

Tragic story brings home extent of our failure in Afghanistan

Chris Sidoti **The Age** September 6, 2021

The Morrison government's disastrous mismanagement [of the defeat in Afghanistan](#) brings deep dishonour on us all. It will cost lives, perhaps thousands of lives. The government has caused grievous damage to people in Afghanistan, as well as to Australia's reputation and its strategic interests in the region. And this is brought home by one particularly tragic story.

For 20 years, Australia has supported the work of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. We cheered its establishment in 2002. We encouraged its development. We enabled its work with grants of many millions of dollars. We sent people to Kabul to advise and strengthen it. We provided training programs for its commissioners and staff. I went over six times in 10 years to help.

We also sought the commission's help when investigating allegations of war crimes against Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. The commission was the first to investigate these allegations, almost immediately after the events occurred, and reported them to Australian authorities. If the military had listened to the commission, perhaps we could have avoided further allegations. The commission assisted the Brereton Inquiry into the allegations and has been assisting the Australian government's Office of the Special Investigator.

With the support of the Australian and other governments, the commission became one of the most trusted, most credible and most effective state institutions in Afghanistan. It is acclaimed internationally – its chairperson has been asked to brief the United Nations Security Council three times in the past 14 months.

The courage of the commission's leaders and staff is the stuff of legend but they have paid a price. One commissioner was killed in a suicide bombing, along with her husband and two little children. Attempts have been made on the life of the chairperson – one attacker missed her but killed others. Other commissioners and staff have been threatened and three workers were killed in 2019 and 2020.

Yet in an otherwise dismal 20 years in Afghanistan, supporting the commission was one of Australia's few success stories. Then, four weeks ago, before the collapse of Kabul, the commission's chairwoman sent the Australian government a list of 90 staff members considered to be at grave risk from the Taliban because of their work investigating atrocities, especially those relating to women and children. She asked for asylum for people on the list and their families – as many as we could take. She got no response.

Australia's evacuation flights out of Kabul ended on August 26. The list was still being considered, presumably by the Department of Home Affairs. The next day, the details of 10 workers on the list and their families were sent to Foreign Affairs. That shortlist is still under consideration.

Fortunately, while Australia dithered and delayed, other countries acted to help the commission's staff, namely Britain, Canada, Denmark, Belgium, Norway, France, Germany and the United States, among others. But 47 of the 90 people on that list could not get out in time.

For almost 30 years, Australia has championed human rights commissions. Supporting them has been a core objective of our human rights foreign policy. Australia has led resolutions on these institutions in meetings of the UN Human Rights Council. Yet when one of these institutions faced a most grave crisis, Australia failed dismally to help. At the very least, shamed and dishonoured in the face of this failure towards the Afghan commission, we must relinquish our leadership role in the United Nations to a country with a better record than ours.

The story of the Afghan human rights commission and its courageous leaders and staff is only one of the stories of the defeat in Afghanistan. Australia's response to this defeat has been disgraceful. Our leaders have failed both the people of Afghanistan and Australian voters.

By any standard of governance and accountability, there should be a judicial inquiry into what went wrong – especially over the past three months. The government decided suddenly in late May to close the embassy in Kabul and run away. What did we know then? Why were we not better prepared? Why has our response been so pathetic?

I know this government has no sense of accountability and will never appoint a judicial inquiry into this disgrace, so the Senate must act. At the very least we deserve a Senate inquiry into the dismal failures of the government over the past three months.

[After the suicide bombing at Kabul airport on August 26](#), US President Joe Biden said, "We will not forgive. We will not forget." I thought of the Morrison government, "I will not forgive. I will not forget."

Chris Sidoti is a former Australian human rights commissioner who worked with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission from its foundation in 2002.

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