

The Prime Minister's opening statement on Afghanistan: 18 August 2021

Mr Speaker, I beg to move –

and may I begin by thanking you and all the Parliamentary staff for enabling us to meet this morning.

Before I turn to today's debate, I am sure the House will want to join you and me in sending our condolences to the family and friends of those killed in the appalling shooting in Plymouth last week.

Investigations are, of course, continuing but we will learn every possible lesson from this tragedy.

Mr Speaker, I know that Members across the House share my concern about the situation in Afghanistan,

issues it raises for our own security,

and the fears of many remaining in that country – especially women and children.

The sacrifice in Afghanistan is seared into our national consciousness, with 150,000 people serving there from across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom,

including a number of Members on all sides of the House, whose voices will be particularly important today.

And so it is absolutely right that we should come together for this debate.

I thank my honourable friend and I can assure him that I will be saying in just a few moments, we will be doing everything we can to support those who have helped the UK mission in Afghanistan and investing everything we can to support the wider area around Afghanistan and to do everything we can to avert a humanitarian crisis.

Mr Speaker, it is almost twenty years since the United States suffered the most catastrophic attack on its people since the Second World War,

in which 67 British citizens also lost their lives at the hands of murderous terrorist groups incubated in Afghanistan.

In response, NATO invoked Article V of its Treaty, for the first and only time in its history,

and the United Kingdom, amongst others, joined America in going into Afghanistan on a mission to extirpate Al Qaeda in that country

and to do whatever we could to stabilise Afghanistan, in spite of all the difficulties and challenges we knew that we would face.

And we succeeded in that core mission.

As I said in the House just a few weeks ago, there was an extensive defence review about the Afghan mission after the combat mission ended in 2014, and I believe most of the key questions have already been extensively gone into.

It's important Mr Speaker that we in this House should be able to scrutinise events as they unfold.

Mr Speaker, we succeeded in that core mission and the training camps in the mountain ranges of Afghanistan were destroyed,

Al Qaeda plots against this country were foiled because our serving men and women were there,

and no successful terrorist attacks against the West have been mounted from Afghan soil for two decades.

Mr Speaker, I think it would be fair to say that the events in Afghanistan have unfolded and the collapse has been faster than I think even the Taliban themselves predicted.

What is not true is to say that the UK Government was unprepared or did not foresee this, because it was certainly part of our planning, of pitting the very difficult logistical operation for the withdrawal of UK nationals has been under preparation for many months Mr Speaker, and I can tell the house that the decision to commission the emergency handling centre at the airport took place two weeks ago, Mr Speaker

Alongside this core mission, we worked for a better future for the people of Afghanistan.

And the heroism and tireless work of our armed forces contributed to national elections,

as well as the promotion and protection of human rights and equalities in a way that many in Afghanistan had not previously known.

Whereas twenty years ago almost no girls went to school and women were banned from positions of governance,

now 3.6 million girls have been in school this year alone, and women hold over a quarter of the seats in Afghanistan's parliament.

But Mr Speaker, we must be honest and accept that huge difficulties were encountered at each turn and some of this progress is fragile.

The honourable gentleman raises exactly the right question.

I spoke this morning to Ambassador Sir Laurie Bristow as well as to Brigadier

Dan Blanchford who is handling the evacuation

And it would be fair to say the situation has stabilised since the weekend but it remains precarious and the UK officials on the ground are doing everything that they can to expedite the movement of people, those that need to come out, whether from ARUP scheme or eligible persons to get from Kabul to the airport.

And at the moment it would be fair to say the Taliban are allowing that evacuation to go ahead.

But the most important thing is that we get this done in as expeditious a fashion as we can, and that's what we are doing.

And I may say that I am grateful not just to the UK forces who are now out there helping to stabilise the airport but also to the US forces as well

The combat phase of our mission ended in 2014 when we brought the vast majority of our troops home and handed over responsibility for security to the Afghans themselves, and we continued to support their efforts

Even at that stage, we should remember that conflict was continuous, and that in spite of the bravery and sacrifice of the Afghan army –

and we should never forget that 69,000 of those Afghan army troops have given their lives in this conflict – significant parts of the country remained contested or under Taliban control.

