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Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP

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Dear Foreign Secretary,

As members of the British and Irish Agencies in Afghanistan Group (BAAG) and Bond, the UK network of organisations working in international development, we are deeply concerned for the people of Afghanistan and **call on the UK government** urgently protect those whose lives are at risk and those in need of humanitarian assistance.

We urge the UK government to take the following steps immediately:

1. The UK should support all steps to safeguard the international protection of the people of Afghanistan, and increase the number of safe and legal routes to safety, including:
 - Using their diplomatic influence to encourage and **support neighbouring states** to keep their borders open and allow refugees and asylum seekers to flee the conflict without fear of refoulement, and to help ensure that these refugees are able to access adequate and appropriate humanitarian assistance safely. 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.
 - Collaborating with other countries **to keep Kabul airport open and functioning** so that people who need to leave are able to do so.
 - Suspending immediately **all deportations of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees from the UK and committing to review failed applications** in light of the crisis, following the example set by other countries like Canada and Germany.
 - **Expanding the scheme providing visas to the UK (ARAP)** to include not only those Afghans who have worked directly for the UK government but those who have worked through NGOs or contractors to support the UK aid and military programmes for so many years. The scheme should also include human rights defenders, journalists and others with a high profile who are at a high and imminent risk of threat to life.
 - The UK must do everything in its power to **protect Afghan women**, including human rights defenders and civil society actors, who face grave threats from the Taliban for advancing the rights of the Afghan people. Many of these women 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 in whichever ways are possible including offering humanitarian visas as a safe and legal route to asylum.
2. **The FCDO should take immediate steps to increase UK humanitarian support to Afghanistan and Afghan civil society**, reversing the recent UK aid cuts, and mobilising the long-term, flexible funding necessary to meet our responsibilities towards the Afghan people, including:

- Supporting the flexible reallocation of existing funding and programming based on urgent needs now.
 - Providing flexible, direct, and rapid funding to frontline NGOs and national partners who have the contextual knowledge, relationships and community acceptance to effectively meet urgent needs.
 - Activating early warning famine monitoring and take proactive steps for famine prevention.
 - Continuing to support development programmes where possible, as diverting funds away from efforts to shore up the foundations of food security will only worsen the humanitarian situation in the long term.
3. The UK, working with others, should **act to protect the rights and lives of women and girls and minority groups**, recognising their position as equal members of Afghan society as enshrined in the constitution. Minority groups have already been subjected to atrocities and assassinations and must be protected. In the first half of 2021, the UN documented record numbers of girls and women killed and injured, as well as record numbers of overall child casualties. This should include:
- Leveraging all multilateral avenues to safeguard Afghan women and girls and minority groups.
 - Ensuring any humanitarian response is locally-informed, gender and conflict sensitive and does no harm.
 - Recognise, support and protect the role of women-led and women rights organisations and women humanitarian staff in the humanitarian response. Without female staff, humanitarians cannot provide programming at scale for women and girls, particularly protection, health and services for victims of violence.
 - Supporting safehouses and GBV services for women and their families.
4. The UK should work with likeminded allies including the UN, to ensure that **protection of civilians** remains the priority.

As territorial control shifted during the first six months of 2021, there has been intentional destruction of civilian property and infrastructure, and attacks that appeared to intentionally target objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, as well as reports suggesting the implementation of a number of restrictions on individuals' rights (i.e. pressure on NGO operations by armed groups to restrict NGO recruitment of female staff). Critically, the United Nations is warning that without a significant de-escalation in violence, Afghanistan is on course to witness the highest ever number of documented civilian casualties in a single year since the UN's records began.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and strongly committed to a rules-based order, the UK must work toward international humanitarian law and related legislation to be respected by state and non-state actors in Afghanistan. This includes:

- Ensuring principled humanitarian access for international NGOs and national civil society.
- Supporting UN agencies and international NGOs to stay and deliver, including through humanitarian diplomacy and support to access negotiations.

We would be very pleased to meet with you and your officials to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Starling, Director of Policy, Advocacy and Research, Bond

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