risen by 50% since September. It is likely that areas will continue to be contested.

54. There are differences in outlook between the younger members of the Taliban, who do not remember its rule in the late 1990s, and veteran Taliban fighters. (Paragraph 246)

55. The Taliban reflects the views of a section of largely rural Afghan society on issues including women's rights and human rights. Although still predominantly Pashtun, it has become more geographically diverse. (Paragraph 250)

56. The Taliban has adapted since 2001, but it has not necessarily become less conservative. The extent to which the Taliban has moved away from its previously ideologically hidebound agenda is unclear. (Paragraph 254)

57. The Taliban maintains close links with international partners, particularly Pakistan. However, it has shown itself to be unwilling to bend to external pressure, even from its allies. (Paragraph 259)

58. The Taliban is increasingly institutionalised, with a consultative system that reflects the diversity of the group. It can co-ordinate military actions and ceasefires. (Paragraph 264)

59. The Taliban has developed parallel government structures in the areas it controls, providing basic services to local communities and further undermining the institutions of the government in Kabul. (Paragraph 273)

60. The Taliban has demonstrated a degree of flexibility to local needs and demands in the areas it controls, but it remains highly authoritarian and parasitic. (Paragraph 274)

The Taliban says it has changed since it was in power. The Taliban movement oversees some basic service delivery to communities living in areas under their control, predominately rural areas. This includes education, health, and justice. Nevertheless, the Taliban's service provision is often achieved through intimidation and coercion, and there is limited provision for decision-making made by women and minorities.

64. We are surprised that the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is not included in the Home Office's list of proscribed terrorist organisations. The UK is the only country among the 'Five Eyes' group not to proscribe ISKP. We recommend that this matter be reviewed urgently. (Paragraph 289)

67. Islamic State Khorasan Province poses a significant threat to the Afghan government and civilians. Its ability to recruit educated, urban Afghans is a particular concern. (Para 316)

The Government remains deeply concerned by the security situation in Afghanistan, with the violence largely driven by the actions of non-governmental armed groups, including Daesh-affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP). The Government proscribed the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Daesh, in June 2014.

IS-KP publicly declared its allegiance to Daesh in 2015 and is formally recognised as one of its regional branches, receiving material support and direction from Daesh's core leadership. Like all regional affiliates of Daesh, IS-KP is effectively regarded and treated as being proscribed even if it is not explicitly referenced within HMG's list of proscribed organisations.

The Government is committed to stopping Daesh recruiting and inspiring support online. The UK co-leads the Communications Working Group of the 83-member Global Coalition, which includes Afghanistan. As part of HMG's contribution to that effort, FCDO hosts the Counter-Daesh Communications Cell, which coordinates international efforts to tackle Daesh's propaganda and reduce its ability to recruit. The Counter-Daesh Communications Cell makes insight and resources available to Global Coalition partner governments, supporting their efforts to undermine Daesh's narrative.

62. The Taliban has maintained relationships with a range of terrorist and militant groups. It is likely to prioritise its internal unity over US demands to denounce or target such groups. (Paragraph 284)

63. Public information on the different terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, their size, and the links between them, is very limited. (Paragraph 288)

65. The Taliban remains closely associated with the Haqqani Network, which is designated by the UK Government as a proscribed terrorist organisation. (Para 296)

66. Al-Qaeda has retained a presence in Afghanistan, although it appears to be weaker than before 2001. It maintains close ties to the Taliban. (Para 307)

The Government agrees with the Committee's conclusion that Al Qaeda is now less active in Afghanistan than before 2001. However, the group has not ceased to exist and remains a threat to Afghanistan and the international community. The Haqqani Network is designated a proscribed terrorist organisation that a variety of credible sources conclude has ties to Al-Qaeda.

Under the terms of the US-Taliban agreement, the Taliban made commitments on preventing international terrorism within their territory, including on its relationship with Al Qaeda. The Taliban must deliver on these commitments. The UK continues to monitor the situation closely.

