

Defence Select Committee - Afghanistan Withdrawal Written Evidence

1. Who are we?

1. We are part of a group of former senior diplomatic and development staff who, on 24th August 2021, wrote to the Prime Minister to urge the Government to ensure those who worked with the British mission in Afghanistan were evacuated through the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP).
2. All the letter's signatories have worked for the British Government in Afghanistan, including in the British Embassy in Kabul and the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Helmand Province, often in senior leadership positions.
3. They had been contacted by former staff seeking help and assistance. The majority of those seeking support were former direct employees of the British Embassy, as well as our implementing partners, and our former allies in government and civil society, who were left behind in Afghanistan. The Government owes all of them a duty of care. They are still fearful for their lives due to direct and perceived threats from the Taliban, in hiding and seeking to leave the country.

2. Summary

4. Our main messages are:
 - a) Overall, the Government appears to have severely underestimated the size of the challenge and was unprepared. As a result, the resettlement schemes and evacuation effort were significantly under-resourced, including staff available to process applications.
 - b) Communication with Afghan applicants has been particularly poor, causing not only stress but also ever-increasing numbers of requests sent to the Government by MPs and third parties.
 - c) The criteria for the ARAP scheme have been unclear, often changing, and remain too narrow. In addition to direct employees, the scheme should consider Afghan contractors, grantees and partners in government and civil society who are at risk because of their association with the UK mission and programmes and wish to leave, including their family members who are vulnerable or at risk.
 - d) The Defence Committee should consider these Afghans who contributed to the UK civilian effort as defence, diplomacy and development officials all worked together to deliver shared UK National Security Council objectives.
 - e) The UK can do much more to enable Afghans at risk because of their association with the UK to leave Afghanistan now, such as chartering flights.
 - f) More should be done through diplomatic approaches to ensure that those at risk and eligible to come to the UK are granted visas and other necessary travel documents to neighbouring countries in a timely fashion
 - g) The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) is still not operational for those not accepted under ARAP. The ACRS selection and prioritisation criteria need to be clear, fair and transparent, and its scope needs to include those Afghan who assisted the UK effort but who were not directly employed by the UK, such as staff of private sector contractors or civil society organisations funded by the UK.

- h) It is a strategic long-term error for the UK not to honour the Government's duty of care for those who worked for us and with us in Afghanistan. The UK will no longer be trusted in other fragile or conflict-affected countries, and we will fail to recruit the best local staff or implement programmes with the most appropriate partners.

3. How successful was the evacuation? Did it go according to plan?

- 5. This evidence is based on the collective experience of our group of former officials. We have facilitated a separate submission to this Committee with evidence from ARAP eligible families who were called forward but not evacuated, who describe in great details how and why they failed to enter the airport.
- 6. We appreciate the incredible efforts of UK Government staff during Operation PITTING who worked day and night to evacuate as many people as possible. They operated under very difficult conditions.
- 7. During the evacuation process, we identified a number of weaknesses which we communicated to the Prime Minister and senior ministers pressing for urgent action (letter included as appendix 1, which has now been signed by more than 60 persons).
- 8. Overall, the Government appears to have severely underestimated the size of the challenge and was unprepared. As a result, the resettlement schemes and evacuation effort were significantly under-resourced, including staff available to process applications. Many ARAP applicants had already been waiting for months for a response before the evacuation started; some had been accepted but were waiting for biometrics while the evacuation was underway, even though their identity was clearly known. Many errors were made by ARAP, such as rejecting staff who had worked for several years for the then Department for International Development (DFID) in the British Embassy in Kabul. Some had to re-apply in August, and have still not heard anything.
- 9. Communication has been particularly poor, causing stress to applicants. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) rarely responded to requests for updates sent to LocalStaff-Afghanistan@mod.gov.uk. It would take hours to reach someone by phone in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)-led crisis team, with limited effect. As a result, the Government received many more messages, including from MPs and concerned third parties. Thousands of ARAP applicants are still waiting but will not receive an individual response, as the Government has been overwhelmed by the sheer volume of correspondence it received. They will continue to apply and seek answers.
- 10. In addition, the criteria for the ARAP scheme have been unclear, often changing, and remain too narrow. The scheme needs to include families of Afghan staff, as they too have been targeted by the Taliban. Even when the Afghan staff is already a refugee in the UK, some family members left behind may be at risk and should be considered as eligible for resettlement in the UK.

11. Of particular concern are Afghans who implemented UK-funded programmes and whom the UK Government employed as contractors or who were funded through grants. The Taliban will not distinguish between an embassy employee and a contractor. Some were accepted under ARAP during the evacuation, and this precedent needs to continue for others at risk who wish to leave.

12. Afghans also at risk to whom a duty of care is owed because they assisted the implementation of UK programmes include those who worked in sensitive government positions such as ministers and senior officials; governors in Helmand where the UK was active; spokespeople; National Security Directorate staff, judges and prosecutors; as well as civil society activists and journalists. Women and minorities are particularly vulnerable.

4. How many UK nationals and Afghan nationals and families who worked with or for UK Armed Forces remain in Afghanistan? What can now be done to enable them to leave? What criteria will be used?

