

Press release: UK aid to help eliminate the world's leading infectious cause of blindness across poorest countries in the Commonwealth by 2020

Malawi has successfully eliminated trachoma. Photo credit: The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust

Millions of people across the Commonwealth will be free of blinding trachoma as the UK steps up its support to tackle this ancient and avoidable disease, the International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt will announce today.

Trachoma, a bacterial infection that can lead to permanent loss of sight, affects more than 52 million people across 21 Commonwealth countries. If left untreated, the painful disease, which is the world's main infectious cause of blindness, can cause eyelids to turn inward, or eyelashes to grow towards the eye scratching the cornea.

To help eliminate the disease, UK aid will provide additional support to 10 Commonwealth countries over the next two years, providing antibiotics to millions, surgery and education programmes to teach people how to stop the spread of this infection.

International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt said:

British research, NGOs and pharmaceutical companies have been at the forefront of the global fight to eliminate blinding trachoma that causes debilitating pain for its victims.

UK aid has already made a huge difference to vulnerable people in countries including Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda, freeing families trapped in a cycle of poverty as the disease passes from one generation to the next. In Malawi for example, four years ago eight million people were at risk of trachoma and now no-one is.

This further commitment will mean millions of people across the Commonwealth will receive vital sight-saving treatment and we will be on course to eliminate this ancient and avoidable disease.

This new package of UK support will:

- Enable our partners to map out where the disease remains in 138 districts in Tanzania, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Kenya;

- Help Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Nauru work with the World Health Organisation to confirm they have eliminated trachoma;
- Provide 76,000 people with surgery in Kenya, to prevent blindness and end the pain trachoma causes, and eliminate the disease as a public health problem by 2020; and
- Help Pakistan, Tanzania and Papua New Guinea get nearer to elimination as millions receive sight-saving treatment.

Today's support is part of the UK's £360 million commitment made in April 2017 to provide a billion treatments for people at risk of neglected tropical diseases like trachoma and guinea worm. Neglected tropical diseases affect over a billion people in the poorest and most marginalised communities in the world, stopping children going to school and parents going to work – costing developing economies billions of dollars every year in lost productivity and reducing overall global prosperity.

The International Development Secretary will highlight the results of UK aid at an event this evening organised by The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust (QEDJT) to celebrate work to eliminate trachoma across the Commonwealth.

Dr Astrid Bonfield CBE, chief executive of The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust, said:

At the Trust, thanks to support from DFID and our partners from across the Commonwealth, we have seen how the elimination of trachoma transforms lives for the better.

It is wonderful news that more citizens, communities and countries across the Commonwealth can now look forward to a future free of the scourge of this ancient, painful, blinding disease.

Through our partners, Sightsavers and the QEDJT, UK aid has made huge progress in fighting avoidable blindness. UK aid has helped to train more than 10,000 people to look for the final trachoma cases around the world. These trained specialists have provided crucial advice to those affected by the disease, helping them to get surgery and teach them on how to stop the spread of the infection itself.

Dr Caroline Harper CBE, CEO of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind – more commonly known as Sightsavers – welcomed the announcement:

Blinding trachoma is a horribly painful disease that has devastating effects on the people it affects and their communities.

This new investment the Commonwealth 2018-20 Fund will help us make huge strides towards eliminating this ancient scourge from the Commonwealth and will also encourage other donors to step forward.

1. The International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt today announced £20 million of funding, contributing towards eliminating blinding trachoma across the Commonwealth by 2020.
 2. £7 million for this programme comes from the 2018 – 2020 fund which the British government has made to create positive change in the Commonwealth, during the UK's period as chair-in-office.
 3. Today's announcement is part of our effort to beat these diseases. The world is making great progress on these. In 2017 there were only 30 cases of guinea worm left globally, down from over 3 million a year in the 1980s.
 4. Pharmaceutical companies have been critical to efforts controlling and preventing trachoma and other neglected tropical diseases, through their generous donation of the necessary drugs. For trachoma, Pfizer have donated more than 500 million doses of antibiotics, treating more than 100 million people in 33 countries.
 5. The two year programme announced today will build on, and in some cases complete, the UK's previous efforts to eliminate blinding trachoma in 10 Commonwealth countries: Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Nauru, Kenya, Pakistan, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea, and Nigeria.
 6. The programme implements SAFE strategies (surgery, antibiotics, facial cleanliness and environmental improvements), which are known to eliminate blinding trachoma, and have been endorsed by the World Health Organisation.
 7. UK aid supported the Global Trachoma Mapping Project 2012-2016, the largest infectious disease survey ever undertaken that helped to pinpoint the world's trachoma-endemic areas. This project collected data from 2.6 million people in 29 countries using Android smartphones.
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Press release: National primary offer day

- 90% per cent of pupils offered their first choice of primary school and 97.2% were offered a place at one of their top three last year
- Disadvantage gap index at Key Stage 2 down 10.5% since 2011
- 825,000 new school places created since 2010 – with 90,000 more over 2016-17 alone

Pupils across the country will find out today (Monday 16 April) which primary school they will be going to in September, amid rising education standards in England.

