

Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy

Dear General The Lord Dannatt,

The Prime Minister and whole Government shares the concern expressed by the signatories of the open letter about former Locally Employed Staff (LES) in Afghanistan. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to interpreters and other staff who risked their lives working alongside UK forces in Afghanistan.

There has been considerable misreporting of the scheme in the media, feeding the impression the Government is not supporting our former and current Afghan staff. This could not be further from the truth and since the US announced its withdrawal we have been at the forefront of nations relocating people.

As announced on 31 May, we have greatly expanded and accelerated the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) in parallel with the military withdrawal to bring as many people as possible to the UK as quickly as possible, prioritising within the programme all those who are judged to be at most serious risk.

Since 2014 we have relocated almost 1,400 LES and their families to the UK. In the past weeks alone we have relocated nearly another 1,400, but more must and is being done. In fact, we have now committed to relocate a further 500 families, or 2,500 people, as soon as possible and the scheme will remain open indefinitely thereafter for all those who qualify – there is no quota or cap on total numbers.

We have already made several important changes and enhancements to the eligibility guidelines to address particular concerns. Interpreters who supported military operations as contractors are now eligible for relocation. We are no longer excluding people who were dismissed for minor administrative offences, and we have recently published updated guidance setting out the circumstances under which additional family members may accompany LES to the UK.

We are pleased to confirm that we are making further changes to the rules to permit LES and their family members to make applications from outside Afghanistan. This will mean that those who have already left Afghanistan, or choose to do so in future, will automatically be eligible for relocation to the UK, rather than having to rely on exceptional circumstances and procedural fixes, as hitherto. We will do this by making changes to the Immigration Rules this Autumn, but will publish guidance imminently which will enable it to take effect immediately.

However, as the signatories acknowledge, the Government has a duty to protect the security of the UK and its citizens, and it would be wrong to make a blanket offer of sanctuary to those who may have committed offences that would be crimes in the UK or pose a security threat to this country.

Officials carefully monitor the outcome of applications and the reasons for rejections, in order to ensure this balance between generosity and security is maintained and all eligible applicants are approved. Analysis has recently been conducted on the personnel records of all former interpreters and other LES previously employed by the MOD who have applied for relocation under the ARAP. The records we hold, since 2006, show that of all the LES employed 1,345 people were dismissed from service, of whom 679 were in what we have termed 'exposed enabling roles', such as interpreters.

Of these dismissals, 119 (18%) were for activities that would be criminal offences in the UK. A further 296 (44%) were for a range of activities or offences which either had, or could have had, serious consequences. These include refusal to follow orders or rules for which the consequences were judged to pose a serious risk to UK forces. We now offer relocation for the remaining 264 (38%) who were dismissed for what are recorded as relatively minor administrative offences. Since May we have offered relocation to the 121 people in this category who have so far applied.

However, we will continue to exclude those whose dismissal was based on serious security concerns at the time, often due to links with the Taliban, as well as those whose dismissal was for offences that constitute a crime under UK laws, such as sexual harassment or sexual assault, violent assault on British troops or fellow LES, theft, and drug abuse. We also exclude those whose dismissal was for non-criminal but serious offences, including breaches of operational security and aggression towards British or Afghan troops.

All applications are subjected to security checks carried out across government departments and with the same criteria applied. We will continue to examine all new applications, and appeals against enquiries that have been rejected where new evidence is presented, but will prioritise for relocation those who were not dismissed from service, and those who were dismissed for minor administrative reasons. Furthermore, the Defence Secretary is reviewing all rejections due to dismissal for non-criminal offences to ensure that ministers are content with the justification for those decisions.

As the signatories of the letter note, relocation is offered to those who served in exposed enabling roles. These were roles that made a direct and material difference to the delivery of the UK mission, without which the execution of operations would have been adversely affected. The LES assessed to be most at risk are those who supported international forces in capacities that required them to engage openly with the local population, such as interpreters, and those who were instrumental in offensive operations and in investigating and prosecuting the Taliban for their crimes, such as case officers involved in counter terrorism investigations and operations.

The MOD alone directly employed several thousand local staff during the UK's military campaign in Afghanistan, the majority in roles that were behind the wire in military bases, including in cooking, cleaning, maintenance and administrative support functions. Recent and regular intelligence assessments on this subject do not indicate intent on the part of the Taliban to conduct reprisals against Afghans who conducted low-level support roles for international forces. We do not therefore support the view that all Afghans

who performed roles in support of international forces in Afghanistan are at risk of reprisals from the Taleban.

However, the ARAP policy does also allow for priority relocation for anyone assessed to be at high risk of harm as a result of their work for HMG, regardless of their role, so no former LES are excluded by default.

Furthermore, we have recently expanded the criteria for eligibility by default to include those who are employed as contracted military interpreters, but we also conduct risk assessments of all former employees who claim to be at risk. We will continue to prioritise for relocation those whose contribution was deemed to be most significant and placed them at higher risk, and cases where we have evidence that any current risk is directly attributable to that service.

We are monitoring the situation on a daily basis to ensure that if conditions on the ground deteriorate we can change our processes accordingly. Where cases are contentious they will personally be reviewed by the Defence Secretary. And unlike some other countries our scheme will remain open indefinitely.

The whole Government is committed to ensuring we honour the risks and sacrifices that brave Afghans made to support this country and we will ensure that all those eligible are supported in finding sanctuary at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP and The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP