

Written evidence submitted by Josie Stewart (AFG0054)

Introduction

1. I never wanted to be in this position. I do not want to damage FCDO, an organisation to which I have given my passion, energy, and effort. I want it to be better. I believe that giving this evidence is now the most likely way in which I might be able to contribute to this goal. I am not doing this for political purposes, to undermine government policy, or for personal gain. I believe it is necessary in the public interest and for the sake of accountability in government.
2. I am a senior professional with over fifteen years' experience specialising in good governance in the UK and internationally. I have been employed by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly the Department for International Development) since April 2015. I was based at the British Embassy Kabul from May 2015 until May 2017.
3. I have been at Grade 6 since May 2018. Grade 6 officials in FCDO are generally senior staff with responsibility for leading a policy agenda and/or a team. I am a high performer, selected to take part in FCDO's internal 'talent management' scheme to support staff with potential for promotion into the Senior Civil Service.
4. From 23rd August until 8th September 2021, I volunteered to work on the Afghanistan Crisis Response. I was in the Special Cases team from August 26th until 8th September. I acted as 'Special Cases Bronze' within the crisis structure on the majority of my shifts. This means that I was in charge of the Special Cases function, reporting to 'Crisis Silver, Afghan Nationals' who oversaw both Special Cases and the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) team.
5. Much of my career has been devoted to promoting accountability in government. Such was my concern at elements of FCDO's handling of the crisis and subsequent dismay at what I saw as FCDO's failure to abide by the very principles I have spent my professional life working on, in December 2021 I shared some background information with a BBC journalist. This information corroborated in general terms material which was already in the public domain, and raised questions regarding the accuracy of testimony that had been given to the Committee by FCDO. I had believed, incorrectly, that the two emails I shared would not be published. They have, however, subsequently proved to be of interest to the Committee, corroborating my belief that the regular system of accountability in government had broken down and this action was necessary in the public interest.
6. This was not something I did lightly, and neither is giving this evidence. I feel that my employment by FCDO put me in an impossible situation in which my conscience could not tolerate what FCDO required of me. My actions are likely to result in my dismissal from FCDO. I loved my job. I loved working with my regular team and department, and am devastated to be leaving them.
7. I cannot, however, accept the lack of accountability that I have seen for failures in the civil service system associated in particular with FCDO's management of the Afghanistan crisis response. I feel a strong sense of moral injury for having been part of something so badly managed, and so focused on managing reputational risk and political fallout rather than the actual crisis and associated human tragedy. I also cannot accept the disregard that I have seen over recent months, during this Inquiry, of core tenets of the Nolan Principles of Public Life: the issuing of misleading statements and stifling of information which harms accountability in government and the public interest.
8. The Civil Service Code includes the requirement not to mislead ministers, Parliament or others. A civil servant who is aware that the public or Parliament has been deliberately misled by the government has a duty to put this right. This is why I am providing this evidence.

9. I have three caveats that I feel are important to note:
 - a. This evidence is based entirely on my own experience. I do not have access to FCDO systems to provide records or enable elaboration. I have included only evidence in which I am completely confident, from my memory.
 - b. From what I saw, during Operation Pitting the HMG effort in Kabul and third country locations was truly extraordinary, an achievement which should not be downplayed.
 - c. The vast majority of individuals who worked in the FCDO Crisis Centre during the Afghanistan crisis response displayed great integrity, professionalism and compassion. They were let down by systemic failures in the organisation and its leadership, which compounded the chaos of the crisis situation and hampered the effectiveness and efficiency of the response.

Corroboration

10. The main reason I am giving evidence is to formally corroborate the evidence already provided by Raphael Marshall. Whilst I do not agree with every specific aspect of his testimony, I do agree with the majority of the substance and all of the essence.
11. Philip Barton testified to the Committee on 7 December that he takes the issues raised by Raphael Marshall very seriously. I have seen no evidence of this, either in subsequent testimony provided by FCDO to this Inquiry, or in changes made within FCDO to better equip the organisation to respond to future crises.
12. I hope that my corroboration serves the purpose of giving the Committee confidence in relying on key elements of the evidence provided by Raphael Marshall. His evidence is important.
13. I had never heard of Raphael Marshall before his evidence to the Committee was published. We did not overlap in our periods of time working on the Special Cases team.

