

**Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan
SAWA - Australia (SA) Inc.**



<https://www.sawa-australia.org/>

5 October 2021

Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee,
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

RESPONSE TO SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE

We submit the following response from the **Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan (SAWA-Australia SA Inc)**. **SAWA** is a registered charity which has supported the education and vocational training of women and girls in Afghanistan since 2009.

We respond in order to the criteria set out in the Invitation to Submit.

a. Australia's twenty-year military, diplomatic and development engagement in Afghanistan in reference to:

(i) Our success in achieving the Australian government stated objectives:

In June 2010, the Australian Minister for Defence stated ... *Our fundamental objective in Afghanistan is to combat a clear threat from international terrorism to both international security and our own national security.....*

SAWA considers that this objective was met in part as no major terrorist attacks have occurred on US or Australian territory since that date. However, we question whether a twenty-year, large-scale military operation, alongside US troops, was the only possible response by the Australian Government to achieve an outcome which resulted in a high loss of both Australian and Afghan lives. We respectfully suggest that pursuing diplomatic avenues more robustly, under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council and/or with the UN Peacekeepers, may well have achieved a more favourable outcome for both Australia and Afghanistan, with significantly lower financial and human costs.

(ii) the collapse of the Afghan government and Afghan national army and the Taliban's resurgence and takeover of Kabul, following the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan.



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The collapse of the Afghan government and national army substantiates diplomatic and military intelligence, and even journalistic insight, which all recognised the very low level of support by Afghan citizens of their government and the national army's inability to maintain effective resistance to the Taliban advances. This indicates a serious indictment of the Afghan Government's authority and their failure to build trust within the citizenry. It also indicates an inability to establish relationships and peace within the Afghan factions and tribal areas.

The closure of the Australian Embassy in Kabul in May 2021 is evidence of the Australian Government's acceptance of the inevitability of the Taliban's takeover.

While recognising the complexity of issues related to the collapse of the Afghan government and army, it is SAWA's view that the Australian Government must accept some level of responsibility for this collapse. It would seem that Australia's "diplomatic and development engagement" with Afghanistan over two decades achieved minimal outcomes in terms of developing and supporting effective systems of governance or fledgling democracy. Instead, it would appear that this engagement did little more than prop up an ineffective government. Without some level of continuing development support, the sudden and complete withdrawal of coalition troops led inevitably to the Taliban's resurgence and control, and the devastating outcomes that this has brought about for the people of Afghanistan. SAWA particularly points to the loss of rights faced by women and girls.

(iii) the costs of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan.

The Australian Government's own public figures state that military engagement with Afghanistan over the past 20 years resulted in close to \$10 billion dollars. Human costs included 41 deaths in combat and a high number of returned soldiers with injuries and disability. There have also been a high number of deaths due to PTSD and suicide in the years following discharge. This is an extremely high figure in both financial and human terms, which must seem a totally unacceptable outcome for little real gain.

SAWA trusts that this profligate waste of money and lives will never be repeated again and that any future Australian government will not so readily align themselves with the United States, or any other nation, in taking a military response to what might better be addressed through a diplomatic or UN Security Council mandate.

(b) The adequacy of Australia's preparation for withdrawal from Afghanistan, including:

(i) The closure of the embassy

The closure of the Australian Embassy in May 2021 contributed to the chaos, fear and anguish experienced by the Afghan people immediately following the Taliban takeover in August. Desperate for their lives and safety, people had little or no recourse to diplomatic assistance or advice as to how to apply for humanitarian assistance or visas to seek refuge in Australia.

In the ensuing 2-3 months (between May and August) hundreds of Afghan nationals previously employed by the Embassy, along with interpreters, translators, drivers etc who had supported Australian troops, were left stranded. SAWA considers that Australia had a moral responsibility to assist these people, as well as many thousands of others who sought to escape the prospect of a tyrannical regime.

A delay in the closure of the Embassy, and the retention of some Australian staff in Kabul, might have enabled more evacuation flights to be arranged and better management of granting of visas, advice and assistance.

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One example, among many thousands, of the failure of the Australian Government to assist more people seeking evacuation flights is the case of the former Director of the women's training centre which SAWA has supported for over 10 years. As a prominent women's rights activist, she faced a high risk of danger from the Taliban.

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover (and aided by an Australian Labor Senator), SAWA obtained a Special Humanitarian Visa for this young woman and her family. However, they were unable to get through the crowds at the Hamid Karzai airport in the ensuing chaos, despite making multiple attempts. They witnessed people being crushed in the crowd and the death of a young child, exacerbating the personal distress they were experiencing in their flight from their home country.