External actors

68. The agreement negotiated between the US and the Taliban was a withdrawal agreement not a peace agreement. The US was driven by its determination to withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan. (Paragraph 340)

69. The US appears not to have consulted NATO Allies when negotiating with the Taliban, although the final agreement covered NATO personnel. This has risked undermining NATO unity. (Paragraph 341)

70. The commitment by the Taliban in its February 2020 agreement with the US on terrorism is obscure, imprecise and fragile. It will be important that any settlement which emerges from the Doha talks firms up that commitment, and enlists the support of the whole international community and of Afghanistan's neighbours in its enforcement. (Paragraph 342)

71. We regret President Trump plans to withdraw a further 2,500 troops from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021. The withdrawal of these troops has the potential to further destabilise the security situation in Afghanistan at a critical moment for the peace talks. We note that the requirements of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 are likely to constrain the Trump Administration's ability to withdraw these troops before the end of his term. (Paragraph 343)

72. It will be important for the Government to engage with the incoming Biden Administration from the outset on the definition of its policy towards Afghanistan. One objective should be more collective management of policy on Afghanistan among NATO Allies; another should be to give more emphasis to the conditions-related implementation of commitments entered into by all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 344)

The UK will continue to work closely with the US, and other NATO Allies, to support a secure and stable Afghanistan that minimises threats to the UK. The UK holds regular confidential discussions with the US and other NATO Allies to review our collective approach.

73. The incoming Biden Administration is expected to continue with plans to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. There is a possibility, however, that it will give more weight to the conditions on the ground, and the impact of withdrawal on the Afghan peace talks than the Trump Administration. It is likely to consult NATO Allies more closely on the withdrawal. (Paragraph 351)

The administration of President Biden has said publicly that it is reviewing the US-Taliban agreement and has indicated that it is looking carefully at the conditions for further troop withdrawals. It has affirmed that any decision on troop numbers will be made in consultation with NATO Allies. The UK welcomes this and the UK will continue to work closely with all NATO Allies.

74. Pakistan is the most important external actor in Afghanistan. We welcome the Government's engagement with Pakistan on Afghanistan and hope it will continue to press Pakistan to support a negotiated settlement. (Paragraph 367)

75. Pakistan appears to have considerable influence over the Taliban, even if the relationship has changed since 2001. However, it appears to be unwilling to use this influence. (Paragraph 368)

76. Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan is driven by its tense and volatile relationship with India. (Paragraph 369)

109. The UK should continue to work with Pakistan in support of a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 515)

The UK enjoys strong bilateral ties with the government of Pakistan, as well as a shared history and strong people-people links. Pakistan is an important ally in supporting peace in Afghanistan and the UK Government continues to encourage Pakistan and Afghanistan to work together to support peace, counter the terrorist threat and promote regional economic development. The UK Government recognises that securing a stable Afghanistan matters, not just to Afghans, but more widely, including with countries such as India. Pakistan is a key regional partner for Afghanistan and the UK Government will continue to work with the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to support cooperation on security, regional connectivity and refugees, among other issues.

77. India's involvement in Afghanistan, particularly in respect of trade, is heavily dependent on the goodwill of Pakistan. India is, however, Afghanistan's largest regional donor of development assistance. (Paragraph 382)

India is an important regional power and, as the Committee notes, the largest regional donor of development assistance. Beyond development assistance, India works closely with the Afghanistan government on infrastructure projects, including the recently agreed Shahtoot dam project. India has an educational exchange programme, with thousands of Afghan students studying in India each year. Afghanistan's future development will depend on strong regional economic connectivity which will require cooperation with India. The UK Government will continue to work closely with India across a range of Afghan and regional issues.

78. Iran has a highly flexible strategy when it comes to Afghanistan and appears to be willing to work with all actors to secure influence and achieve its aims, particularly stability on its border. (Paragraph 394)

79. The Government should engage more systematically with Iran on Afghanistan than has been the case in the past, recognising that on policies encouraging greater stability and security and on interdicting drug trafficking, UK and Iranian interests could coincide. (Paragraph 395)

Afghanistan's immediate neighbours are key to countering security threats from cross-border terrorism, serious organised crime and narcotics, as well as managing bilateral issues. Iran shares a long border and has significant linguistic and people-to-people links. In total, there may be up to 4 million Afghan refugees in Iran. The UK engages with Iran on a range of issues including regional stability. Nonetheless, the UK Government recognises the complexities of the Iranian system and remains alive to challenges to Afghan stability posed by elements of the Iranian state.

Iran is a primary transit route for heroin consignments and illegal immigration destined for the Europe and the UK. Iran's high opiate addiction rate and concerns

over illegal migration from Afghanistan are convergence points of mutual interest. However, any cooperation with the Iranian government would be governed by FCDO policy on Overseas Security & Justice Assistance and Cabinet Office principles relating to the detention and interviewing of detainees overseas and passing and receipt of intelligence relating to detainees.