Prioritisation of Special Cases

14. In my opinion, the criteria used for prioritising Special Cases during the evacuation were so broad as to be largely meaningless. They were also impossible to evaluate with the information we had in the timeframes that were necessary. From the time I joined the Special Cases team, I saw no meaningful attempts to do so. Prioritisation was based on who happened to open or forward which random email, and who could most quickly transcribe data from emails into spreadsheets from which there was a chance it might be actioned.
15. The explanation in Philip Barton's letter to the Committee of 17 January that "The LOTR cohorts drew on FCDO, MoD, and other interested parts of Government's knowledge of Afghanistan and recent evidence of actual or likely targeting by the Taliban or other groups" is in my opinion a description of idealised fantasy. I did not see this happen once.
16. The Special Cases Team did a remarkable job of implementing policy at the same time as it was being created. I agree with the testimony that this was better than the alternative of helping no one other than British Nationals and those who qualified under ARAP. I do not understand, however, why the policy was not in place earlier. I believe an appropriately functional administration could reasonably have been expected to anticipate, to clarify precisely to whom Ministers felt we owed a duty of care, and to prepare in advance a robust process for identifying and prioritising these people. This did not happen, and this manifest failure led to confusion, impossible demands on the crisis team, and compounded human tragedy in Kabul.
17. There was confusion within the Crisis Centre as well as externally as to which cohorts of people were eligible to be considered for evacuation under which mechanism. At one point I was told that Afghan contractors – UK-funded implementing partners who had been essential to the delivery of UK priorities in Afghanistan – were eligible under ARAP Category 4. The next day I

was told that they were not. Irrespective of views on whether or not it is possible to outsource moral responsibility alongside with outsourcing delivery, this lack of clarity on policy positions compounded confusion, chaos, and risk to lives.

18. From what I saw, I believe that MPs also bear some responsibility for the fact that the Special Cases team was unable to even look at enough cases to be able to claim that any meaningful prioritisation took place. The very significant pressure and lobbying by MPs on behalf of particular individuals and cohorts meant that most of the focus of the Special Cases team was on tracking down correspondence or data on individuals with connections, when it could otherwise have been spent identifying and ensuring we helped the most vulnerable people.
19. We were all desperately trying to help people we knew. Doubtless I would have done the same, had I been in a position of political influence. But the cost and implications of this should not be overlooked.

Handling of correspondence

20. Immediately after the evacuation had ended, I focused considerable effort on working with teams across the Crisis response to attempt to put in place a logical system for managing correspondence across the numerous – there were at least six that I am sure of – crisis mailboxes that were in use in FCDO.
21. There was no central process or system for handling correspondence. Individual teams managed each individual mailbox as they saw best. Mostly this meant opening emails, categorising them with coloured flags according to various systems (each mailbox team using a different system), and forwarding them to the ‘correct’ crisis mailbox (Special Cases, ARAP, Consular, etc).
22. Duplication was a huge issue already: understandably, once numerous email addresses were in the public domain, individuals and those attempting to help them would copy their emails to every address they had, as well as sending numerous follow-up emails, in hope of achieving some response. The system failure within the crisis response at least doubled this multiplication by requiring the same email to be opened and read at least twice: once in the original mailbox and then again in the ‘correct’ mailbox to which it was forwarded.
23. During my time in the Crisis Centre, there was no process for identifying these duplicate emails or tracking what if anything had been done with any emails. For most of the time there were no objectives given to mailbox teams. The very existence of some mailboxes was forgotten about entirely between shifts. Days after I finished working in the Crisis Centre, I received a call from a colleague who had started work on Special Cases asking me if I knew anything about one mailbox they had heard mentioned in passing, or how to access it.
24. I believed my attempts to agree a logical management system post-evacuation had been successful. Numerous ‘Crisis Silvers’ had been appointed to sort out the problem. Working to one of them, I documented and circulated decisions, agreements and instructions for a new way of working. I finished my shift that day around 22:00, after a thorough handover. When I started again around 8:00 the next day, no one had any awareness of what had been agreed the day before. It felt like Groundhog Day.
25. Philip Barton’s testimony that FCDO made a decision to prioritise looking at correspondence rather than answering it was accurate. However, the claim that “Since the completion of the evacuation phase, the FCDO has been urgently working through the correspondence” (letter from the previous Foreign Secretary dated 15 September 2021) is not accurate. There was no urgency whatsoever accorded to doing anything actually meaningful with any of the emails at this stage.

