

Afghanistan response: Foreign Secretary's statement, 6 September 2021



PUBLISHED SEP 6, 2021
BY [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

Mr Speaker, with your permission I will update the House on the UK's international response to the situation in Afghanistan.

As my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister has set out, over the last 3 weeks, through a shared effort right across government and our armed forces, we have delivered the largest and most complex evacuation in living memory.

Between 15 and 29 August, the UK evacuated over 15,000 people from Afghanistan. That includes: over 8,000 British nationals, close to 5,000 Afghans who loyally served the UK, along with their dependents, and around 500 special cases of particularly vulnerable Afghans, including Chevening scholars, journalists, human rights defenders, campaigners for women's rights, judges and many others.

Of course, the work to get people out did not start on 15 August. The FCDO advised British nationals to leave the country in April, and then again on 6 August. We estimate that around 500 did so.

At the same time, the government launched the ARAP scheme for interpreters and other Afghan staff, getting over 1,900 out before the airlift began on 15 August.

Now as the security situation deteriorated, we accelerated that process throughout July and early August.

In total since April, we have helped over 17,000 people leave.

And I want to place on record my thanks, and pay tribute to the Herculean efforts of our troops, our diplomats, our civil servants who have done an incredible job in the toughest of conditions. And as we remember their efforts we also remember those of UK armed forces who paid the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan trying to make that country a better place for the Afghan people.

Mr Speaker, now that the evacuation has ended, we have moved into a new phase. We stand by our commitment to support those who have worked for us, and to take all remaining eligible cases. Securing their safe passage out of the country is an immediate priority. We are working through our diplomatic channels to that end.

And of course the Taliban have given assurances that they will provide safe passage for foreign nationals and those eligible Afghans who wish to leave. On 30 August the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2593. Driven by the UK alongside the US and France, affirming the international community's expectation requirement that the Taliban should follow through on the assurances that they have given.

Last, week I visited Qatar and Pakistan. In Qatar, I met with the Emir and the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed, to discuss safe passage alongside the international community's wider approach to dealing with the Taliban. We discussed ongoing efforts to re-establish flights at Kabul airport, where Qatari technical staff are working on the ground, and see how we can cooperate in handling the organisation of future flights.

I also announced our new non-resident Chargé d'Affaires for Afghanistan, Martin Longden, who is now working out of Doha.

In Pakistan, I met with Prime Minister Khan and Foreign Minister Qureshi to discuss safe passage via third countries, and the importance of holding the Taliban to its commitments.

I also announced that we are sending £30 million of support to Afghanistan's neighbours. This will provide life-saving support for refugees including shelters, household necessities, sanitation and other hygiene facilities.

At the same time I dispatched last week a new Rapid Deployment Team to the region, with an extra 22 staff in total. They will reinforce our embassy teams, our high commission teams in those neighbouring countries, processing British nationals or eligible Afghans who are seeking to leave via third countries, which we want to do just as fast as we possibly can, once they can leave, and subject to the necessary security checks.

I also spoke to the foreign minister of Uzbekistan earlier today, and the foreign minister of Tajikistan last week. And the Minister for South Asia, Lord Ahmad, last week visited Tajikistan and will return to the region shortly.

Mr Speaker turning to the wider international strategy. The international community is adjusting and it must adjust to the new reality in Afghanistan and recalibrate its approach. The UK is playing a leading role.

My Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister convened G7 leaders on 24 August to discuss a shared response to the situation. That followed a G7 Foreign Ministers meeting.

And we are building a global coalition around four key priorities set out in a UK G7 paper that we have shared with those partners:

First, we must prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a safe haven or harbour for terrorists ever again.

Second, we must prevent a humanitarian disaster and support refugees – wherever possible in the region. The UK has allocated £286 million in aid for Afghanistan this year. We are supporting Afghanistan's neighbours, as I have already set out, and the Home Secretary has set out our resettlement scheme. We are leading by example, which enables us to encourage others to step up in what will inevitably have to be an international team effort.

Third, we must preserve regional stability, which risks being shattered by the combination of renewed terrorist threat and an exodus of refugees.

Fourth, we must hold the Taliban and other factions to account for their conduct, including in particular on human rights and their treatment of women and girls.

I am taking this forward through our bilateral partners and we have a G7-plus meeting later this week.

The UK is also pressing for further discussions amongst the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, and we plan to host an event at the UN General Assembly later this month as indicated by the Prime Minister.

Mr Speaker, we will not recognise the Taliban, but we will engage, and we will carefully calibrate our actions to the choices that they make and the actions that they take.

Given our strategic priorities, the ones that I've set out, we must also set some credible tests to hold the Taliban to the undertakings they have made on safe passage, on terrorism, on humanitarian access, and a more inclusive government. And we stand ready to use all the levers at our disposal in that effort - political, economic and diplomatic.

Mr Speaker, we continue to galvanise the international community, and bring together the widest possible group of influential countries, to deliver on those strategic priorities and exercise the maximum moderating influence on the Taliban that we possibly can.

I commend this statement to the House.

Press release distributed by Media Pigeon on behalf of GOV.UK, on Sep 6, 2021. For more information subscribe and [follow us](#).

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