

Home Secretary statement on humanitarian support for Ukrainians

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement updating the House on the government's humanitarian response to the terrible, unjust war that Putin is waging in Ukraine.

We are united across this House in the horror at what is happening and the whole country stands with the heroic people of Ukraine.

Mr Speaker, I have literally just come from a meeting with our dear friend and colleague, the Ukrainian Ambassador to London, and I have heard first hand some of the real pressures and tensions inside the country.

Putin must fail in his assault on Ukraine.

Working closely with the Ukrainian Government and allies in the neighbouring region, the United Kingdom is standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine; sending military support, defensive military aid, training thousands of Ukrainian troops, as well as introducing one of the toughest sanctions regimes in the world.

We are supporting NATO partners, pressing for more economic reform and energy independence in Ukraine, banning Aeroflot, and calling for an end to Russian involvement in the SWIFT banking system.

We will continue to think robustly and creatively about what more we all can do.

As I said in the House yesterday, the government will bring forward amendments to visa penalty measures in the Nationality and Borders Bill, so that we can slow down and effectively stop the processing of Russian visas or any state that poses a threat to our national security or the interests of our allies across the world.

The government of Ukraine has requested that the Russian government be suspended from Interpol – a position the UK wholeheartedly endorses and we are rallying other international partners to also call for the same and support.

Mr Speaker, yesterday I announced the first phase of a bespoke humanitarian support package for the people of Ukraine, having listened carefully to the asks and the requests of the Ukrainian Government.

We have already made significant and unprecedented changes to the immigration system.

We have helped hundreds of British nationals and their family members resident in Ukraine to leave the country, with Home Office staff working around the clock to assist them.

The Rt Hon Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford raised a specific case yesterday and I am pleased to confirm that the person concerned has been able to travel to the UK.

Family members of British nationals resident in Ukraine who need a UK visa can apply through the temporary location in Lviv, or through Visa Application Centres in Poland, Moldova, Romania, and Hungary.

We have created additional capacity in all locations at pace, in anticipation of the invasion of Ukraine. This includes a pop-up Visa Application Centre in Rzeszow in Poland, which has provided total capacity currently of well over 3,000 appointments per week.

Our contingency plans have been enacted now and they are expected further to increase total capacity to 6,000 appointments a week, starting this week.

By contrast, demand across these locations is usually approximately 890 biometric appointments per week.

There remains availability for appointments and walk-ins across every location.

Should more capacity be required, we will of course deliver it.

Mr Speaker, I should also add at this stage, we have our rapid deployment teams already in the region and in fact, the FCDO sent them in a few weeks ago to support this whole effort.

I have also removed the usual language requirements and salary thresholds to come to the UK to be with their family members.

And where family members of British nationals do not meet the usual eligibility criteria – but do pass all security checks – we will give them permission to enter the UK outside the usual rules for 12 months.

This means that British nationals and any person settled in the UK can bring over immediate Ukrainian family members. Through this policy alone, an additional 100,000 Ukrainians could be eligible to come to the UK and access work and public services.

There is no limit on the numbers eligible under this route, Mr Speaker.

Anyone in Ukraine intending to apply under the Family Migration route should contact the dedicated 24-hour Home Office line for assistance before applying.

Ukrainian nationals already in the UK have been given the option to switch – free of charge – to a points-based immigration route or a family visa route.

Visas for Ukrainian temporary workers in some sectors are being extended, so they can stay until at least the 31st of December this year.

As I said yesterday, I have heard some members calling for visa waivers.

Russian troops are seeking to infiltrate and merge with Ukrainian forces. Extremists are on the ground and in the region, too. Given this, and also with Putin's willingness to do violence on British soil, and in keeping with our approach, which we retained consistently throughout all emergency evacuations, including that of Afghanistan, we cannot suspend any security or biometric checks on people we welcome to our country. We have a collective duty to keep the British people safe and this approach is based on the strongest security advice.

Mr Speaker, these measures have been designed to enable swift implementation, and that is the point, without the need for legislation or changes to immigration rules. The Ukrainian people need help immediately and we are bringing this in place now.

As outlined by the Prime Minister earlier today, I can also set out phase two of our bespoke humanitarian support package for the people of Ukraine.

Firstly, we are establishing an expansive Ukrainian Family Scheme so that British nationals and people settled in the UK can bring a wider group of family members to the UK, extending eligibility to parents, grandparents, adult offspring, siblings, and their immediate family members.

Again, this scheme will be free.

Those joining family in the UK will be granted leave for an initial period of 12 months. They will be able to work and access public funds.

Secondly, we will establish a humanitarian sponsorship pathway, which will open up a route to the UK for Ukrainians who may not have family ties with the UK but who are able to match with individuals, charities, businesses, and community groups.

Those who come under this scheme will also be granted leave for an initial period of 12 months and they will be able to work and access public services.

The Home Office will work closely with all our international partners on the ground to ensure that displaced Ukrainians in need of a home are supported.

My colleague, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, will work with the devolved administrations to ensure that those who want to sponsor an individual or a family can volunteer and be matched quickly with Ukrainians in need.

There will be no numerical limit on this scheme, and we will welcome as many Ukrainians as wish to come and have matched sponsors.

Making a success of the new humanitarian sponsorship pathway will require a national effort from the entire country. And, Mr Speaker, our country will rise to that challenge.

Mr Speaker, this is a very generous and it is an expansive and unprecedented package. It will mean that the British public and the Ukrainian diaspora can support displaced Ukrainians in the UK until they are able to return to a

free and a sovereign Ukraine.

We are striking a blow for democracy and freedom against tyranny.

Above all, we are doing right by the courageous people of Ukraine.

We will help British nationals and their families to get out of Ukraine safely.

We will support our displaced Ukrainian friends.

We will respond robustly to Russian threats here in the UK.

We, Mr Speaker, will not back down.

We will do what is right.

I commend this statement to the House.