80. The future security and stability of Afghanistan and the well-being of its citizens will depend crucially on reducing, and if possible eliminating, the intervention in its affairs of its neighbours. An objective of UK policy should therefore be to establish as binding as possible a commitment by its neighbours to non-interference and positive support for a stable Afghanistan, and to encouraging economic co-operation. This objective may be best pursued by discussions at the UN. (Paragraph 396)

The support of its neighbours and the region will be essential to support Afghan-led, Afghan-owned efforts to develop peace and stability. Any successful regional strategy will require collaboration across a wide range of issues, not just non-interference. The UK Government actively encourages co-operation and dialogue between Afghanistan and its neighbours to address shared interests and concerns.

The UN Security Council has mandated the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to support regional cooperation, with a view to promoting stability, peace and economic development. The UK continues to support these efforts in the UN Security Council.

81. The role and influence of the Gulf states in Afghanistan has changed. Saudi Arabia's influence has waned, while Qatar's has increased significantly. (Paragraph 401)

The Committee is right to suggest that Qatar has worked hard to deliver the peace talks in Doha. The UK will continue to work with partners across the region to support peace in Afghanistan.

82. The stability of Afghanistan appears to be China's main priority. Possible threats from Uighur militant groups based in Afghanistan are a concern to China. It is interested in exploring Afghanistan's raw materials; however, this appears to have become secondary to its security concerns. (Paragraph 408)

83. Pakistan is an important regional ally for China. Beijing's policy on Afghanistan is, to a large extent, a by-product of its relationship with Islamabad. (Paragraph 409)

China is important in the region and plans to develop regional connectivity, especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, but also through Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries. The Chinese Foreign Minister spoke about the importance of maintaining stability in Afghanistan at the opening of the peace talks in Doha in September 2020.

84. Russia is no longer a major actor in Afghan affairs, but the US's ongoing engagement means it retains an interest, and it has cultivated relations with the Taliban. (Paragraph 417)

Russia has communicated its desire to see progress in the peace process. The UK will continue to work with Russian counterparts in Afghanistan whilst remaining aware of those areas where our interests may diverge.

The Afghan National Security Forces and NATO

85. We welcome the valuable part the UK has played in NATO's Resolute Support Mission since 2015. In particular, we welcome the UK's long-term investment in training through the establishment of the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, which has been an important contribution. (Paragraph 435)

86. The Afghan National Security Forces have become increasingly effective. While they can operate more independently, ongoing US and NATO support is required if the Afghan government is not to lose further territory to the Taliban. (Paragraph 444)

87. Ongoing patronage ties within the Afghan National Security Forces are a concerning reflection of the level of influence of militias and strongmen across Afghan state institutions. (Paragraph 445)

88. Ongoing donor funding through the NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund and the UN Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan is essential to the viability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). There is no short or medium-term prospect that the Afghan state can generate additional revenue to replace international funding for the ANSF. (Paragraph 449)

89. We welcome the UK's pledge of a further £70 million of funding for the Afghan National Security Forces for 2021. (Paragraph 450)

We welcome the Committee's acknowledgment of the contribution the UK has made to the successes of Resolute Support Mission and our role in supporting the Afghan Security Forces in becoming increasingly self-sufficient.

We would like to correct an error in the Committee's report. Firstly, the report details throughout the US intent to 'withdraw 2,500 troops from Afghanistan by January 2021'. The BBC article from which this appears to be quoted is in reference to joint withdrawals in Afghanistan and Iraq, amounting to 2,500 across both countries. The article later confirms that 'in Iraq, the number of US troops will be cut by 500 to 2,500, while the number of service personnel in Afghanistan will fall from 4,500 to about 2,500'. The correction should therefore state that the US announced the withdrawal of 2,000 troops from Afghanistan by January 2021 or reducing to 2,500 troops by January 2021.

We would also like to respond to evidence presented by Brigadier Thomas at paragraph 428 that the Kabul Security Force is 'American-led'. While this may have been correct at the time Brigadier Thomas was in post, the KSF is now UK led, and coordinates and delivers critical and complex force protection to NATO advisors in the city, which enables international mentoring and training throughout Kabul.

We note the Committee's concerns that support to the Afghan security forces must be ongoing to ensure their continued capability. HMG is closely monitoring any developments in the security situation to best inform policies that protect our national interests.

