

Taliban terrors

The world must say that Taliban rule is already unacceptable in Afghanistan. A country should not block its citizens from taking civilian flights to places that will accept them. A government in waiting should not so terrify many of its citizens that they queue up at an airport to try to get a flight to anywhere that might take them. It is tragic that they live in the hope they can start a new life somewhere else with nothing more than a suitcase of personal items to show for their life to date. Nor should those who claim to have control allow chaos to make the suicide bomber's task easier. The sad deaths in Kabul yesterday made the tragedy worse.

We should not regard it as a norm that civilian aviation is cut off from a country, or that a group of armed individuals can settle the fate of thousands of people wanting to move by making instant judgements with a gun pointing at the applicant. One of the most attractive features of advanced democracies is the ability and right to travel freely within your own country or to leave it to go to anywhere which will let you in without needing permission.

There are some in the UK who think we should be willing to take tens of thousands of Afghans who would like to leave their country now. I strongly support the heroic efforts of our troops and border staff in seeking to get all UK citizens home who wish to come, and to give free passage and the right to live and work in the UK to all those who worked for our government and military in the past and are now at risk because of that. I am not convinced that it would be right to make a wider offer to Afghans more generally to come to the UK.

The first sad truth is we will only get a limited number of people out in the time left with access to a runway and with permission to fly in and out to pick people up, a right we have to share with our allies who all need to do the same. The second is even if we offered more places to Afghans to come and could find a safer route to let them do so we could only ever offer it to a small fraction of the 40 million living in Afghanistan today. Helping cream off more of the bright and motivated people with more liberal views from the society will make the plight of the millions who remain worse. The Taliban might behave even more unpleasantly if too many more Afghans are assisted out. We would wish to make sure that anyone invited to live and work in the UK can do so with a decent living standards. We are already very short of homes, and there are limits to how many more we can house from overseas to acceptable standards.

There is no alternative to working with the world community to try to prevent the return of the Taliban to the barbarism of their past. The former policy which President Biden undermined of assisting a far from perfect democratic government in Afghanistan to widen human rights and raise living standards made sense and was working to some extent. Given the way an armed group has displaced an elected government, we have to accept that our influence is much less. However, all the time the Taliban led country needs western currency

and goods and expects some continuation of aid and technical support there is the basis for some agreements to try to limit the damage. It is also the case that countries with more influence than us like Pakistan and China need to be brought into the conversations, as they too should not want a rogue state that harbours terrorists who might harm them as well.