

Supplement to the Special Committee on Afghanistan’s Report on Honouring Canada’s Legacy in Afghanistan: Responding to the Humanitarian Crisis and Helping People Reach Safety

Conservatives support the Committee’s Report.

Conservatives wish to add the following evidence and observations that are not captured in the Report.

The way Canada left Afghanistan in August 2021 was a betrayal of the legacy of the 40,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces that fought in the war in Afghanistan – including 158 soldiers who gave their lives – together with hundreds of thousands of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) soldiers.¹ It was a betrayal of our diplomats that served during and after the war – including one who gave his life. It was also a betrayal of the thousands of brave Afghans who worked alongside our soldiers and diplomats, and whose contributions were crucial to the success of Canada’s mission in Afghanistan.²

These Afghans worked as interpreters, cooks, drivers, cleaners, construction workers, security guards, lawyers, and in other employment. They and their families were threatened and targeted by the Taliban because they worked with Canada’s soldiers and diplomats. When it became clear that the government of Afghanistan was going to fall to the Taliban, the Canadian government had a moral duty to evacuate these Afghans and their families. In the words of the Canadian government, these Afghans have a “significant or enduring relationship with the Government of Canada.”³

It was no secret that the United States (U.S.) was going to withdraw from Afghanistan. In the months before the U.S. withdrawal, it was also clear many Afghans who had worked for NATO governments and militaries were desperate to leave to avoid persecution by the Taliban.

When the U.S. set a deadline in April 2021 to withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021,⁴ the Canadian government was slow to act to evacuate these Afghans. This is despite clear and vocal calls that came from numerous experts, veterans, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the months before August 15, 2021.

The government also ignored other calls for urgent action, including questions in the House of Commons during the Spring of 2021, a statement issued by Conservatives on July 6, 2021, and a letter sent on July 22, 2021, by the Leader of the Official Opposition Erin O’Toole to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Weeks and months were wasted as the government delayed evacuation of these Afghans until the very last moment.

¹ Government of Canada, [The Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan](#), 14 February 2019; North Atlantic Treaty Organization. [NATO and Afghanistan](#), 19 April 2022.

² AFGH, [Evidence](#), 14 February 2022, 1945 (Major-General (Retired) David Fraser, Afghan Strategic Evacuation Team, as an individual).

³ Government of Canada, [Government of Canada offers refuge to Afghans who assisted Canada](#), 23 July 2021.

⁴ U.S. President Joe Biden [announced](#) in July that the withdrawal will be moved up to August 31, 2021.

There were failures of intelligence. The Honourable Harjit Sajjan, speaking about his former role as Minister of National Defence (2015-2021), stated that he was working “hand in glove” with embassy staff in the months leading up to Kabul’s fall.⁵ Despite National Defence (DND) and Global Affairs Canada (GAC) supposedly working together, both were completely taken by surprise about the declining security situation on the ground.⁶ Ambassador Reid Sirrs testified that he had not received information to indicate that Kabul would fall until August 12, 2021, three days before the Taliban takeover.⁷

There should have been no surprise. Organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Afghan-Canadian Interpreters, the Veterans Transition Network (VTN), as well as Canadian Armed Forces veterans testified to the committee that Canadian government officials were warned of the situation on the ground months before the Taliban takeover.⁸ UNHCR testified that they briefed the Government of Canada back in March 2021 on the contingency plans that would be needed in the event of a mass exodus of Afghans fleeing the violence and humanitarian crisis.⁹ Daily reports from news organizations in the months and weeks leading to the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, chronicled gains of territory by the Taliban at the expense of the Afghan government.

There was a failure of political leadership by the Prime Minister. As Kabul fell to the Taliban, the Prime Minister advised the Governor General to dissolve Parliament, triggering a general election and the “caretaker” convention. Ministerial exempt staff were put on leave to campaign and ministers focussed on re-election. General Wayne Eyre testified that the election limited DND’s ability to publicly communicate,¹⁰ as required by the caretaker convention.¹¹ The Prime Minister and relevant ministers should have been entirely focussed on the evacuation of Afghans and their families. Instead, they put partisan political considerations ahead of an extraordinary emergency, a decision that will have damaging consequences to Canada’s international reputation for years to come.

