

Written evidence submitted by Major General (Rtd) R R Davis CB CBE (AFG0035)

1. In 2003 I set up and commanded the first UK Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mazar-i-Sharif. I subsequently served in both Kabul and Kandahar. In May this year one of the senior interpreters from the Mazar PRT got back in touch, after many years, to say that he had applied for the ARAP scheme. We chatted on and off through June and early July. When by mid-July he had nothing but replies saying that the ARAP scheme had received his application but that it was still being processed I emailed the ARAP team to ask what was happening and to confirm that he had been my interpreter. Finally on 27 July he received an email telling him that he was eligible for relocation. But between then and start of the evacuation he just kept getting messages telling him that he would be called for biometrics. Finally, after I repeatedly raised his case with the system he was called for evacuation and after being made to join the crowd at the Baron Gate, with a wife who had just had an induced still birth and his three young children, we managed to get his family a place on a bus only for it to be waiting at the airport gates when the bomb went off after which the airport was shut to Afghan nationals. He thus missed the evacuation and was left behind, along with every other interpreter still in the country, I had served with over nearly three years in Afghanistan. To say that I was upset on the day the evacuation finished is an understatement. I could not believe that we had left so many people, who had loyally served us, behind. I decided, then and there, that I would do whatever it took to help those I had worked with who were eligible to come to the UK, but had been left behind, to make their escape. Fortunately, I was successful, and they are all now out of Afghanistan and I have gone on to help many more get out than I had originally intended. Over the course of the process, I have learnt much, which I now set out below.
2. **Data**. We appear to have had very poor data on locally employed staff, by all government departments, across the campaign. This is particularly the case for early units like the Mazar PRT which folded in 2006, when the British effort moved to Helmand. Many other nations appear to have captured and retained much better data, and some biometrically enrolled their staff (Germans and Swedes, I believe) and thus have found it much easier to verify identities and organise their overall extraction efforts, particularly post evacuation. Without accurate data it was clearly not possible to assess the scale of the task and allocate resources appropriately. Even today it not possible to accurately state how many eligible people are left in Afghanistan, as in many cases eligibility has yet to be determined.
3. **Eligibility Policy**. Eligibility criteria have by necessity been vague, as there is a huge variation in circumstances and personal risk. But it is being applied unevenly between government departments: I am aware of an FCO laundry man who was deemed eligible and at least one MOD laundry man who was not. It seems to be role based rather than risk based, which given that our aim is to protect those at risk seems wrong. I am not sure how this could be fixed quickly, but it should be reviewed.

4. **British Values**. Once it was decided that the campaign was more than dealing with the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack it became, in large part, a contest of values. The UK, along with coalition partners, actively promoted human rights, equal treatment of women, the rule of law, democracy, etc. But we appear to have not thought through our responsibility to those who have worked with us in adopting and promoting these values and who now, because of our withdrawal, are at risk. For example, it was obvious that female: judges, journalists, sports personalities, and members of the ANSF would be at particular risk if the Taliban returned, but there does not appear to have been any planning for this eventuality. The rapidly announced ACRS was not finalised in early October, and I believe is still not ready. It should have been ready much earlier, and certainly from the end of August. Some of these people have got out through the sterling efforts of other countries and NGOs, but this has not been part of a clear UK plan.
5. **Biometrics**. The lack of biometric enrolment of ARAP eligible personnel has caused serious problems. The Home Office will not issue letters of assurance or visas to individuals without biometric enrolment. Without such assurances most countries will not issue Afghans transit visas for passage to the UK, this thus closes off most routes out of the country. The German experience is particularly instructive and needs scrutiny because, I am led to believe, they had biometric data on their staff and as a result had a transit arrangement with Uzbekistan. Had biometric enrolment been started much earlier and been properly resourced many of the difficulties now being faced by those left behind could have been avoided.
6. **Diplomatic Engagement with Neighbouring Countries**. It appears little was done to engage the surrounding countries so that they were ready to help us extract those left behind in the event regime collapse. This activity should have been started in Feb 2020 once the path to withdrawal was set.
7. **Preparation Time**. Given that the Trump deal was signed in Feb 2020 we had 18 months to rectify the lack of and quality of our data, refine our evacuation polices, and conduct diplomatic preparations with neighbouring countries, yet it appears little was done. Whilst I understand that the MOD started planning the evacuation in January 2021, I am surprised that the issue of poor data on who qualified for evacuation was not addressed more seriously at this point.
8. **Timing of the Decision to Evacuate**. Any decision to even prepare to evacuate would have served to undermine the Afghan Government and, therefore, it is understandable that the ARAP scheme was only launched in Apr 2021, some 14 months after the withdrawal was agreed. But the consequences of this late decision do not appear to have been thought through. Because it meant that huge processing resources should be applied to cope with large numbers of people to be processed in much shorter space of time and raised the possibility that large numbers of eligible people would be left behind. Whilst I understand that the central assessment was that the Afghan Government would last for longer than it did, as the situation deteriorated more processing capacity should have been added. An

examination of the French approach to the situation would make an instructive comparison.

9. **Processing Capacity.** As already covered, it is very clear that the application processing capability allocated to the ARAP scheme fell well short of what was required. I have seen multiple cases of those who applied in April (when the scheme opened) and May being left behind because their applications had not been processed. Had this system been working properly many people who applied early could have left the country before the actual evacuation, the UK would have been able to manage the evacuation more effectively and it would have been much easier to help those left behind.
10. **The Evacuation.** The evacuation was clearly conducted in very difficult circumstances and those running the operation both in London and in Kabul clearly worked very hard to get as many people out as circumstances allowed.
11. **Lack of Planning for those Left Behind.** My focus has been on helping those left behind. As far as I can see there was little, or no planning done for how to support and extract those left behind and a result valuable time was wasted, and mistakes made. Considering that the Defence Secretary admitted in a media interview during the evacuation that people would be left behind, the lack of planning for the aftermath of the evacuation is a major omission. Due to the poor quality of data the UK did not have an accurate understanding who had been left behind. Lack of diplomatic engagement with the surrounding countries meant that pathways out the country post evacuation had not been developed. But perhaps the biggest failing was that insufficient resources and attention was paid to the need to reassure those left behind and their families that they would eventually be helped to safety. Instead, standard emails were sent on an infrequent basis to only a proportion of those left behind and thousands of emails to the MOD crisis response cell went unanswered. To compound this the UK then issued conflicting advice. On the one hand telling ARAP applicants to get to an embassy in a third country where their claims could be processed, and on the other issuing travel advice that it was unsafe to cross the land border. This travel advice seemed to take no account of the relative dangers of remaining in Afghanistan. Perhaps most importantly there appears to have been no central command and control cell that brought together the FCDO, the MoD and the Home Office to which Afghans could have communicated and from which practical solutions to their problems could have been devised.
12. **Conclusion.** Whilst I have been very critical of the lack of planning particularly for a post evacuation phase, it would be very unfair not point out that many, particularly in PJHQ, in Embassies and the Home Office, have worked extremely hard to help entitled personnel to make it safely to the UK. The failings have been in our national planning and overall response to the crisis and there are urgent lessons that need to be learnt. I firmly believe that, painful as it may be, a full Public Inquiry is needed into the war in Afghanistan and its aftermath. The post evacuation phase should not have required determined veterans, I am just one of many, to get personally engaged in rescuing those with whom they had served with many years ago.

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