

## Responding to the crisis in Afghanistan: A briefing for UK MPs

Wednesday 18 August, UK Parliament

Following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan we have grave concern for the rights and interests of Afghan citizens, especially women, girls and ethnic and religious minorities.

Afghan women, including members of Afghanistan's National Assembly, some of whom are members of the International Parliamentary Network for Education, have expressed their fear at the prospect of women and girls losing their right to attend school and university.

When the Taliban last held power in the 1990s, a strict regime was imposed that banned education for girls. Women were not allowed to work and had to be accompanied by a male relative if they left the house.

Whilst the Taliban has stated that girls will be able to continue to access education, the United Kingdom should make its expectations unequivocal that the Taliban respect and uphold women's and girl's rights.

The immediate priority is to provide urgent assistance to at-risk Afghan citizens including those who have promoted or provided education and opportunities for girls - often backed by the United Kingdom - and who may now be at grave risk from the Taliban.

At the same time the United Kingdom should:

- Provide immediate assistance to countries receiving Afghan refugees, including to ensure that children fleeing Afghanistan in search of protection have immediate access to education;
- Expand the provision of educational opportunities including scholarships for Afghan students to study overseas;
- Increase flexible and urgent humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan;
- Call on the Taliban to uphold fundamental rights and freedoms, including by maintaining a UK diplomatic presence in Afghanistan.

This briefing provides more information on each of these recommendations.

### **1. Ensure safe and legal routes to safety for those facing imminent danger and their dependents.**

#### **1.1. Expand eligibility for the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy.**

The UK Government's Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) offers relocation or other assistance to current and former staff who were or are currently locally employed by the UK government in Afghanistan.

This scheme must be expanded to make a wider range of individuals beyond those who were directly employed by the British government eligible for assistance.

The scheme should be open to members of Afghanistan's National Assembly, human rights defenders, journalists, those who have worked on projects funded by the British government, and their families.

We are particularly concerned for individuals who have provided or promoted access to education, especially for girls, and who as a result face grave threats from the Taliban must be given the opportunity to seek safety in the United Kingdom.

Many of these individuals and their organisations were funded by the UK government and other international donors and encouraged to take visible leadership roles.

The UK now has a moral responsibility to protect them.

Expanding access criteria for ARAP would be in line with the actions of allied governments including the United State, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

### **1.2. Work with governments of neighbouring countries to provide safe and orderly routes out of Afghanistan.**

The UK Government should exercise its diplomatic influence to encourage and support neighbouring states to allow refugees fearing persecution from the Taliban to flee the conflict without fear of refoulement, and help ensure that these refugees will be granted safe access to humanitarian assistance.

Pakistan and Iran in particular should be encouraged to keep their borders open and funded appropriately to enable them to respond to the scale and gravity of the crisis.

## **2. Provide immediate support to countries receiving individuals fleeing Afghanistan in search of protection, including to ensure the timely provision of educational services to refugee children.**

Whilst no large-scale displacement across borders from Afghanistan had been observed this year, this could now change. Any major influx will clearly require the international community, including the United Kingdom to step up immediate and sustained support to both Afghanistan and its neighbours, in a spirit of responsibility- and burden-sharing.

UNHCR's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework requires receiving states, with the support of the international community, to provide educational services to refugee children in a timely way. To do so states that host large refugee populations must be supported to ensure children can access educational services.

With almost one million Afghan refugee cardholders already in country, the Government of Iran has consistently welcomed Afghans fleeing protracted conflict and violence for over 40 years, including through exemplary inclusion of Afghans in national health and education systems. Meanwhile Pakistan already hosts 1.5 million Afghan refugees.

We urge the UK to work with UNHCR to provide likely receiving states, including Pakistan and Iran with the technical, practical and financial support to prepare for a potential large influx of Afghan refugees.

UNHCR's financial appeal for the Afghanistan situation (including operations for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran) remains acutely underfunded, at only 43 per cent of a total \$337 million required.

The UK has so far contributed [\\$21.2 million](#) to UNHCR in 2021, compared to \$134.7 million in 2020, and should now urgently scale up its support to the refugee agency.

### **3. Support the expansion of educational opportunities including scholarships for Afghan students to study overseas.**

Afghanistan's education system has been devastated by more than three decades of sustained conflict. For many of the country's children, completing primary school remains a distant dream – especially in rural areas and for girls – despite recent progress in raising enrolment.

In the poorest and most remote areas of the country, enrolment levels vary extensively and girls still lack equal access. Access to secondary and tertiary education is severely restricted, exacerbating critical labour market shortages.

In a country where [41.8 per cent of the population is under 15 years of age](#), education quality, equity, and access remain urgent national development concerns.

To minimise the impact of any disruption to already underfunded and overstretched educational institutions in Afghanistan, opportunities for Afghan students to pursue their studies overseas should be expanded with international support.

This could include increasing the number and range of scholarships at UK universities as well as supporting existing schemes in other countries, such as Pakistan's program for Afghan students.

### **4. Increase flexible and urgent humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.**

At the beginning of August, UNHCR reported that since January 2021 more than 400,000 Afghans had been displaced within the country due to fighting with the Taliban bringing the total number of internally displaced people to over 3.5 million.

Even prior to the Taliban takeover, more than half of the population required humanitarian assistance.

The UK spent [£292 million](#) on bilateral aid in Afghanistan in 2019, but has allocated just [£93.8 million](#) for the 2021-2022 financial year, despite the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian crisis. Afghanistan's Humanitarian Response Plan also remains woefully underfunded at less than [40 per cent](#) of the \$1.3 billion required.

The UK should review its humanitarian support to Afghanistan and Afghan civil society, especially in light of recent UK aid cuts.

The UK should mobilise the funding necessary to meet our responsibilities towards the Afghan people at this critical time, including by closing the funding gap facing the Humanitarian Response Plan, which is now predicted to grow significantly.

Flexible, direct, and rapid funding should be provided to frontline NGOs and national partners who have the relationships and community acceptance to effectively meet urgent needs, including ensuring the continuity of educational services.

## **5. Call on the Taliban to uphold the fundamental rights and freedoms of Afghan citizens.**

As the Taliban forms a new government in Afghanistan the UK should use every possible source of influence both alone and working with other member states to ensure the Taliban upholds the fundamental right and freedoms of all Afghan citizens.

We urge the UK to maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan enabling it to monitor developments, provide vital moral and practical support to human rights defenders and civil society and to engage as appropriate with the new government.