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London, May 27 (RHC)-- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has dismissed allegations from Dominic Cummings, his former chief aide, that government failures had caused tens of thousands of unnecessary coronavirus deaths.

Cummings, who was Johnson's top adviser until late last year, delivered an excoriating attack on his former boss and top ministers during seven hours of testimony before a parliamentary committee on Wednesday.

But Johnson on Thursday denied that government incompetence and mismanagement had caused avoidable deaths, insisting instead that officials had been "governed by a determination to protect life" and shield the UK's National Health Service from becoming overwhelmed.

"Of course this has been an incredibly difficult series of decisions, none of which we've taken lightly," he said. "We've followed, to the best we can, the data and guidance that we've had." With just over 128,000 deaths, the United Kingdom has the world's fifth-highest official COVID-19 toll, far higher than the government's initial worst-case estimates of 20,000.

Johnson's remarks came hours after Health Secretary Matt Hancock denied Cummings' allegations that he had repeatedly lied to colleagues and the public about the government's pandemic response.

Cummings claimed that Hancock misled officials about his efforts to deal with COVID in care homes and made false assurances over the supply of personal protective equipment, before concluding he should have been fired "for at least 15 to 20 things."

Cummings claimed Hancock's statement that the government had thrown a "protective ring around" care homes at the start of the pandemic was nonsense. "These unsubstantiated allegations around honesty are not true," Hancock told Parliament on Thursday. "I've been straight with people in public and in private throughout. Every day since I began working on the response to this pandemic last January, I've got up each morning and asked: 'What must I do to protect life?' That is the job of a health secretary in a pandemic."

Cummings' testimony led to calls from campaigners and the opposition for a promised public inquiry into the government's handling of the crisis to be brought forward.

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