

PM statement to the House on Afghanistan: 6 September 2021

Mr Speaker, with permission, I will update the House on the situation in Afghanistan, and our enduring effort to provide sanctuary for those to whom we owe so much.

Since the House last met, our armed forces, diplomats and civil servants have completed the biggest and fastest emergency evacuation in recent history, overcoming every possible challenge, in the most harrowing conditions -and bringing 15,000 people to safety in the UK and helping 36 other countries airlift their own nationals.

They faced the pressure of a remorseless deadline, and witnessed a contemptible terrorist attack at the very gates of the airport, with two British nationals and thirteen of our American allies among the dead.

But they kept going and in the space of a fortnight they evacuated our own nationals alongside Afghan friends of this country who guided, translated and served with our soldiers and officials, proving their courage and loyalty beyond doubt – sometimes in the heat of battle.

The whole House will join me in commending the courage and ingenuity of everyone involved in the Kabul Airlift, one of the most spectacular operations in our country's post-war military history.

This feat exemplified the spirit of all 150,000 British service men and women who deployed in Afghanistan over the last two decades, of whom 457 laid down their lives and many others suffered trauma and injury.

Thanks to their efforts, no terrorist attack against this country or any of our Western allies has been launched from Afghanistan for twenty years.

They fulfilled the first duty of the British armed forces – to keep our people safe – and they and their families should take pride in everything they did.

Just as they kept us safe, so we shall do right by our veterans.

In addition to the extra £3 million we have invested in mental health support through NHS Op Courage, we are providing another £5 million to assist the military charities who do such magnificent work, with the aim of ensuring that no veteran's request for help will go unanswered.

And now the evacuation – Op Pitting – will give way to Operation Warm Welcome, with an equal effort to help our Afghan friends begin their new lives here in the United Kingdom, and recognising the strength of feeling across the House about the plight of individual Afghans.

Years before this episode, we began to fulfil our obligation to those Afghans

who had helped us, bringing 1,400 to the UK.

Then, in April this year, we expanded our efforts by opening the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy, and even before the onset of Operation Pitting we had brought around 2,000 to the UK between June and August. And our obligation lives on.

So let me say to anyone to whom we have made commitments – and who is currently in Afghanistan – we are working urgently with our friends in the region to secure safe passage and as soon as routes are available we will do everything possible to help you to reach safety.

Over and above this effort, the UK is formally launching a separate resettlement programme, providing a safe and legal route for up to 20,000 Afghans in the region over the coming years, with 5,000 in the first year.

We are upholding Britain's finest tradition of welcoming those in need and I emphasise that under this scheme we will of course work with the UN and aid agencies to identify those we should help, as we have done in respect of those who fled the war in Syria – but we will also include Afghans who have contributed to civil society or who face a particular risk from the Taliban, for example, because of their role in standing up for democracy and human rights, or because of their gender, or sexuality or religion.

All who come to our country through this safe and legal route will receive not a five year visa, but indefinite leave to remain and our support will include free English courses for adults, and 300 university scholarships.

We will shortly be writing to local authorities and the Devolved Administrations with details on funding for extra school places and long-term accommodation across the UK.

I am grateful for everything they are doing, and, of course, for the work of my Honourable Friend the Minister for Afghan resettlement.

I am delighted – but not surprised – that across our country, people have been fundraising for our Afghan friends and we have received numerous offers of help from charities and ordinary families alike, and anyone who wishes to join that effort can do so through gov.uk.

Mr Speaker, our first duty is the security of the United Kingdom and if the new regime in Kabul wants international recognition and access to the billions of dollars currently frozen in overseas accounts, then we and our friends will hold them to their agreement to prevent Afghanistan from ever again becoming an incubator for terrorism.

And we shall insist on safe passage for anyone who wishes to leave, and respect for the rights of women and girls. Our aim is to rally the strongest international consensus behind these principles, so that as far as possible the world speaks to the Taliban with one voice.

To that end, I called an emergency meeting of G7 leaders which made these aims the basis of our common approach, and the UK helped to secure a UN

Resolution, passed by the Security Council last week, making the same demands.

Later this month, at the UN General Assembly in New York, I will work with Secretary-General Guterres and other leaders to widen that consensus still further.

We will judge the Taliban by their actions not their words and use every economic, political and diplomatic lever to protect our own countries from harm and to help the Afghan people.

We have already doubled the UK's humanitarian and development assistance to £286 million this year, including to help people in the region.

Mr Speaker, on Saturday we shall mark the 20th anniversary of the reason why we went into Afghanistan in the first place: the terrorist attacks on the United States which claimed 2,977 lives, including those of 67 Britons.

And if anyone is still tempted to say that we have achieved nothing in that country in twenty years, tell them that our armed forces and those of our allies enabled 3.6 million girls to go to school; tell them that this country and the Western world were protected from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan throughout that period; and tell them we have just mounted the biggest humanitarian airlift in recent history: eight times, the RAF rescued more than 400 people on board a single plane – the most that have ever travelled on an RAF aircraft in its 103 year history, helping thousands of people in fear for their lives, helping thousands to whom this country owes so much, and thereby revealing the fundamental values of the United Kingdom.

There are very few countries that have the military capability to do what we have just done and fewer still who would have felt the moral imperative to act in the same way.

We can be proud of our forces for everything they have achieved and for the legacy they leave behind.

And what they did was in the best traditions of this country, and I commend this Statement to the House.