We are pleased that the Committee acknowledged our commitment to continue to support the Afghan Security Forces through 2021. We are pleased that the Committee welcomes our pledge of up to £70 million to continue to support the Afghan Security Forces through 2021.

The peace talks in Doha & the future

90. A negotiated settlement is the only long-term solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 455)

The UK is clear that a negotiated political settlement is the only long-term solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. The UK therefore welcomes current peace efforts including the start of direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The UK urges all sides to seize this opportunity.

91. We regret that the US's agreement with the Taliban was not conditional on the outcome of the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The US's unilateral commitment to withdraw troops has undermined the Afghan government's leverage in the talks. (Paragraph 459)

92. The violence perpetrated by the Taliban against the Afghan state and civilians is unacceptable. We regret that this violence has increased since the US-Taliban deal in February 2020. (Paragraph 460)

The US-Taliban agreement paved the way for the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The agreement is clear in its preamble that it does not, in itself, provide a comprehensive settlement for Afghanistan, but sets a foundation upon which peace talks can be held.

The Government shares the Committee's conclusions that the violence perpetrated by the Taliban is unacceptable. The UK is deeply concerned about the high levels of violence across Afghanistan, including recent assassinations, which risk undermining peace efforts. The UK Government at the highest levels has condemned this violence. The Taliban must demonstrate its commitment to peace by taking immediate steps to reduce this violence and set the path for a comprehensive ceasefire.

93. Afghan women should play a significant role in the peace negotiations in Doha. We commend the four women in the Afghan government aligned delegation for their important work in very challenging circumstances. (Paragraph 466)

94. The UK Government should advocate for greater representation of women in the Afghan government-aligned delegation to the peace talks. (Paragraph 467)

95. The UK Government should support engagement between the negotiators and civil society groups to increase the representation of the range of Afghan society. (Paragraph 468)

97. The UK Government and its international partners should advocate for the Taliban delegation to include women. (Paragraph 476)

The Government agrees with the Committee that Afghan women should play a significant role in the peace negotiations. The UK advocates greater representation and inclusion of women in talks. Afghanistan was designated one of three priority countries globally for our 2020 support to meaningful participation of women in peace processes.

The Government believes that any political process in Afghanistan should be representative of Afghanistan's diversity at every level of decision-making, including the meaningful inclusion of women and minorities. The UK continues to make clear to all sides that a political settlement should protect and build on the progress made in the country on human rights and freedoms, particularly for women and minorities.

To help this, the UK is currently providing capacity-building support to the Afghan government State Ministry of Peace, women's networks and civil society organisations. For example, the UK's partnership with the Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid (CORDAID) aims to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to engage with the peace process. This includes providing ongoing mentoring to a diverse cadre of 30 female peacebuilders, as well as increasing the opportunities for women to engage in discussions on peace across 15 provinces. In partnership with Germany, Indonesia and the Afghan government, the UK has promoted a greater role for women in the peace process at the United Nations Security Council. The UK Mission to the UN in New York co-hosts, with the Afghan Mission, the Group of Friends of Women of Afghanistan, providing a high-profile platform for the promotion of women's rights in Afghanistan.

The UK's future development partnership with Afghanistan will be based on the principles of the Afghanistan Partnership Framework focussed on shared objectives including progress in the peace process, protection of women and minority rights groups and broader human rights.

96. The Afghan government appears to have developed a consensus for the negotiations. The possibility remains, however, that power brokers within, and associated with, the government may act as spoilers if they regard their economic or political interests to be threatened. (Paragraph 473)

As in any country, there are political players who wish to achieve their own interests, and could therefore exert a negative effect on political unity or the peace process. However, significant efforts have been made to unite opinion and direction behind the peace process. The UK welcomes the Afghan government's formation of the Afghan negotiating team, comprised of a variety of ethnicities, men and women, as well as the formation of the High Council for National Reconciliation. This broad-

based representation of the Afghan negotiating team has been a strength in negotiations. The people and Afghan government want an end to the conflict.

98. The Taliban has shown itself to be willing to engage in the peace talks, but its commitment to a negotiated settlement and to power-sharing remains unclear. The Taliban's desired outcome from the talks, beyond the departure of foreign troops, is not known. (Paragraph 482)

99. The Taliban leadership appears to have significant control of its forces. However, its negotiators' ability to compromise is likely to be limited by the group's ideology, the narrative with which it has inspired its fighters and the risk of defections to other extremist groups. (Paragraph 488)

Under the terms of their agreement with the US, the Taliban committed to engage in direct peace talks, aimed at reaching a lasting peace settlement. The Taliban needs to show it is serious about peace by engaging meaningfully in peace negotiations with the Afghan government and responding to the clear demand from the Afghan people for violence to end.

