

UK special forces rejected 2,000 Afghan asylum claims to conceal war crimes

Harvey Thompson
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British special forces used a veto to reject over 2,000 asylum claims from Afghan elite units, whom they fought alongside during the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) confirmed that UK special forces officers blocked every single application from former Afghan commandos referred to them for sponsorship under a resettlement scheme put in place after the Taliban came to power. This followed the ignominious withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan after two decades of occupation in August 2021.

The former Afghan commandos were referred to as the “Triples”, due to their unit designations as CF 333 and ATF 444. The units were established, trained, and paid for by UK Special Forces (UKSF) to support the main special forces units—the SAS (Special Air Services) and the SBS (Special Boat Services) on operations in Afghanistan.

Under the rule of the Taliban some are already feared beaten, tortured or killed in reprisals for collaboration with foreign imperialist forces, while many more are believed to be in hiding.

The MoD had always previously denied any suggestion that there was a blanket policy to reject members of the Triples. However, the BBC confirmed that it had “not been able to find any evidence that UK Special Forces (UKSF) supported any resettlement applications.”

The mass rejection of the resettlement applications coincides with the convening of the Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan in London, which is investigating allegations that UK special forces had committed war crimes on operations in Afghanistan where the Triples were present.

The inquiry has the power to compel witnesses to appear who are in the UK, but not non-UK nationals who are overseas. If resettled, former members of the Triples could be compelled by the inquiry to provide evidence that could be highly damaging for the special forces and

other armed forces of the UK.

In January, a trove of testimony was released from the ongoing inquiry revealing war crimes, the deletion of evidence relating to these crimes and their whitewashing through internal inquiries. It also showed how dramatically relations had deteriorated and repeatedly broken down between Afghan forces and UK special forces following some of the bloodiest fighting of the occupation.

Inquiry testimony detailed one meeting held in February 2011, following a growing rift between the SAS and the Afghan special forces over alleged war crimes committed by UK special forces. This episode almost ended in an armed clash and Afghan special forces temporarily withdrew their support.

Afghan units—who would often suffer blowback for the conduct of UK and other foreign forces, not being separated by garrison walls from the general population—have said that they were treated “like dogs” by their imperial masters.

It was first revealed last year by the BBC’s *Panorama* documentary series that UK Special Forces command had been given veto power over the resettlement applications of Afghan commandos and exercised it to deny them asylum in Britain.

The MoD initially denied the existence of the special forces’ veto, until denial became untenable. After first suggesting that the BBC’s reporting had been inaccurate, the then Conservative government Defence Minister Andrew Murrison was later forced to inform Parliament that they had misled parliament in their denials.

The confirmation of 2,022 specific rejected asylum applications emerged in court hearings this month, during a legal challenge brought by a former member of the Triples.

According to a February 17 BBC News, “Lawyers for the MoD applied for a restriction order which temporarily

prevented the BBC from reporting on the relevant parts of the proceedings, before withdrawing their application last week under challenge.”

Documents since disclosed in court revealed that during the time the MoD was denying the existence of the veto, it already knew that every blocking decision made by UK special forces was potentially unsound and would have to be independently reviewed.

Mike Martin MP, a Liberal Democrat member of the Defence Select-Committee and former British Army officer who served in Afghanistan, told the BBC last week, “There is the appearance that UK Special Forces blocked the Afghan special forces applications because they were witnesses to the alleged UK war crimes currently being investigated in the Afghan inquiry. If the MoD is unable to offer any explanation, then the matter should be included in the inquiry.”

Johnny Mercer, the former Conservative MP who served alongside the SBS in Afghanistan, was last year threatened with imprisonment if he didn’t reveal what his sources told him about alleged war crimes by UK special forces in Afghanistan. He said after testifying to the ongoing inquiry that it was “very clear to me that there is a pool of evidence that exists within the Afghan [special forces] community that are now in the United Kingdom that should contribute to this Inquiry.”

According to the BBC, the MoD began a review last year of all 2,022 resettlement applications referred to and rejected by UK special forces. All apparently contained what MoD caseworkers regarded as “credible” evidence of service with the Triples units.

A government announcement at the outset stated that the review would take 12 weeks, but more than a year later it has yet to be completed.

An anonymous former Triples officer said, “Although decisions have been overturned, it’s too late for some people. The delays have caused a lot of problems. People have been captured by the Taliban or lost their lives.” The officer said the Afghan commandos worked alongside UK special forces “like brothers” and felt “betrayed” by the widespread rejections.

The MoD is facing a legal challenge to aspects of the review being brought by a former senior member of the Triples who is now in the UK, on behalf of commandos still in Afghanistan. It includes challenging the decision not to inform applicants whether their case is actually being reviewed or not.

Dan Carey, a partner at the law firm Deighton Pierce Glynn, said, “Our client’s focus is on his soldiers left

behind in Afghanistan, some of whom have been killed while they wait for these heavily delayed protection decisions.

“As things stand they have a right to request a reassessment of a decision they haven’t even been told about. And there are others who think they are part of the Triples Review when the secret criteria would tell them that their cases aren’t even being looked at.”

Lawyers also criticised the level of disclosure in the case by the MoD. No documentation has yet been handed over from within UK Special Forces or government records about the process that led to the blocked applications.

Last week, sacked Foreign Office whistleblower Josie Stewart won a case for unfair dismissal over her disclosures to the media about the UK’s role in the evacuation from Afghanistan. Stewart was sacked by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in 2022 after being apparently accidentally identified as a confidential source by a BBC journalist.

Stewart’s lawyers said the case was “without precedent” and “raised numerous important issues about civil servants’ rights to whistleblower protection under existing law.”

The tribunal found there was a “clear public interest” in the evacuation and whether it was being carried out effectively and fairly, as the lives of individuals who had assisted NATO forces in Afghanistan were “potentially at stake.”

It also considered that it was “reasonable” for Stewart to go to the BBC’s flagship *Newsnight* programme when allegations had already been put into the public domain by former FCDO employee Raphael Marshall and “government ministers were publicly disputing them.”

In a statement upon receiving the judgment, Stewart said, “By calling this out, I lost my career. The outcome of this case doesn’t change any of this, but it has achieved what I set out to achieve: it has established that civil servants have the right not to stay silent when systemic failures put lives at risk, as happened during the Afghan evacuation.”



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