And so when after two decades, the Americans prepared to take their long-predicted and well-trailed step of a final extraction of their forces,

we looked at many options, Mr Speaker, including the potential for staying longer ourselves, finding new partners, or even increasing our presence,

I think that when he asked for a commentary on the respective military potential power of the Taliban and the Afghan forces, it's pretty clear from what has happened that the collapse of the Afghan forces has been much faster than expected

And as for our NATO allies and our allies around the world, when it came for us to look at the options that this country might have in view of the American decision to withdraw, we came up against this hard reality

that since 2009, America has deployed 98 per cent of all weapons released from NATO aircraft in Afghanistan,

and at the peak of the operation, when there were 132,000 troops on the ground, 90,000 of them were American.

The West could not continue this US-led mission,

a mission conceived and executed in support and defence of America, without American logistics, without US air power and without American might.

I spoke to Secretary General Stoltenberg of NATO only the other day about NATO's continuing role in Afghanistan.

But I really think it is an illusion to believe that there is appetite amongst any of our partners for a continued military presence or for a military solution imposed by NATO in Afghanistan.

The idea ended with the combat mission in 2014 and I do not believe that today deploying tens of thousands of British troops to fight the Taliban is an option, no matter how sincerely people may advocate it, and I appreciate their sincerity, but I do not believe that is an option that would commend itself either to the British people or to this House.

Mr Speaker, we must deal with the position as it now is,

accepting what we have achieved and what we have not achieved.

The government has been working around the clock to deal with the unfolding situation.

We must deal with the world as it is, accepting what we have achieved and what we have not achieved.

The UK will work with our international partners on a shared plan to support the people of Afghanistan and to contribute to regional stability.

There will be five parts, Mr Speaker, to this approach.

First, our immediate focus must be on helping those to whom we have direct obligations,

by evacuating UK nationals, together with those Afghans who have assisted our efforts over the past twenty years.

And I know the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the bravery and commitment of our Ambassador, Sir Laurie Bristow,

I thank the right honourable gentleman for raising the very needy case that he does.

I am sure that colleagues across the House, literally every member will I imagine have received messages from people who know someone who needs to get out of Afghanistan,

And I can tell the right honourable gentleman that we are doing everything we can to help out of that country those people to whom we owe a debt of obligation

And on that point, I want to repeat my thanks, not just to Sir Laurie Bristow, but also our commander on the ground, Brigadier Dan Blanchford and the entire British team in Kabul.

I can tell the House that we have so far secured the safe return of 306 UK

nationals and 2,052 Afghan nationals as part of our resettlement programme, with a further 2,000 Afghan applications completed and many more being processed.

UK officials are working round the clock to keep the exit door open in the most difficult circumstances,

and actively seeking those we believe are eligible but as yet unregistered.

That's why it's been so important that we maintain a presence at Kabul airport and that's why we've been getting the message out that we want people to come through

As I said earlier on, it is important for everybody to understand that at the moment in the days that we have ahead of us, which may be short, but at the moment, this is an environment in which the Taliban are permitting the evacuation to take place.

Mr Speaker, these are interpreters, they are locally engaged staff and others who have risked their lives supporting our military efforts and seeking to secure new freedoms for their country.

We are proud to bring these brave Afghans to our shores – and we continue to appeal for more to come forwards.

Mr Speaker, that's the 5000 on whom we are spending £200 million to bring a further 5000 on top – I think it will be 10,000 altogether that we bring under the ARUP and other programmes.

We will be increasing that number over the coming years as I said to 20,000.

But the bulk of the effort of this country will be directed, and should be directed, to supporting people in Afghanistan and in the region in order to prevent a worse humanitarian crisis

I tell the House that in that conviction I am supported very strongly both by President Macron of France and by Chancellor Merkel of Germany.

We are also doing everything possible to accelerate the visas – we are making sure that we bring back the 35 brilliant Chevening scholars, so that they can come and study in our great universities.

We are deploying an additional 800 British troops to support this evacuation operation, and I can assure the House that we will continue this operation for as long as conditions at the airport allow.

We will not be sending people back to Afghanistan and nor by the way will we be allowing people to come from Afghanistan to this country in an indiscriminate way.

We want to be generous but we must make sure we look after our own security.