The Taliban are not a unitary movement but have demonstrated a high level of cohesion, most recently through short-term ceasefires. It remains unclear how the Taliban's views may evolve, and how and whether the movement will maintain cohesion.

100. Achieving a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan is likely to be a protracted and contentious process. The Government should encourage the parties, and regional and international actors, to remain engaged in the process, even if progress is slow. (Paragraph 494)

We share the Committee's view that peace talks may take time. The Afghan peace negotiations should be given the necessary space to develop. The UK will continue to urge the parties to seize the opportunity afforded by the talks to reach a political settlement. The UK will continue to support peace efforts.

101. The ongoing engagement of the US is critical to the success of the Afghan peace talks. We are concerned that the US's agreement with the Taliban risks critically undermining the Afghan government in the talks. (Paragraph 498)

102. The UK Government should make clear to the US that ongoing US military and diplomatic engagement is essential to achieving a successful negotiated settlement, and that further US and NATO troop withdrawals should be paused. (Paragraph 499)

The UK will continue to work closely with the US on our shared interests in Afghanistan and within NATO. The Biden administration has made clear publicly that Afghanistan is a top early foreign policy priority: this is welcome.

103. We welcome the UK's enduring commitment to human rights, particularly the rights of women and minorities, in Afghanistan. We regret that the UK is

***unlikely to have sufficient leverage to ensure these rights are protected.
(Paragraph 507)***

The UK is one of the largest international donors to Afghanistan. UK aid money supports essential services to the Afghan people and gives peace the best chance to succeed. Future funding to Afghanistan to continue our vital developmental assistance will depend on genuine progress of our shared objectives that includes the protection of human rights gains over the last 20 years.

104. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said that the UK was emphasising to the Taliban the importance of “inclusivity”. We are not confident that the Taliban will embrace inclusivity, or develop respect for the rights of women and minorities, or fundamental principles of human rights. (Paragraph 508)

105. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said the Taliban’s “ideological philosophy” needed to be addressed. We were provided with no information by the Government on how it or its partners were seeking to influence the Taliban in this regard, or its assessment of how successful this might be. We request this information. (Paragraph 509)

108. The Government should be giving careful consideration to how, in the event of the Doha talks resulting in an agreement, it will handle its future relationship with the Taliban, which will necessarily be part of any power-sharing arrangement, and how it will manage aid programmes in areas under Taliban control or influence. We request that the Government in due course shares its thinking on this issue with Parliament. (Paragraph 512)

The Government shares the Committee’s concern over the protection of human rights in Afghanistan, particularly for women and minorities. The gains in human rights remain fragile. The UK’s future development partnership with the Afghan Government will be based on the principles of the Afghanistan Partnership Framework focussed on shared objectives including progress in the peace process, protection of women and minority rights groups and broader human rights.

The Government closely monitors the risk of Taliban interference through our programmes by way of informal and formal reporting from partners for humanitarian coordination. Through regular dialogue with partners receiving UK funding, the UK stresses the importance of not acceding to requests, and where they cannot operate without interference they should withdraw. Three key factors are used to agree this: numbers of cases of aid diversion and interference, systematic interference and the inability to continue to deliver programmes.

The UK engages with a wide range of contacts in support of Afghan peace efforts. This includes UK officials meeting Taliban representatives in Doha, as NATO, the EU and others do. During these meetings, officials discuss the Afghan peace negotiations; human rights, including women’s rights; the need for a reduction in violence; and the need for the Taliban to make a clear break with terrorist organisations and calling for the cessation of their targeting of women and minorities. The UK is clear that the Afghan government is the legitimate representative of the Afghan people.

If the Taliban comes to power in Afghanistan, or there is a material change in context, the UK would review its approach to the provision of aid in Afghanistan.

106. We welcome the Government's commitment to promoting freedom of religion and belief. There is an urgent need for moderate Islamic scholarship to become more widely known and celebrated. (Paragraph 510)

The Government acknowledges the Committee's conclusion recognising the UK's commitment to promoting freedom of religion and belief. The Afghan government's High Council for National Reconciliation's ulema commission has a focus on Islamic interpretation in order to create space for moderate Islamic scholarship and ulema.

