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First Minister Left in the Dark Over MoD's Afghan Data Leak Scandal

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A major data breach within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) exposed the personal details of thousands of Afghans, but the Scottish Government and most UK Cabinet ministers were unaware, raising serious concerns about transparency and accountability at the highest levels.

Defence Secretary John Healey confirmed last week that a superinjunction, which had prevented any public reporting on the 2022 breach, had now been lifted. The leak exposed sensitive information belonging to over 18,000 Afghans who had applied to the Afghan

Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), a government scheme designed to support those who had worked alongside British forces during the two-decade-long war in Afghanistan.

The situation became even more alarming when it emerged that the personal details of serving intelligence personnel and special forces operatives had also been compromised. Former Defence Secretary Ben Wallace was reportedly unaware of the breach until 18 months later, when the information began circulating on Facebook.

In response, the MoD quietly established a secretive initiative called the Afghan Response Route (ARR) to relocate the affected individuals. Approximately 6,900 people were moved through this scheme at an estimated cost of £800 million. Wallace personally sought an injunction to suppress the media and keep Parliament in the dark, a move that his successor, Grant Shapps, later strengthened into a full superinjunction, remaining in force until last week.

Information Withheld

Despite many of the affected Afghans being relocated to Scotland, the Scottish Government was never briefed. Then-First Minister Humza Yousaf only learned of the scandal when John Healey addressed the House of Commons. A senior adviser told the Sunday Mail: “We knew nothing about it until everyone else learned from John Healey. I’m sure Humza also learned about it from watching Parliament TV.”

The Labour government applied to extend the secrecy order on three separate occasions, in May and November last year, and again this January, while also commissioning a review into the future of the ARR scheme. That review, led by retired civil servant Paul Rimmer, claimed there was little evidence the Taliban had launched a campaign of retaliation based on the leaked data and suggested the breach may not have been as widespread as initially feared.

SNP defence spokesperson Dave Doogan condemned the handling of the affair, describing the repeated failures as “institutional incompetence”. He criticised the government’s focus on financial cost and immigration impact, saying the priority should have been a formal apology and urgent action to protect those put at risk. Doogan also expressed concern over the government’s reliance on the Rimmer Report, calling it an example of “complacency” from officials more concerned with saving face than addressing real-world consequences.

The Ministry of Defence stated that the superinjunction restricted how widely information could be shared. A Scottish Government spokesperson confirmed they were unaware of the issue until it was publicly disclosed and urged Westminster to prioritise the safety of those affected.

Despite the gravity of the breach, the MoD has said it will robustly defend any claims for compensation from the 18,714 Afghans whose lives may have been placed in danger.