

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Inquiry into Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan, 2021 - 2022

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Written

QoN 009 – Hearing 11 October 2021
Topic: Evacuations from Kabul airport

Senator Penny Wong

Question

49. What was the process for deciding who could board departing flights for those inside the airport?
- a. Who made the decisions that people could board?
 - b. Were Departmental staff working off lists of eligible people?
 - c. How were people prioritised?
 - d. How many people that made it into the airport were rejected from boarding?
 - e. Who created the lists and gave it to ADF? Which Ministers and Departments were involved, and which coordinated the list?
 - f. What guidance was given to ADF personnel on how to make snap decisions on the validity of a visa?
 - g. Were lists of approved Australian evacuees provided to coalition forces at airport checkpoints?

Answer

The 16 August joint statement by the Prime Minister, Minister for Defence and Minister for Foreign Affairs and the decisions taken by the Minister for Immigration informed assessments of people seeking to evacuate.

On 19 August, Minister Hawke agreed to arrangements for managing the issuing of emergency visas in Afghanistan. The Minister for Immigration delegated authority to the senior officer on the ground, the Head of the CRT to authorise uplifts from Kabul in extremis and balancing the best information available. This was on the basis that all required checks and reviews would occur in the UAE or a third location before a visa was issued and onward travel to Australia occurred. Decision-making by the most senior DFAT officer on the ground, the Head of the Crisis Response Team, for the evacuation of non-citizens / non-permanent residents was guided by principles defined by Minister Hawke:

- against granting visas to a person who was not directly connected to Australia through being a certified locally engaged employee, or as a family member of an Australian citizen, permanent resident, LEE or Australian visa holder;
- in favour of providing visas to spouses, children (including under guardianship arrangements), parents and grandparents;
- against providing visas to more distant relatives including siblings of the primary visa holder and their families;
- against splitting family groups; and

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- against granting visas to single men of fighting age.

a. In accordance with consular practice during an emergency, we assisted Australian citizens and Australian permanent residents and their immediate families (spouse and dependent children). Home Affairs and Australian Border Force in line with the decisions taken by the Minister for Immigration, assessed non-Australians for uplift, in consultation with the Head of the CRT on sensitive or highly complex cases. Home Affairs and ADF then determined boarding for the next flight in order of processing and taking into account the seating configuration of a plane, medical or other conditions (such as pregnancy), and a desire to keep families together where possible.

b. Yes, DFAT officials in Kabul were provided names of individuals requiring assistance from Canberra, and directly from Afghans and Australians, including from community groups and political representatives.

c. Home Affairs and Australian Border Force staff initially assessed people as they were presented from the gates. As numbers in the staging areas grew during the week potentially threatening the operation's capacity to assist more, on a limited number of occasions, Head, CRT directed Home Affairs and Australian Border Force staff to prioritise assessment of Australian citizens and permanent residents and their families in the staging area to relieve pressure due to a likely faster processing time. This and identification of an additional staging area during the week relieved this pressure.

d. All of the people approved for uplift departed Kabul airport on flights. Australian government agencies did not record the number of people not approved for uplift.

e. In instances where we were aware of individuals or family groups immediately outside the gates, this information was passed to ADF and Home Affairs and Australian Border Force and DFAT staff near the gates who attempted to positively identify people within the crowd.

f. See answer to Q45.

g. The names of Australian Citizens, Permanent Residents and their families who had registered with DFAT were shared with the US and UK (via our missions in Washington and London) at the commencement of the evacuation to assist with gaining access through the US controlled airport perimeter, but were of limited utility due to the chaotic environment at the airport gates.