26. The only urgency I ever saw injected into managing correspondence was when the previous Foreign Secretary undertook that FCDO would reply by Monday 6 September to all MPs who wrote in about Afghanistan cases before 31 August. Then, the mailbox teams were bolstered and they were all required to focus solely on identifying and opening emails from MPs. This was purely in order to enable the Foreign Secretary to say that all emails from MPs had been read, and to issue a generic response. I do not believe that anything was actually done with any of the information in these emails at that time. The only urgent requirement was to manage the political fallout and to appear to MPs as if something was being done – not to actually manage, understand and act on correspondence.
27. From the 29th August through September, I and a number of others working within FCDO's Crisis Centre argued strenuously that we should respond in some way to emails from desperate Afghans and/or those working to support them. There was no agreement, interest, or urgency accorded to this argument. Sustaining communication with those who had reached out to the UK for help was not considered important. I am not aware that it ever happened.
28. This was indicative of FCDO's priorities. It did not seem to be considered important to respond to individuals in distress, even just to acknowledge their situation. When I answered emails myself – a random handful that happened to come through to me, out of the tens of thousands in the mailboxes – I could not give help or advice, but I did say how sorry I was that there was nothing I could do, and how much I was thinking of them and their families. I received replies brimming with gratitude, simply for the simple fact that someone noticed, and responded.

Nowzad

29. I am not aware of any deliberate decision to prioritise animals over people, and do not believe that this happened intentionally.
30. In my opinion, however, the decision to approve Nowzad's Afghan staff under LOTR was not in line with policy, as there was no reason to believe these people should be prioritised under the agreed criteria. The issue also certainly carried significant opportunity cost in terms of the amount of senior civil servant time spent on the case.
31. It was widespread 'knowledge' in the FCDO Crisis Centre that the decision on Nowzad's Afghan staff came from the Prime Minister. I saw messages to this effect on Microsoft Teams, I heard it discussed in the Crisis Centre including by senior civil servants, and I was copied on numerous emails which clearly suggested this and which no one, including Nigel Casey acting as 'Crisis Gold', challenged. Some of these the Committee has seen.
32. I consider the letters the Committee received from Philip Barton (17 January 2022) and from Lord Ahmad (23 February 2022) to be misleading in claiming that "Nowzad staff were included by officials in the potential cohorts to be considered for evacuation if space became available under LOTR." While factually accurate, from what I heard and saw, Nowzad staff were included as a late addition only in response to this 'PM decision.' This occurred against the previous judgement of officials.
33. I do not find it credible that Philip Barton, or those who drafted his letter dated 17 January 2022, would not have been aware of this.
34. I was copied on an email from Nigel Casey stating that the National Security Adviser would seek input on the Nowzad case from Number 10.
35. I cannot fathom why either Philip Barton or Nigel Casey would have intentionally lied to the Committee, but I believe that they must have done so both in the letter dated 17 January and in the oral testimony given on 25 January. I have tried to imagine but cannot conceive of any way this could have been an honest mistake. Nigel Casey explicitly testified that he had searched his emails and found nothing of relevance, yet when I searched my emails for "PM" and "Nowzad" I

found more than one email referencing “the PM’s decision on Nowzad” and with Nigel Casey in copy. So the only possible explanations are that a) Nigel Casey had deleted his emails (which everyone who had worked on the Afghanistan crisis had been ordered by Diptel not to do); b) he did not know how to use the “CTRL-F” function in Outlook, or searched for something other than “PM” and “Nowzad”; c) he found the emails but somehow concluded they were not relevant, despite mentioning ‘the PM’s decision on Nowzad’; or d) he was lying.