(ii) The evacuation of Australian citizens, permanent residents and visa holders

SAWA's response to this question has been stated to some extent above, but we would emphasise our belief that in a precarious war zone in which Australia had been involved for 20 years, the Australian government should have developed a planned withdrawal and been ready for all emergency evacuations. We understand that the majority of Australian citizens and permanent residents have been assisted with a return to Australia, but it would seem that Afghan nationals holding visas were not afforded the same level of support and assistance – possibly due to a lack of sufficient forward planning?

(iii) Decisions relating to evacuation of at-risk Afghan nationals and partners, and family members of Australian citizens and permanent residents.

SAWA considers that the Australian Government failed to plan sufficiently or put in place effective contingency plans for the evacuation of at-risk Afghan people and their families when it was clear that a Taliban takeover was imminent. This raises serious questions that SAWA trusts this Senate Inquiry will address:

- Did Government intelligence not recognise how swiftly the Taliban would take over the country? (The closure of the Embassy in May would suggest that the Government was aware that a takeover was imminent.)
- Did the Government not read the mood of the local people and recognise the number who would be at risk when the takeover occurred? This would include (but not be limited to) former Afghan government employees, women, University teachers, people with disabilities and LGBTQ people.
- In the apparent failure to plan ahead and manage the evacuation earlier and more effectively, was the Australian Government inept, incompetent or uncaring?

b. How the Australian government should respond to recent developments in Afghanistan in order to:

(i) Protect Australia's national security.

It is SAWA's sincere wish that the outcomes of Australian's long involvement in Afghanistan – and the ultimate failure to achieve a positive outcome - will result in our current Government (and all future Australian Governments) reflecting on their relationship with the US (and now AUKUS) so that Australians are never drawn into a war with no direct threat to this country.

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It is difficult to measure any advancement in protecting Australia's national security as a result of our country's involvement in Afghanistan over 20 years. Conversely, it is highly likely that Australia's close ties to the United States and United Kingdom may have set back relationships with neighbouring countries in our region.

We urge the Australian Government (and future governments) to develop closer strategic alliances with countries in the Asia-Pacific region and to increase humanitarian aid. In particular, we believe that Australia has a responsibility to recognise the Taliban as the new authority in Afghanistan and to assist in the re-development of their country through the provision of medical aid and other essential services – subject to negotiated and agreed principles, including recognition of the rights of women.

Developments in Afghanistan over two decades have proven that military responses to ideological differences do not work.

(ii) Prevent or mitigate damage to Australia's international reputation, if necessary

Australia has suffered international reputational damage through its military defeat in Afghanistan, the hasty closure of its Embassy in Kabul and the poorly-planned and executed evacuation of Afghan nationals seeking refuge, particularly for those people who worked with Australian troops and other Australian interests. This damaged reputation has been compounded by the government's reluctance to date to provide a greater number of Humanitarian Visas to people at risk from the Taliban regime. SAWA urges the Government to increase our country's intake of Afghan refugees, in line with that proposed by our western allies.

The AUKUS alliance, forged so soon after the retreat from Afghanistan, can only further damage Australia's international reputation amongst our neighbours in the region. Continued close alignment with America and Britain would not appear to bode well for a better future on the international stage for Australia.

(ii) Extend immediate mental health support to Australian Defence personnel and veterans while the Royal Commission into the Defence and Veteran suicide remains ongoing, and

Absolutely! SAWA urges the Government to provide sufficient resources to fully fund services and support for all Australian Defence personnel suffering mental illness as a result of their experience in war. We urge our government to work for peaceful resolution of any potential future conflict with any other nation. Leadership requires striving for a peaceful and independent future.

(iii) Protect Australian citizens, visa holders and Afghan nationals who supported Australian forces, where they remain in Afghanistan.

As stressed in several points above, it behoves the Australian government to ensure that all Afghan citizens who helped and supported our Australian contingent throughout the decades of war in Afghanistan are offered repatriation in Australia as their lives are now at risk. Every possible effort should be made to ensure their safety, along with an acknowledgement of the friendship, knowledge and support they extended to Australian personnel.

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(iv) Any related matters

SAWA trusts that all submissions to the Senate Committee Inquiry will be made public, and that a thorough response to the issues raised will be published so that those who have responded will see the outcomes, recommendations and plans to address this wide range of complex issues.

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry.

Convenor

Signed on behalf of the Committee and all members (Australia-wide) of the Support Association of Afghanistan: SAWA AUSTRALIA SA. Inc.