107. We would especially like to learn more about the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Declaration of Humanity, referred to by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, and the promotion of freedom of religion or belief (Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), in the FCDO's strategy. (Paragraph 511)

The Declaration of Humanity denounces the stigma faced by survivors of sexual violence in conflict, including children born of conflict-related sexual violence, and calls for the prevention of sexual violence in conflict. It provides an opportunity for multiple faiths and beliefs to unite in a common front to challenge damaging societal norms, and calls for support for survivors of sexual violence internationally.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, as the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence, worked closely with a UK-based Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) Faith and Belief Leaders working group to develop a succinct impactful text, which uses neutral language to maximise support from a diverse range of faith, and belief groups.

The Declaration was launched on 17 November 2020 and has received significant support globally from faith and belief leaders, community leaders, and faith-based organisations in a range of countries including Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, the Vatican, Kosovo, and Iraq. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office continues to engage with faith and belief leaders around the world to ensure the Declaration has maximum impact and reaches key individuals in communities most affected by conflict related sexual violence.

The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all, and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. Promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief is one of the UK's human rights priorities. On 20 December 2020, the Prime Minister reaffirmed his commitment to FoRB by appointing Fiona Bruce MP, as his Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Mrs Bruce will work closely with the Minister of State responsible for Human Rights, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, to promote FoRB for all.

The UK remains deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of FoRB in many parts of the world. Religious intolerance and persecution are often at the heart of foreign and development policy challenges. Where FoRB is under attack, other human rights are often threatened too. The UK Government

believes that one of the most effective ways to tackle injustices and advocate for respect among different religious and racial groups is to encourage states to uphold their human rights obligations.

The UK works within the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe and other multilateral fora to promote and protect FoRB for all where it is threatened. In November 2020, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon underlined the UK's commitment to FoRB, speaking at the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Ministers' Forum of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Bilaterally, Ministers and officials regularly raise specific cases of concern, and discuss practices and laws that discriminate on the basis of religion or belief. The Government does not shy away from challenging those the UK believes are not meeting their obligations, whether publicly or in private.

110. A successful outcome to the Afghan peace talks must include a ceasefire, the reconciliation and reintegration of armed groups, respect for the rights of all Afghan citizens and a commitment not to provide support for terrorist groups. It is likely to include some sort of power sharing with the Taliban. (Paragraph 521)

111. If a negotiated settlement is not reached between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the outcome is likely to be more violence and possibly a civil war. (Paragraph 522)

112. If the Taliban is brought into the Afghan government, it will expect to be given political and military roles. This may result in competition with existing power brokers. (Paragraph 527)

The UK remains particularly concerned about the high levels of violence in Afghanistan. There is an urgent need for a reduction in violence, leading to a ceasefire. The UK urges all parties, and particularly the Taliban, to respond to the clear demand from the Afghan people for the violence to end.

Peace talks are expected to cover a variety of issues, including future governance arrangements and a comprehensive ceasefire and will be for Afghans to decide. It has been made clear to the Taliban that if they wish to play a political role in Afghanistan's future, and share the goals of stability and security for its population, they must engage meaningfully in the peace talks.

The UK Government shares the Committee's concerns that the alternative to a political settlement is likely to be further years of violent conflict. The UK Government urges all sides to come together to deliver the peace that the Afghan people want and deserve. The UK Government remains committed to supporting a more stable and prosperous Afghan state.

113. Human rights, particularly the rights of women and minorities, are in danger of being a casualty of the Afghan peace talks. The Taliban has not demonstrated that it has changed, and it is ideologically opposed to the progress made since 2001. (Paragraph 537)

114. The UK Government should continue to use its diplomatic influence to ensure that sufficient time is devoted to the discussion of human rights issues in Doha, and call for the involvement of a broad range of Afghans in the negotiations. It should provide financial support to enable civil society groups and rights advocates to participate in the talks. (Paragraph 538)

115. The UK should continue to make clear that its future financial support for Afghanistan is conditional on respect for human rights, including the rights of women and minorities and freedom of speech. (Paragraph 539)

The UK Government agrees on the importance of supporting human rights, including the future rights of women and minorities. The Taliban have yet to give concrete assurances, that in a future political settlement, human rights gains, including the rights of women will be fully protected.