36. For these reasons I do not find Philip Barton’s letter of 27 January 2022, in which he apologised for having given “inadvertently inaccurate answers”, credible. It is possible, although it would be surprising, that neither Philip Barton nor Nigel Casey remembered seeing the emails about supposed PM involvement on the day they were sent. I cannot see how it is possible that they would not have found the extensive evidence of this when asked about it later.
37. The statement in Lord Ahmad’s letter (dated 23 February 2022) that “FCDO officials sought confirmation from the Cabinet Office later that same morning (25 August) that Nowzad’s Afghan staff should indeed be called forward for military evacuation. The National Security Adviser subsequently confirmed to a senior FCDO official later that morning that they should proceed to call forward Nowzad’s staff” is consistent with my understanding of what happened. I do not believe, however, that either the Cabinet Office or the National Security Adviser were involved in confirming any other call forwards, and can imagine no reason why FCDO officials would have sought that confirmation if they had indeed included Nowzad staff in cohorts prioritised for potential evacuation.
38. Lord Ahmad’s letter of 23 February also confirms that there were emails referring to a Prime Ministerial decision on Nowzad, and quotes Lord Goldsmith in an attempt to explain this: “it is not uncommon in Whitehall for decisions to be interpreted or portrayed as coming directly from one department or another or even the Prime Minister, even when that is not the case.” I have never in my career seen any such thing. Governance would fall apart entirely if this were the case.

Crisis management

39. I was based in South Sudan when civil war broke out in December 2013, and was in Sierra Leone at the beginning of the Ebola outbreak in 2014. I understand that an effective crisis response is, to a large extent, the result of a naturally evolving process. It requires flexibility and improvisation, and at times inefficiency is inevitable in the confusion and rapidly shifting situations. By definition, I never expected the Afghanistan crisis response to feel under control, or for everything to work well. But an effective crisis response also requires clarity of purpose, clear direction, some risk appetite, and the fundamentals of basic management competence.
40. While I worked within it, the Special Cases team did not receive any communication or instruction regarding the policy objective of our work. I came to understand for myself that in essence the evacuation of Afghan nationals was a political rather than a humanitarian response. I had, I believe wrongly, assumed it was the latter: that our objective was to fulfil our duty of care to those whom most needed and deserved it. In fact, I came to believe, it was to protect the UK from reputational damage and to manage domestic political fallout.
41. I believe the efforts of myself and many others in the FCDO crisis response would have been more efficient and more effective if there had been some clarity of purpose: if we had known what it was that we were fundamentally trying to achieve.
42. In my opinion the crisis response was also hampered by a fundamental mismatch between FCDO’s risk appetite and the requirements of the crisis. For example, following the evacuation, once alternative routes out of Afghanistan became possible, I believe we decided not to put people on Pakistan Airlines flights because Pakistan Airlines is on the UK’s blacklist due to safety concerns. I do not believe this was a reasonable calculation based on weighing up the

probability of vulnerable Afghans being targeted by the Taliban versus the probability of something going wrong on a PIA flight. I believe that risk aversion – avoiding any danger of the UK looking bad if something happened – outweighed the importance of protecting lives.