Figures show 97.2 per cent of pupils were offered one of their top three primary schools in 2017 and follows the creation of 825,000 new school places since 2010.

Families will receive their offers as standards continue to rise thanks to

the government's reforms and the hard work of teachers, with 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010 and nine out of ten schools awarded this rating at their last inspection.

School Standards Minister Nick Gibb said:

This morning, thousands of pupils and their parents will find out which primary school they will be going to this September. Thanks to our reforms and the hard work of teachers, academic standards in our primary schools are rising across the country. Our young readers are among the best in the world, the proportion of primary school pupils reaching the expected standards in reading, writing and maths standards went up 8 percentage points last year and the attainment gap between children from wealthier and poorer backgrounds has narrowed by 10.5% since 2011.

A good primary school education lays the foundations for success at secondary school and beyond, so it is right that we help make sure every child reaches their potential from the moment they start their education. That's why we're investing £5.8 billion to create even more good schools and good school places – building on the 825,000 we've created since 2010 – resulting in 9 out of 10 pupils securing one of their top three choices of schools.

Academic standards are rising following the introduction of a more rigorous primary school curriculum to match the best education systems in the world, with latest performance data showing:

- The gap between disadvantaged pupils and others in a combined measure of English, reading and mathematics has decreased in each of the last six years, narrowing by 1.3% in the latest year and 10.5% since 2011;
- There are now 154,000 more six-year-olds on track to become fluent readers than in 2012, with England's recent rise up the international PIRLS rankings putting the success of the government's reforms on a global scale; and
- In 2017 72% met the expected standard in reading, 75% in maths and 77% in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

On top of this, the government has invested in programmes to help raise standards in these crucial early years of education, including a £26 million network of specialist English Hubs around the country to improve pupils' literacy and £41 million to follow the same approach to teaching maths as world leading countries through the Shanghai Mastery for Maths programme. □ This is on top of wider changes to the primary assessment system which will reduce unnecessary workload for teachers so they can focus on what really

matters in the classroom.

Press release: Action on trade and inclusivity to benefit all Commonwealth citizens

Already accounting for one fifth of global trade, with intra-Commonwealth trade valued at \$560billion and estimated to rise to \$700billion by 2020, the organisation holds vast potential for future growth. New initiatives announced today will help make this happen.

As Commonwealth partners, we have a lot to offer each other. And at home there is a gain by tapping into new markets and new talents.

Speaking ahead of the Heads of Government Meeting, the Prime Minister will also call for the Commonwealth to be a beacon of free and inclusive trade at a time of fragile growth and continuing protectionism.

To help make the most of the Commonwealth's potential, Prime Minister Theresa May will unveil new programmes to free up trade, boost women's participation in business and to upskill young people whom make up two thirds of the Commonwealth's 2.4 billion citizens.

The new SheTrades programme will offer £7million in Commonwealth-wide support to increasing the presence of women-owned businesses to operate internationally from countries where being female is a professional barrier.

Indeed, it has been estimated that if women played the same role as men in labour markets, as much as \$28 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025.

The UK will work with the International Trade Centre (ITC) to deliver this, while also compiling the world's first 'Global Outlook' on trade and gender in the Commonwealth. This will provide information needed to help Commonwealth countries implement more inclusive trade policy.

UK Prime Minister Theresa May said:

Our Commonwealth family already accounts for one-fifth of global trade, and we must continue to work together to build further upon this solid foundation by building on our existing trade links and establishing new ones.

I firmly believe that regardless of which corner of the Commonwealth you are from, we all will benefit from the jobs created by doing so. Every one of those new jobs will mean another

family seeing their hard work rewarded, and the spread of greater opportunity.

The initiatives I have announced will see the Commonwealth being better able to respond to its youth, rise to the challenges they face and answer their ambitions for a better life. In taking decisive action today, we have begun a positive change which will echo through the generations.

I am also proud that important action taken at this summit will mean that more women will be able to overcome barriers which keep them from participating in trade.

The Prime Minister will also announce UK funding for a new Commonwealth Standards Network which helps harness the benefits of existing international standards. These will be a shared language for trading partners across the globe to enhance trust and create innovation.

This will boost intra-Commonwealth trade and support developing countries to produce goods and services to internationally recognised standards and access new markets. The effective use of existing international standards will reduce trade costs between members.

International common standards act as a common language that will help the UK forge new, and deepen existing trading relationships with our Commonwealth partners, which will bring benefit to both businesses and consumers in the UK.

While this action will help, to truly tap into the Commonwealth's potential there needs to be dedicated programmes for its young. The issue of youth unemployment has been raised as a key issue at this year's summit, which is why Theresa May will announce action to help.

