

International COVID Response Oral Statement

With permission Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the UK's support for the global effort to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.

The world is now having to address the biggest threat that it has faced in decades: an invisible killer on a global scale.

Here in the UK, communities across the country are united in their determination to beat it – making their own personal sacrifices by staying at home, protecting our NHS and saving lives.

There is a daunting outlook for countries in the developing world: simultaneously facing a health crisis, a humanitarian crisis and the risk of a protracted economic crisis leading to much greater hardship for years to come.

The threat of famines, exacerbated by the worst locust plague for 70 years, fragile healthcare systems that enable the spread of the disease and economic disruptions risk a much longer and harder road back to recovery than for wealthy countries.

However, through the altruism of the British people and the expertise of our scientists and engineers, the UK is proudly playing a leading role in the global response.

On Monday, together with other world leaders, my Right Honourable Friend, the Prime Minister, co-hosted a virtual Global Coronavirus Response Pledging Conference.

He called on countries around the world to step up their efforts and work together on this, the “most urgent shared endeavour of our lifetimes”.

World leaders responded and some £6.5 billion was pledged for the Covid-19 response, including the UK's own £388 million commitment for vaccines, tests and treatments.

The UK is proud to stand with our international partners – this is a truly global effort and the only way to fight this pandemic is together.

Scientific Response

Mr Speaker, so the UK is an international development superpower, and we are also a scientific and medical world leader. This enables our response to this global pandemic to be greater than the sum of its parts.

From Gloucestershire's Dr Jenner, who laid the foundations for immunology, to our researchers who developed vaccines for measles and Ebola, the UK has led

the scientific response to many global health challenges in the past.

And I am so proud to say that UK-based scientists, such as those at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine are playing key roles in the global response to this deadly new virus.

Scientists in Bedfordshire who developed rapid diagnostic devices to manage the recent Ebola outbreak funded with taxpayers' money through UK AID, are using that expertise to develop new rapid diagnostic tests.

Researchers at Oxford University, funded through CEPI, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, are now progressing to clinical trials with funding from the UK government's Vaccines Taskforce – which is also funding a vaccine trial starting soon at Imperial College.

In partnership with a British success story, AstraZeneca – one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies – our Oxford researchers are working towards their vaccine being manufactured at scale.

But we know that any vaccine might prove to be the solution, so through our DFID aid budget, the UK is the largest single contributor by any country to CEPI's international efforts to find a vaccine. Through this fund, we are working to improve our understanding of the virus and to support scientists around the globe – CEPI is already backing nine potential vaccines.

Mr Speaker, the Foreign Secretary outlined at the launch of the WHO "Access to Covid-19 Tools" Accelerator, that the UK is proud to work with our international partners to ensure new vaccines are accessible to everyone and quickly as possible.

No one will be safe until we are all safe, Mr Speaker. So we will need vaccines against this deadly disease, at home and abroad.

Once a vaccine is found, delivering it globally will be the next big challenge. To help that, we have invested the equivalent of £330 million a year for the next five years in Gavi, the global vaccine alliance that delivers vaccines in 68 of the poorest countries around the world.

And on 4 June the UK will be hosting the Global Vaccines Summit to co-ordinate international investment efforts for Gavi.

Together with the announcement made by the Prime Minister on Monday, that is a combined additional investment in global health security that comes to more than £2 billion – helping combat the spread of this disease.

In investing globally, we are helping to protect our citizens, our families from future waves of infection, and therefore protecting our NHS.

DFID response

The global pandemic is one part of the challenge facing the world. DFID's immediate Coronavirus response to date amounts to £744 million. But this is

on top of our work to pivot much of our existing activity to provide health, humanitarian and economic support where it is needed most – as part of our response to these crises.

A health response that builds on the UK's longstanding record of supporting countries to prepare for and respond to large disease outbreaks, including as the third largest donor to the World Health Organisation.

Investing on the frontier of research into new rapid diagnostics and therapeutics that can detect and treat coronavirus.

Working in partnership with Unilever, we've launched an innovative handwashing campaign that will reach a billion people around the world. A major contribution to global sanitation and hygiene.

With the support of British and international NGOs, and advice from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, we will reach 1 in 7 people around the world with information on the most effective ways to stop the virus spreading and therefore to save lives.

Economic response

We are also working to reduce the global economic impact of the virus by preventing its spread, protecting both the UK public and the stability of our economy.

Last month, the UK together with other G20 countries announced a commitment to suspend debt service payments to the poorest countries until the end of 2020. This will create up to \$12 billion of additional fiscal space.

DFID has also made available up to £150 million to the International Monetary Fund for debt relief.

These measures will enable developing countries to direct greater domestic resources to their own healthcare efforts, helping prevent the virus from spreading around the world.

So, we are supporting developing country governments to make proportionate, evidence-based trade-offs between containing the virus and maintaining open trade. So that essential goods and services, including critical medical and food supplies, can continue to move around the world.

That supports developing countries, but it also means that British consumers get the vital goods they need.

Mr Speaker...

COVID-19 is a global pandemic. It does not respect national borders. Individual efforts will only succeed as part of a global response.

The UK has been playing – and will continue to play – a leading role in galvanising the most effective co-ordinated international action.

In 2017, the scientific community in the UK proudly played a key role in the international response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. I am proud to update the House that we are doing so again.

We are using British expertise and funding to demonstrate leadership internationally. Recognising the needs will be great, we are doing whatever it takes to make sure vaccines, treatments, and technologies are available, to save lives and support economies in the most vulnerable countries to help end the pandemic.

This will help reduce the risk of the world being attacked by a second wave of infection.

So, as the Prime Minister said on Monday, it's humanity against the virus. We are in this together and only together we will prevail.

I commend this statement to the House.