Over the coming weeks, we will redouble our efforts, working with others to protect the British homeland and all our citizens and interests,

from any threats that may emanate from a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, from terrorism to the narcotics trade.

Like many of us I have been extensively lobbied on behalf of the excellent work done by Mr Pen Farthing – I am well aware of his cause and all the wonderful things he has done.

And for animals in Afghanistan I can tell my honourable friend that we will do everything we can to help Mr Pen Farthing and others who face particular difficulty like himself

But as I say without in any way jeopardising our own national security

These are concerns shared across the international community, from the region itself to all the NATO alliance and indeed all five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

and I will chair a virtual meeting of the G7 in the coming days.

Third, Mr Speaker, we also have an enduring commitment to all the Afghan people,

and now, more than ever, we must reaffirm that commitment.

Our efforts must be focused on supporting the Afghan people in the region itself, particularly those fleeing conflict or the threat of violence.

We therefore call on the United Nations to lead a new humanitarian effort in this region.

I'm very grateful to right honourable lady opposite because I think she's asked a question that formed in many people's minds about the 5000

And yes indeed the 5000 extra and the resettlement scheme and in addition to those already announced – we will support those people in coming to this country

We will also support the wider international community in delivering on humanitarian projects in the region

by doubling the amount of humanitarian and development assistance that we had previously committed to Afghanistan this year, with new funding, taking this up to £286 million with immediate effect.

And we call on others to work together on a shared humanitarian effort, focusing on helping the most vulnerable in what will be formidably difficult circumstances.

My Right Honourable friend makes an excellent point and that's why the UK has chaired the security council of the UN, and asked to put the motion together

with our French friends to get the world to focus on the humanitarian needs of Afghanistan

And we'll be doing the same thing in NATO, in the G7 and the other bodies in which we have a leadership role.

We want all these countries to step up as he rightly says and focus on the most vulnerable in what we will be formidably difficult circumstances

Fourth, while we must focus on the region itself, we will also create safe and legal routes for those Afghans most in need to come and settle here in the UK.

So in addition to those Afghans with whom we have worked directly, I can announce today that we are committing to relocating another 5,000 Afghans this year,

with a new and bespoke resettlement scheme focusing on the most vulnerable, particularly women and children,

and we will keep this under review for future years, with the potential of accommodating up to 20,000 over the long-term.

And so taken together Mr Speaker, we are committing almost half a billion pounds of humanitarian funding to support the Afghan people.

Fifth, Mr Speaker, we must also face the reality of a change of regime in Afghanistan,

and as President of the G7, the UK will work to unite the international community behind a clear plan for dealing with this regime in a unified and concerted way.

Over the last three days I have spoken with the NATO and UN Secretaries General,

with President Biden, Chancellor Merkel, President Macron, and Prime Minister Khan,

We are clear and we have agreed that it would be a mistake for any country to recognise any new regime in Kabul prematurely or bilaterally.

Instead, those countries that care about Afghanistan's future should work towards common conditions about the conduct of the new regime before deciding, together, whether to recognise it and on what terms.

We will judge this regime based on the choices it makes – and by its actions rather than by its words.

On its attitude to terrorism, to crime and narcotics, as well as humanitarian access and the rights of girls to receive an education.

Defending human rights will remain of the highest priority.

And we will use every available political and diplomatic means to ensure that those human rights remain at the top of the international agenda.

Mr Speaker, our United Kingdom has a rollcall of honour that bears the names of 457 service men and women who gave their lives in some of the world's harshest terrain,

and many others who bear injuries to this day

fighting in what had become the epicentre of global terrorism,

and even amid the heart-wrenching scenes we see today, I believe they should be proud of their achievements,

and we should be deeply proud of them,

because they conferred benefits that are lasting and ineradicable on millions of people in one of the poorest countries on earth,

and they provided vital protection for two decades to this country and the rest of the world.

They gave their all for our safety, and we owe it to them to give our all to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a breeding ground for terrorism.

Because no matter how grim the lessons of the past,

that future is not yet written,

and at this bleak turning-point, we must help the people of Afghanistan to choose the best of all their possible futures,

and in the UN, the G7, in NATO, with friends and partners around the world that is the critical task on which this government is now urgently engaged,

and will be engaged in the days to come.