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Britain Quietly Relocated Afghans After Major Data Breach

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Britain covertly launched a high-cost relocation initiative for thousands of Afghans after a serious data breach exposed their details, potentially endangering lives under Taliban rule. The breach, kept secret until now, triggered a £2 billion (\$2.7 billion) effort under the former Conservative government to bring affected individuals to the United Kingdom.

The operation came in response to a data leak that compromised nearly 33,000 Afghan nationals who had applied to resettle in Britain following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The sensitive information, including names and supporting documents, was mistakenly disclosed in early 2022 and remained unnoticed until August 2023, when part of it surfaced on social media. The disclosure raised fears that those named could become targets of retribution.

According to court documents, the Conservative-led Ministry of Defence (MoD) acted swiftly after discovering the breach, securing a legal gag order known as a superinjunction in September 2023. The injunction was lifted only this week, revealing the extent of the crisis. The data exposed included names of individuals, their family members, and British officials, members of Parliament, and senior military officers who had endorsed their asylum applications.

Defence Secretary John Healey issued a formal apology in Parliament on Tuesday, acknowledging the severity of the situation. "This serious data incident should never have happened," Healey stated. "To all whose data was compromised, I offer a sincere apology." He emphasised that the incident occurred under the prior administration but took full responsibility on behalf of the ministry.

The relocation plan has so far brought around 16,000 people to British soil, with about 4,500 already in the United Kingdom or in transit. The total cost so far stands at an estimated £400 million, and lawsuits from affected individuals could inflate the final tally. However, Healey confirmed that no additional asylum claims would be granted solely due to the breach.

This revelation comes at a politically sensitive time, as Britain's public spending faces growing strain and public concern over immigration intensifies. The right-leaning Reform UK party has surged in recent polling, reflecting voter dissatisfaction with existing immigration and defence policies.

A Ministry of Defence-commissioned review, also released Tuesday, concluded that while Afghanistan remains a high-risk environment, there was no confirmed evidence that the Taliban initiated a campaign of retribution based on the leaked data. Nevertheless, the government acknowledged the potential risk of extrajudicial killings that had gone unaddressed.

British troops first entered Afghanistan in 2001 as part of a United States-led coalition following the September 11 attacks, with a primary mission to dismantle terrorist networks and stabilise the region. Their involvement lasted until 2014, with thousands of local Afghan allies supporting military efforts during that period.

While the current Labour-led government under Prime Minister Keir Starmer has launched a review into the incident, public confidence in the handling of immigration and national security continues to wane. The unauthorised release of data and the subsequent cover-up until now will likely fuel further debate over governmental competence and border policy going forward.