⁵ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2022, 1845 (Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan, Minister of International Development).

⁶ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2022, 1940 (Ms. Jennifer Loten, Director General, International Crime and Terrorism); AFGH, [Evidence](#), 21 March 2022, 1950 (Reid Sirrs, Former Ambassador of Canada to Afghanistan, Global Affairs Canada); AFGH, [Evidence](#), 9 May 2022, 2010 (Vice-Admiral J.R. Auchterlonie, Commander of the Canadian Joint Operations Command, Department of National Defence).

⁷ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 21 March 2022, 1950 (Reid Sirrs, Former Ambassador of Canada to Afghanistan, Global Affairs Canada).

⁸ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 31 January 2022, 2010 (Indrika Ratwatte, UNHCR); AFGH, [Evidence](#), 14 February 2000, 2005 (Major-General (Retired) David Fraser, Afghan Strategic Evacuation Team, as an individual); Afghan-Canadian Interpreters, et al., [Letter to the Right Honourable Justin Trudeau](#), 1 June 2021; AFGH, [Evidence](#), 28 February 2022, 2015 (Stephen Peddle, As an Individual).

⁹ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 31 January 2022, 2010 (Indrika Ratwatte, UNHCR)

¹⁰ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 9 May 2022, 2000 (General Wayne D. Eyre).

¹¹ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 9 May 2022, 2005 (Bill Matthews, Deputy Minister of National Defence, Department of National Defence).

There was a failure to coordinate the evacuation response within the government and with NGOs. NGOs, such as the Afghan Strategic Evacuation Team (ASET) of the VTN, witnessed firsthand many shortcomings in the government's response that hindered the ability of NGOs to work and assist the government effectively during the evacuation. Testimony indicated that this stemmed from the lack of coordination between the three departments of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), GAC, and DND.

Major-General (retired) Dean Milner indicated that "bureaucracy at Immigration Canada" and leadership coordination issues made it "very difficult" for ASET to support and assist the mission.¹² ASET noted that no plans were communicated to their organization to help streamline the evacuation process, nor was their suggestion to create an interdepartmental task force implemented.¹³ A lead minister, with the appropriate authority, should have been assigned the responsibility by the Prime Minister to manage the government's response across different departments. That would have allowed the government to more effectively respond to the crisis.

Wendy Long, Director of Afghan-Canadian Interpreters, said:

All [IRCC, GAC, DND] have to work effectively there and that's not what was happening all along. There was no effective partnership. They were not looking at it as a mission that all three entities should have been taking part in for the end goal of getting our people to Canada.¹⁴

Interdepartmental coordination between the three departments, particularly for the immigration stream for Afghans that worked for Canada, was weak if non-existent. That is still currently the case. Many Afghans who worked for Canada are still languishing in Afghanistan and in third countries without an application file number from IRCC. This has seriously damaged Canada's reputation and will impact Canada's future ability to effect foreign and military policy internationally.

The consequence of the lack of political leadership and interdepartmental cooperation was that it prevented Canada from evacuating many more Afghans who worked for the Canadian government sooner.¹⁵

There was a lack of resources to handle the evacuation efforts. Corey Shelson, a Canadian Armed Forces veteran, testified he had learned that:

IRCC had only two people to triage inbound emails. Around that same time, a call went out to internal government departments, looking for volunteers to take a contract inside

¹² AFGH, [Evidence](#), 14 February 2000, 1945 (Major-General (Retired) Dean Milner, Afghan Strategic Evacuation Team, As an Individual).

¹³ Ibid, 2010.

¹⁴ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 28 February 2022, 1910 (Wendy Long, Director, Afghan-Canadian Interpreters).

¹⁵ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 14 February 2022, 2010 (Major-General (Retired) David Fraser, Afghan Strategic Evacuation Team, as an individual).

the IRCC. That call went out to the CRA and Service Canada, and volunteers were screened and told they would begin any day.