At the start of the peace talks in September 2020, the Foreign Secretary urged Afghan leaders and the Taliban to work towards an inclusive and sustainable peace. The UK continues to make clear to all sides that a political settlement must protect and build on the progress made in the country on human rights and freedoms, particularly for women and minorities. The UK has enhanced the inclusivity of the peace talks in Doha through capacity building support to the State Ministry of Peace, women's networks and civil society organisations to help build women's meaningful participation and representation. The UK will continue to advocate for an inclusive peace process that puts human rights at its core.

The UK's future development partnership will be based on the principles of the Afghanistan Partnership Framework focussed on shared objectives including progress in the peace process, protection of women and minority rights groups and broader human rights. The Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, reaffirmed this to President Ghani in a call on 24 November. Future development must bring about genuine change and advance inclusive peace.

116. Countering the threat from terrorist groups in Afghanistan will remain important to the UK. The Government will need to work with the US and other NATO Allies how best to address this challenge in the circumstances either of a negotiated settlement at Doha, or of a continuation of the current hostilities. (Paragraph 542)

The UK remains committed to tackling the threat from terrorist groups in Afghanistan, including from Daesh/ISKP (Islamic State in Khorasan Province), Al Qaeda and their affiliates. The UK Government is working closely with the US and NATO Allies to ensure we are able to protect our shared interests, including countering terrorism.

Our continued support, alongside that of our NATO Allies, to the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces (ANDSF) helps to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for international terrorist groups. The UK Government is committed to continue support to the ANDSF until at least 2024.

117. We heard that the ongoing presence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan is essential to the Afghan government's military strength and negotiating position. Premature withdrawal by the US, likely to be matched by NATO partners, runs contrary to the UK's objective of securing a durable negotiated settlement. (Paragraph 546)

118. The UK should emphasise to the US and its NATO Allies the importance of their ongoing presence in Afghanistan until a peace deal is reached. (Paragraph 547)

Any decisions regarding the future of the NATO presence in Afghanistan will be made collectively by NATO Allies.

119. The ongoing presence of UK troops in Afghanistan depends on the deployment decisions of the US. We were disappointed by the lack of analysis of the implications of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan provided by ministers in their evidence. We ask the Government to provide to us its assessment of the US's policy. (Paragraph 548)

We acknowledge the Committee's concern regarding the potential implications of the US troop withdrawal. The US-Taliban deal set a timetable for a conditions-based drawdown of all international troops by 1 May 2021. Forces were adjusted several times throughout 2020, to the current levels of 2,500 US troops alongside c7,000 NATO Coalition Forces. The Resolute Support Mission is able to continue its train, advise and assist capabilities at this level.

The new US Administration has committed to a review of the conditions within the US-Taliban deal, including to assess whether the Taliban is living up to its commitments to prevent international terrorism within their territory, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders.¹

It is unclear at present what the outcome of this review will be. The UK position remains to liaise closely with our US Allies, through NATO as well as bilaterally, in order to understand any developments as early as possible, so that we can make appropriate plans both nationally and within NATO.

120. The evidence we received demonstrated the challenges facing the Government on future security assistance to Afghanistan:

- **A government with Taliban representation might not accept such assistance, and the UK and NATO Allies would need to consider what sort of assistance to provide to such a regime.**
- **If a peace deal was reached with the Taliban and the UK and international partners withdrew funding for the Afghan National Security Forces, this would critically undermine the viability of the Afghan forces.**

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/22/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-call-with-national-security-advisor-hamdullah-mohib-of-afghanistan/>

- ***The UK and non-US NATO Allies are unlikely to remain in Afghanistan if the US withdraws its troops. The US presence is the largest in NATO; the end of its non-NATO mission is likely to result in the security situation deteriorating.***

We invite the Government to provide us with its assessment of these challenges. (Paragraph 553)

The Committee highlights some of the challenges that we face. It is difficult to speculate on future scenarios as these will be heavily linked to the outcome of a peace process.

HMG is committed to funding the Afghan security forces through to 2024. We will continue to consider how this funding is administered and monitored as the peace process evolves and in light of the political and security conditions in country. We will keep the Committee informed as appropriate.

The future of our collective NATO mission is a decision to be taken by Allies together. The new US administration are yet to make their intentions clear regarding their policy towards Afghanistan, but have reiterated their commitment to ensuring that NATO Allies and Partners are consulted on any further decisions. We will keep the Committee updated as we continue to consult with our NATO Allies regarding our joint future commitments.