43. Finally, I cannot understand what happened to the fundamentals of basic management competence during the crisis response. I have already discussed some of this in relation to the management of correspondence, but it was a much wider issue. Staff joining the Special Cases Team did not receive any induction or introduction. There was no clear tasking, no system for recording decisions or actions, no system for handovers between shifts. Sometimes these happened on the impetus of team members, sometimes they did not. There was no accountability, continuity, focus, or control between and across shifts. I have never in my career seen anything within the civil service so badly managed.
44. I cannot understand why the simple task of rostering staff to work on the crisis was so ineffective. I first volunteered to work on the crisis on 16th August. I repeated my offer at least once daily, both proactively and in direct response to daily requests for more volunteers, until 23 August when I decided to just turn up (at which point I was warmly welcomed by an under-resourced team). During this period, I once received a call from the rostering team who had told me I could not work on the crisis as I was an ex-DFID staff member and our IT was incompatible.
45. Most days the Special Cases team ignored the formal roster, as it was incapable of meeting needs, and took responsibility ourselves for ensuring cover and continuity as best we could, including directly calling in our friends and personal contacts from across the organisation.

Lack of internal accountability

46. As a civil servant, feeling that I have no option but to share these concerns publicly has caused me considerable moral conflict. I do not want any other civil servant to be in this position.
47. If I had seen FCDO acknowledge either internally or externally what went wrong with our handling of the Afghanistan crisis, and explain how the failings will be addressed, I would not have felt compelled to give this evidence. If FCDO encouraged and enabled a culture with visible organisational commitment to encourage speaking up, I might have felt my concerns would be taken seriously internally.
48. Sessions I have joined to 'listen to staff' involved in FCDO's Afghanistan crisis response have provided safe spaces and mutual support – important for the welfare of staff put in an exceedingly difficult position, but not an avenue for meaningful accountability.
49. I understand that the internal investigation triggered by the issues raised by Raphael Marshall identified some 'lessons learned', and that a more thorough lessons learned report is forthcoming. Staff have not seen the internal investigation report, nor any meaningful accountability or action resulting from it. I am glad that FCDO recognises that it has lessons to learn, but I suspect its internal efforts would be more accurately described as lessons observed than lessons learned.
50. The Sue Gray update and the Boardman review both flag the existence of inadequate speak-up cultures within central government, where civil servants either felt unable to raise concerns or did not trust the system to deal with concerns in an appropriate way. FCDO has a responsibility to be open and accountable, to not mislead Parliament or the public, to take internal concerns seriously and act on them, and to establish the right climate so staff trust in that.
51. There is a reason that so many committed, capable, morally-attuned civil servants within FCDO are feeling the need to share information externally without authorisation. This is not, in my opinion, due to a disconnect between Ministers and civil servants. It is rather due to a disconnect within the official-level administrative system in FCDO. People have lost confidence in FCDO leadership.

52. It is sadly ironic that a likely result of 'leaks' from Raphael Marshall and from myself will be a further tightening of the control of information and closing down of space for important debate within FCDO. For FCDO to become the organisation it can and should be, the response instead needs to address the reasons why staff feel compelled to speak up, rather than their opportunities to do so.
53. There is a widespread feeling of disempowerment within FCDO currently. Very many staff feel a sense of learned helplessness: they know there is no space for speaking up, and no prospect of being able to make things any better even if they do. Richard Morris's inquest is tragically resonant in terms of the sense of appalling responsibility within a broken system.
54. This is not all the fault of senior management and leadership within FCDO. I believe it is, to some extent, the inevitable outcome of the decision to merge two stressed global organisations at the height of a pandemic, and to then proceed to significantly reduce workforce numbers. It is simply not possible to plan and prepare in advance, nor act swiftly and competently in crisis, without adequate capacity and capability.
55. I expect that some people, especially senior officials within FCDO, will not recognise some of this testimony. This is in itself evidence of the true extent of the disconnect within the organisation.
56. It is my sincere hope that the Committee can help FCDO in its imperative to refocus on delivering Government's stated objectives rather than managing the fallout of its inability to do so, and to become the organisation we all need it to be, not least in order to be capable of responding appropriately to current and future crises such as that playing out in Ukraine now.

10 March 2022