Boosting trade will in turn boost jobs; tackling the youth unemployment which the Commonwealth knows is a real problem for its youngest citizens. Of the organisation's 2.4 billion citizens, 60% are under 30.

And young people looking to move into the workplace will benefit from a new £3.4million apprenticeship and training programme in the Commonwealth, which will help promote and share best practice across the Commonwealth.

Press release: Syria action – background

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There is a very simple reason why it was right for the UK to join our closest allies in launching strikes against the Assad military machine.

This is about our collective future. It is about the kind of world we want our children to grow up in.

It is about – and exclusively about – whether the world should tolerate the repeated use of chemical weapons and the human suffering they cause.

The problem with such weapons is not just that their effect is hideous. Anyone looking at the pictures from Eastern Ghouta can see the kind of suffering involved: the foaming at the mouth, the floppy bodies of children, and the particular terror those weapons deliberately inspire.

Vile, sick, barbaric though it is to use such weapons – that is not the principal objection. These munitions are not just horrible. They are illegal.

It is now centuries since humanity first recoiled against the use of poison in warfare. The French and the Holy Roman Empire were so disgusted by the use of poisoned bullets they signed a treaty to ban them in 1675.

It is now almost 100 years since the great post World War One treaty to prohibit use of chemical weapons – and in that period we have seen nation after nation sign up to the global consensus that this particular means of killing is evil and should be banned.

Indeed, the universal abhorrence of chemical weapons, and the destruction of declared stockpiles, must be considered one of the great achievements of the modern world.

The global community simply cannot afford to turn a blind eye to what is happening in Syria.

In 2013 the Syrian regime committed to destroy its chemical arsenal while Russia – the mentor of the Assad Regime – guaranteed to oversee the process.

Since then the Assad Regime and Russia has made a complete mockery of that pledge.

A significant body of information, including intelligence, suggests the Assad regime was behind the chemical attack at Douma on April 7 that killed about 75 people and resulted in hundreds of casualties.

Multiple accounts located a regime Mi 18 helicopter in the vicinity at the time. The opposition does not have helicopters and no other actor in the Syrian theatre is thought capable of launching a chemical strike of that scale.

The only reasonable conclusion is that the regime has become so hardened and cynical that it is willing to exploit the extra potential of these weapons for removing entrenched urban resistance – in complete defiance of global disapproval and the norms of civilised behaviour.

The Douma atrocity alone would be enough to demand a response. But it is not a one off.

The Douma massacre is now part of a pattern of use of chemical weapons by the Assad Regime. International investigators mandated by the UN Security Council have found the Assad regime responsible for using chemical weapons in four separate attacks since 2014.

The UK and our allies have done everything in our power to deter the barbaric use of these weapons. The EU has imposed sanctions on key figures linked to chemical weapons use in Syria.

We have tried countless resolutions at the UN. But Russia has repeatedly shielded the Assad Regime from investigation and censure, vetoing six separate UN Security Council resolutions, including torpedoing the UN mandated Investigative Mechanism set up to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Instead, Russia has repeated its lies and obfuscation that we have seen in this country since the attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, including the grotesque assertion that the UK is somehow behind the attack in Douma.

Last year we had a military response from the US, when about 20 Syrian planes were destroyed at the Shayrat airfield after the chemical massacre of civilians at Khan Sheikhoun.

Now the world is forced to act again – not only to protect those who would otherwise fall victim to Assad's monstrosities, but because unless we do so his regime will continue to weaken what has become an effective global taboo, with significant humanitarian consequences for many more.

If we do nothing there will be other people and other governments around the

world who will look at the impunity of Assad and ask themselves: they got away with it – why shouldn't I?

Unless we act there is a risk of moral contamination, a coarsening and corruption of what we have until now thought to be acceptable.

Yes of course it was also right for the UK to stand shoulder to shoulder with America and France – close allies who were instrumental in helping to forge the 28 strong group of countries that expressed their palpable outrage at the Salisbury attack by expelling more than 150 Russian diplomats.

Yes of course there are diplomatic considerations – but this is about more than diplomacy. It is about principle.

And in its specific focus on the use of chemical weapons – and the consequences that must flow – this action is limited, and we must be both acutely aware of those limits and clear about them.

These carefully targeted and calibrated strikes are not designed to intervene in the Syrian civil war or effect regime change.

The action was carried out to alleviate further humanitarian suffering by degrading the Syrian Regime's Chemical Weapons capability and deterring their use.

At a time of understandable tension in our relations with Russia it has been important to stress that this action does not entail some attempt to frustrate Russian strategic objectives in Syria.

In short this does not represent any major escalation of UK or western involvement in Syria – and we should have the courage to be honest about that.

In degrading Assad's chemical weapons capabilities we intend to do what we can to protect his people from that specific form of cruelty.

We are standing up for principle and for civilised values.

We may not end the barbarism – but we are telling the world that there is one type of barbarism that is banned and that deserves to be banned.