121. Afghanistan remains highly dependent on international aid. Cutting funding to the Afghan state would disrupt the provision of basic services. Cuts to humanitarian relief and development projects would have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable. (Paragraph 560)

122. We reiterate our opposition to the UK Government's decision not to meet its statutory target to spend 0.7% of its Gross National Income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA) from 2021. We accept that the COVID-19 pandemic has put considerable pressure on Government finances and that the UK's aid budget would have fallen in cash terms as a result of the shrinking of the UK's GNI. We call on the Government not to renege on the 0.7% commitment from 2021, which would undermine the UK's standing in the world and negatively affect some of the world's poorest people, including in Afghanistan. There is not a case for cuts to UK aid to the Afghan people, and Afghanistan's aid dependence makes it particularly vulnerable to future cuts in ODA provision. (Paragraph 561)

As announced last year, the impact of the global pandemic on the UK economy has forced us to take the tough but necessary decision to temporarily reduce how much we spend on Official Development Assistance (ODA). We will temporarily move to a target of spending 0.5% of Gross National Income (GNI) on ODA, rather than 0.7%. This is a temporary measure and we will return to 0.7% when the fiscal situation allows.

We remain firmly committed to helping the world's poorest people, including in Afghanistan. The new strategic approach will ensure every penny we spend goes as far as possible and makes a world-leading difference.

123. The UK and international donors face extraordinarily complex and sensitive problems when considering future aid to Afghanistan if the Taliban is brought into the government:

- ***Around 50% of the UK's ODA is provided to the Afghan government as on-budget contributions, via the ARTF. If the UK were to maintain funding, this would be channelled via a government including Taliban representatives.***
- ***The Government's position is that any future UK funding to Afghanistan will be conditional on respect for human rights, including women and minorities. We are not convinced that it would be able to enforce this conditionality, beyond threats to withdraw funding entirely. The Taliban shows little sign of being willing to respond to such pressure. The UK would have to choose between its commitment to supporting the Afghan government's ability to function and provide basic services, and its commitment not to fund a regime which undermines the human rights of Afghan citizens.***
- ***UK ODA to Afghanistan should be conditional on the recipient not supporting, or maintaining links with, proscribed terrorist organisations. It is not clear that the Taliban would uphold such a commitment. (Paragraph 562)***

The UK Government recognises the challenges faced when considering future aid to Afghanistan, including if the Taliban has a role in government. UK Ministers are alive to the likely scenarios, trade-offs and difficult decisions that might be required. Given the range of possible future scenarios, the UK Government has sought to build as much flexibility as possible into its future aid allocations, including the use of varying delivery modalities to ensure that aid will still reach those most in need, while respecting existing legal and political commitments. The UK played a significant role in the drafting of the new Afghanistan Partnership Framework, which clearly states the principles to which any Afghan government must adhere in order to ensure the continuation of international assistance. This includes respect for the rule of law, democracy and protection of human rights, particularly those of women and minorities.

124. Insecurity and violence are two of the major obstacles to achieving development outcomes in Afghanistan. If the peace talks break down, the security situation would be likely to worsen. While the UK could continue to support the Afghan government, its ability to provide services, and the ability of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials and NGOs to operate in the country, would be significantly undermined. (Paragraph 563)

The UK Government continues to plan for a range of scenarios. These plans include ways to adapt our approaches to ensure continued services and development programming.

The UK Government takes necessary measures to mitigate the risks to our service personnel and staff. In December 2020, the Government announced a new Afghanistan Relocations and Assistance Policy. This is a new scheme that will offer relocation or other assistance to current and former Locally Employed Staff in Afghanistan to reflect the changing situation in Afghanistan. It is expected to be launched following changes to the immigration legislation in April 2021. Under the new scheme, anyone facing a serious risk such as intimidation or threat to life will be offered priority relocation regardless of their employment status, rank or role, or length of time served. Local staff who work or worked in the public eye and who could be at risk as the security situation evolves will be relocated to the UK on a routine basis, and those not eligible to move will be offered other support such as security advice and relocation within Afghanistan.

International NGOs operating in Afghanistan are responsible for their own security provision. The Government provides a clear steer to international NGOs that they must withdraw from any area they cannot operate in safely when delivering their projects. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office constantly reviews Travel Advice used by NGOs and others. It conducts regular engagement with NGOs and discusses the various related risks.