Workers did not start until September, which was already after the evacuation ended. Everybody started answering phones, and it wasn't until October that some of these folks were asked to start to triage emails. They were instructed to look only at emails from August 23 onward, and it took until early November for all of the emails to be processed.¹⁶

The lack of human resources at IRCC to triage phone calls and emails from applicants of the Special Immigration Measures is evidence of a lack of planning on the part of the department. It also demonstrates a lack of political leadership from the minister and Prime Minister.

There was a failure to be creative in the face of bureaucratic hurdles involving life or death situations. For example, arrangements could have been made to ensure Afghans, who were unable to get the necessary documentation, were still able to travel to third countries using single journey travel documents, and the lists of people to be evacuated to Canada should have not separated families because of paperwork.

Had the government listened to the warnings from many stakeholders, veterans, and NGOs in the months before Kabul fell, had it better intelligence and coordination, had it assigned resources more effectively, and had it been creative in overcoming bureaucratic hurdles, many more Afghans who worked for Canada could have been evacuated. All of this required political leadership. As it stands now, it seems unlikely that the Government of Canada will achieve its goal of resettling 40,000 Afghan refugees in Canada, especially before the end of 2023.¹⁷

Nine months after the fall of Kabul and 10 months since the Special Immigration Measures were first announced, the government has still not learned the lessons of the evacuation. The Committee heard from former Afghan interpreters and others who worked for Canada describe the perils they continue to experience. Many have not received an application file number or a unique client identification number.

While all NATO allies scrambled to evacuate both their own citizens and Afghans who worked alongside their forces and staff, Canada performed particularly poorly in the evacuation that terminated at the end of August 2021. Between August 14, 2021, and August 30, 2021, allies such as the U.S. and United Kingdom, respectively evacuated over 122,000¹⁸ and 15,000¹⁹ people. By the end of August, Canada evacuated 3,700 individuals.²⁰ Canada's performance was proportionately poorer than our leading NATO allies. The government's explanation for their

¹⁶ AFGH, [Evidence](#), 28 February 2022, 1940 (Corey Shelton, As an Individual).

¹⁷ Journalists for Human Rights, *Submission to the Special Committee on Afghanistan*, May 2022.

¹⁸ The White House, [Statement by President Joe Biden](#), 30 August 2021.

¹⁹ Royal Air Force, [Operation PITTING – The Moving Story](#), 6 September 2021.

²⁰ Government of Canada, [Operation Aegis: Technical Briefing – August 26, 2021](#), 31 August 2021.

evacuation shortcomings was that Canada's military mission in Afghanistan had been terminated in 2014 and that it did not have military assets on the ground. This does not seem to be a plausible explanation. Canada had an embassy in Kabul until August 15, 2021, and the Royal Canadian Air Force has CC-177 Globemaster strategic airlift planes that can be deployed anywhere in the world on short notice.

The Committee was unable to get the information needed to provide a more complete Report with recommendations. To ensure a more effective response to a future crisis, the government needs to be more open with information. Government witnesses were not forthcoming with information and provided little documentation from the Privy Council Office, GAC, DND, IRCC, and the Canadian Armed Forces to the Committee. For example, the lack of completed or draft after-action reports from these entities makes it difficult for the Committee to analyze in greater detail what went wrong and recommend solutions.

The war in Afghanistan from 2001-2014 was Canada's longest war and the first significant combat engagement since the Korean War. Canada's withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 is not only a betrayal of our soldiers, diplomats, and Afghans themselves, it was a disaster that will damage Canada's interests for years to come. Allies and competitors around the world will question the strength of the Canadian government's commitments and whether the government is willing and able to back up its commitments with effective action.

The failure of the withdrawal and evacuation in August 2021 makes it urgent that Canada engage with Afghanistan's National Resistance Front, and consider political and materiel support, in coordination with our allies. Canada should also better coordinate defence, intelligence, and humanitarian aid capabilities with our democratic allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. Finally, the government should also immediately make efforts to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Australia, India, the U.S., and Japan. This is particularly important, as the vacuum left behind by the withdrawal from Afghanistan is being filled by powers like China.