13. In Afghanistan, the Armed Forces worked closely with civilian staff: diplomats and aid workers who together contributed to the UK effort to implement the National Security Council Strategy for Afghanistan. The UK development effort has totalled £3.5 billion in the last 20 years. The Defence Committee should therefore also include in its enquiry civilian Afghan nationals and families who worked for or with the British Embassy and PRT, and the programmes they funded, and who are at immediate risk and seeking to leave.

14. The Government can do much more to enable safe passage for those eligible for ARAP. It needs to issue transit or visa documents promptly to those accepted for resettlement, including for those who do not have valid passports. It needs to allocate more staff, increasingly in third countries, to speed up the processing of the backlog of applications and ensure that those who reach international borders safely do not get turned back. Other countries have chartered planes, and the UK should do the same.

15. An issue of immediate concern is that the ARAP team are asking those accepted by the ARAP scheme to make their own way to neighbouring countries, conscious of the risks. Some have taken a risk in applying for passports and for visas for Pakistan, for example, without any support from the UK. More should be done through diplomatic approaches to ensure that those at risk and eligible to come to the UK are granted visas and other necessary travel documents to neighbouring countries in a timely fashion.

16. If they are not accepted under ARAP, they will need to be considered under the forthcoming Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), which was announced in August, launched in September but is still not operational. The ACRS selection and prioritisation criteria need to be clear, fair and transparent, as there will be no formal

Home Office owned application process. It will rely on referrals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), international partners and non-governmental organisations to the Home Office; details on how these referrals operate are not yet public.

17. Cross-governmental coordination needs to improve between all schemes so no one falls through the net; between the MOD, Home Office, and FCDO concerning all applications; and with home departments and local authorities in the UK. The current situation is confusing for applicants, creating additional work for Government officials and therefore delays.

5. What effect will the withdrawal have on future operations, and what will be the impact on the willingness of local personnel to work with, and support, the UK in future operations?

18. Our Afghan colleagues have told us that, when they started working for the UK Government in Kabul or Helmand, either as direct employees or as grantees/contractors/partners, they knew they were taking some risks. But they never imagined that the Taliban would take over the entire country and that the UK would abandon them in such a fashion.

19. The UK defence, diplomatic and development efforts depend on collaboration with nationals who share our objectives and trust the UK Government. The Afghanistan resettlement and evacuation schemes' shortcomings, and the continued lack of assistance for thousands left behind, will make future UK missions in fragile or conflict-affected state much more difficult. Not providing adequate assistance will be a strategic long-term error for the UK. If we do not honour the Government's duty of care for those who worked for us and with us in Afghanistan, who will trust the UK in other countries, and want to collaborate with us? We will fail to recruit the best local staff or implement programmes with the most appropriate partners; and as a result, we will not be able to achieve our objectives.

Appendix 1 below

To:

The Prime Minister
Foreign Secretary
Home Secretary
Defence Secretary
Minister of State for the Commonwealth and United Nations
Minister for Future Borders and Immigration
Minister of State for the Armed Forces

via e-mail

24 August 2021

Afghanistan Crisis: Evacuating our staff and partners now

We are writing on behalf of a large group of former civilian employees of the British Government who have worked in Afghanistan, to request that the Government fulfil its duty of care for Afghans who have supported the UK mission in Afghanistan over the last twenty years.

We are gravely concerned for the safety of Afghan colleagues who we worked with in the British Embassy in Kabul and in the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Helmand. Several of us have received direct requests for help from them as they are now struggling to get out of the country and are fearful for their lives due to direct and perceived threats from the Taliban.

Issues for immediate attention include:

- Ensuring that all Afghan staff, past and present, who have worked for the British Government in Afghanistan are included in the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme. Many were in public facing roles, representing the British Government at numerous events. This has made them and their families particularly vulnerable. Female staff who were in high profile roles are particularly worried about persecution. They are also finding it very challenging to get safe passage to the airport.
- Ensuring the scheme includes staff employed by various contractors who have worked at the British Embassy, often over many years, providing vital support services - for example catering staff, cleaners (mostly female), gardeners and guards.
- Extending the ARAP scheme to employees of partners who delivered humanitarian and development programmes funded by the British Government. These include The British Council and private sector companies, as well as international and local NGOs. These staff helped to set up education and health programmes, supported civil society development and built vital infrastructure, often at community levels, as well as many other activities aimed at promoting stability and better lives for the people of Afghanistan.
- Simplifying the process for applications to the ARAP scheme and assigning additional resources to speed things up given the limited timeframe for in-country evacuations.
- Making the ARAP eligibility criteria for dependents much clearer than is currently the case.
- Putting plans in place to support safe passage for Afghan staff to third countries and processing applications within those countries. This will be essential when the airport closes.

Time is of the essence. The window for direct evacuations is likely to close very soon so we would appreciate any immediate efforts you can make to secure progress with these priority issues.

Yours sincerely,

Former civil servants, such as UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office Directors, UK Department for International Development Directors and Heads of Office in Kabul, civilian head of the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Helmand, technical advisers and programme managers for the UK aid effort in Afghanistan, and UK civilian staff seconded to NATO/ISAF.

Alana Albee
Cleo Blackman MBE
Richard Boulter OBE
Matt Butler
Robert Collett
Jackie Creighton
Jim Drummond CBE
Chris Eleftheriades
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