

UK Health Ministry Has No Records on Turkish Protective Equipment (PPE) Fiasco and Won't Say if Files Destroyed

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Department responsible tells MEE it has no documents about botched import of medical gear, raising concerns of cover-up ahead of inquiry into government's response to Covid-19

The British government's health ministry says it has no record whatsoever of its shambolic attempt to import life-saving personal protective equipment (PPE) for health workers from Turkey at the height of the coronavirus crisis.

Officials say they do not have a single report or memo about the affair, nor a single email, either generated within the ministry or sent to it.

The claim raises concerns that Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) files are going missing in advance of a public inquiry into the UK government's handling of the pandemic.

More than 200 healthcare and care home workers have died in the UK due to Covid-19, following months of complaints about shortages of PPE items such as face masks, visors and gloves.

Among members of the public, the country has one of the highest death rates in the world.

Asked repeatedly whether it was destroying files – an act that would be unlawful in the UK – the DHSC refused to comment.

“We have nothing further to add,” a department spokesperson told MEE.

The UK's Cabinet Office, which co-ordinates the work of the prime minister's office and government departments, also denied that it had any records about the matter. It too declined to say whether any records had been destroyed.

The two departments made the claims after receiving requests made by Middle East Eye under the UK's Freedom of Information Act. Appeals are now under way at the request of MEE.

The UK's defence ministry and foreign office said that it did hold relevant material and are now considering requests that the material be released.

Calls for inquiry

Prominent scientists, doctors' and nurses' leaders and bereaved families are demanding a public inquiry into the UK's handling of the pandemic, and ministers have conceded that there will be "lessons to be learned" once it has passed.

At the height of the Covid-19 crisis in the UK in mid-April, when rates of infections and deaths were starting to soar and when healthcare workers were [wearing bin liners](#) because PPE was in such short supply, [a government minister had claimed](#) that the following day the UK would be importing 84 tonnes of PPE from Turkey.

A few hours earlier, the Financial Times had published [a highly critical report](#) on the British government's attempts to encourage companies to design new ventilators, and ministers were aware that the Sunday Times was about to publish [a lengthy investigation](#) into their failure to respond quickly to the crisis, and secure more supplies of PPE.

Insiders within Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Downing Street office say that his chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, has "an obsession with announcements", using them to deflect attention from the government's problems, but showing little interest in delivering the substance of ministers' pledges once those announcements have been made.

When the 84 tonnes of PPE failed to arrive in the UK the following day, a British Royal Air Force (RAF) cargo plane was dispatched to Istanbul, with the British defence ministry [briefing journalists](#) that this was intended to "put pressure on Ankara" to release the consignment.

The Turkish government [told MEE](#) that it was doing all it could to assist its fellow Nato ally, but said that there was a major problem: the private company that was selling the PPE had only ever had the capacity to supply 2,500 items.

Officials in Ankara appeared bemused that the British government should be suggesting that it had got to grips with its PPE crisis by entering into a contract with such a tiny firm.

Referring to the current requirement that Turkish firms must apply for permission to export PPE from the country, one official said:

"God, the company doesn't even have the capacity to apply online for the export exemption."

The Turkish government says it appealed to garment manufacturers across the country, which had been repurposed to manufacture PPE, asking them to assist the UK amid its deepening crisis.

Cargo plane returned nearly empty

The RAF cargo aircraft eventually returned to the UK [three days later than promised](#), but with less than a quarter of the PPE supplies pledged in the ministerial announcement.

There were subsequently claims that some of the material was substandard, although the Turkish company responsible for the shipment said the British government knew that it had

provided – free of charge – some PPE that was intended not for use in intensive care units, but which was instead designed to be donned by visitors to hospitals and care homes.

The episode led to a [well-publicised row](#) between the DHSC and Number 10, with Boris Johnson’s aides suggesting to journalists that the health secretary, Matt Hancock, would be blamed for the affair. Healthcare unions warned that all confidence in Hancock was [“draining away.”](#)

For his part, Hancock [telephoned his Turkish counterpart](#), Fahrettin Koca, to thank him for the support that Turkey had offered British healthworkers.

Yet according to the DHSC’s response to MEE’s freedom of information request, all this happened without any documents or memoranda being retained within the department, and with not a single email about the episode, written or received by anyone working there, being preserved.

Meanwhile, a health service procurement agency known as NHS Supply Chain told MEE that it held no records on the affair as they would be held by the DHSC.

Following publication of this report, the DHSC maintained that it did not have any records relating to the matter – not even keeping a note of Hancock’s telephone conversation – because the importation had been the work of a local NHS organisation in London.

It is unclear whether the health ministry and Cabinet Office have destroyed records relating to the affair, have simply handled the freedom of information request in an incompetent fashion, or have decided to flout their obligations under the law.

However, critics of Cummings say that his contempt for the UK’s Freedom of Information Act is well-known: in 2011, when he was an adviser at the UK’s Department for Education, the Financial Times [caught him](#) using a personal email address in an attempt to evade the requirements of the act.

In one email to colleagues, Cummings wrote:

“I will not answer any further e-mails to my official DfE account ... i will only answer things that come from gmail accounts from people who i know who they are. [sic] i suggest that you do the same in general but thats obv up to you guys – i can explain in person the reason for this .”

The Information Commissioner, the official responsible for enforcing the UK’s Freedom of Information Act, was reported to have been shocked by that email.

Subsequently, the Financial Times reported that Cummings and other senior advisers to then-education secretary Michael Gove had [systematically destroyed](#) official government correspondence. Gove is now the minister responsible for the Cabinet Office.

Destruction of government documents that are of historical significance – such as those that would assist any public inquiry – is unlawful under the UK’s Public Records Acts, while destruction or alteration of any document that has been requested under the Freedom of Information Act is a criminal offence.

Polls suggest that the British public's trust in Johnson's government has plummeted since May, when Cummings and his wife, Mary Wakefield, a journalist, were discovered to have ignored the lockdown rules that he had helped develop for the British public.

After Wakefield felt ill, the couple drove more than 400 kilometres to Cummings' parents' home with their young son.

A magazine article that Wakefield had written in which she falsely implied that the couple had remained at their London home has been [referred to the UK's press regulator](#).

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