

Repatriation during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: Minister Adams' statement, 29 April 2020

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

With your permission, I would like to make a statement on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our team of experienced diplomats here at home, and in our Embassies and Consulates around the world, continue to work around the clock, using our unparalleled international connections to help overcome this unprecedented challenge.

Now, since the outbreak in Wuhan, our over-riding priority has been to help British travellers get home safely to their loved ones.

And we estimate that over 1.3 million people have returned to the UK since the outbreak via commercial routes.

This has been from countries across the globe. We've seen 200,000 British nationals return from Spain. And 50,000 have returned from Australia in the past month alone.

Keeping commercial options running has required enormous international effort.

We have worked alongside airlines and foreign governments to keep vital routes open and ensure that domestic restrictions don't create a barrier to getting people home.

But as you'll appreciate, Mr Speaker, as countries have increased travel restrictions, often without notice, commercial routes have ceased to be an option for some travellers.

So thanks to a £75 million partnership between this government and airlines, we have now brought back more than 19,000 people on 93 charter flights organised by the Foreign Office from 20 different countries and territories.

And in some instances, this will mean bringing home a few hundred passengers from small countries, like the Gambia, or remote locations, like the outer islands of the Philippines.

In other cases, this has meant returning thousands of British travellers, such as the 10,000 people returned home from India, and 2,000 thus far from Pakistan.

In the next week alone, we will bring back thousands more travellers on further charter flights including from Bangladesh, Nigeria and New Zealand.

Mr Speaker, I'd also like to touch on cruise ship travel. More than 19,000 British passengers were aboard 60 cruise ships when the FCO changed their travel advice on 17 March.

And working with local authorities and cruise operators, the FCO has helped ensure these passengers were able to return home.

We have provided consular assistance to many of them, and in some cases, we have organised direct or supported charters for over 1,500 people.

But for those British people who have chosen to remain in place or are still trying to get home, our consular teams are providing support 24 hours a day.

To ensure timely responses, we have tripled the capacity in our consular contact centres.

Our broader consular effort has been centred around supporting British travellers right across the piece.

We have worked with foreign governments to ensure that British travellers can continue to meet visa, immigration or documentation requirements while they're abroad.

And we are offering financial protection as well, including through the same measures available to British workers and residents here at home, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and access to mortgage holidays.

We are making sure British travellers have access to essential care, including food and accommodation, as well as medical care, this also includes psychosocial support, and we have been working with third sector and external partners to deliver this.

And now, most UK insurers will extend their travel insurance cover, so British travellers actively trying to get home will be covered for emergency medical treatment if they're still stuck abroad at least for 60 days.

Our efforts and our aims show that we are committed to helping every British traveller, no matter where they are in the world.

Mr Speaker, I'd now like to turn to the FCO's role in procurement, particularly and specifically PPE equipment.

With so many other countries in similar circumstances, we are grappling with a global shortage in Personal Protective Equipment.

Yet, thanks to the efforts of our domestic manufacturers, and our work with international partners around the world, we've procured and distributed over a billion items to those on the front line.

Lord Deighton who helped organise the London Olympics, has been brought in to oversee efforts to boost our domestic supply even further.

And in the Foreign Office, we are working tirelessly through our overseas

posts to get medical supplies into the UK.

Mr Speaker, over 350 million items of PPE equipment have been procured through our China network alone and we are working flat out to get orders delivered from, for example, Turkey and Egypt.

We have also distributed over 1500 ventilators, with thousands more ordered and on the way.

In the last week, we have received shipments of more than 4 million IIR masks; and 1 million other masks.

And by the end of today, flights will have touched down with more than half a million masks, more than 350,000 gowns, and more than three quarters of a million face shields.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary and my fellow ministers at the FC0 are on calls with counterparts around the world every day, working to secure new deliveries from abroad with the support of our excellent and tireless diplomatic service.

From the start of the crisis, the UK has played a leading role in tackling the spread of the disease and the world's response to it.

We are uniquely placed to do so as a member of the G7, G20, NATO, the Commonwealth; UN; and as a major donor to the global health system.

And as the Foreign Secretary laid out in his previous statement, our international strategy is focused in four key areas:

Securing a strong and co-ordinated global health response, particularly for the most vulnerable countries.

Accelerating the search for a vaccine, more effective treatments and testing.

Supporting the global economy, keeping trade open and securing critical supply chains.

Keeping transport routes and transit hubs open, to support the flow of freight, aid, medical supplies, and crucially to bring our people home.

I've outlined our support for bringing British nationals home, but would like to touch on our good progress in the other areas.

We are helping vulnerable countries with their response to coronavirus by announcing up to £744m in aid, including for R&D and support to the World Health Organisation, UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross.

And today, my right honourable friend, the International Development Secretary also announced a funding pledge equivalent of £330 million a year over the next five years to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

This will fund the immunisation of 75 million children against other deadly

diseases, supporting the world's poorest countries so they can cope with rising coronavirus cases.

On the COVID-19 vaccine, this Government has already committed £360m as part of our domestic and international effort.

This investment includes a quarter of a billion pounds to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness (CEPI) to support coordinated global research – this is the single largest single contribution by any country.

And we are helping to keep vital trade routes and supply chains open by coordinating closely with allies and partners in the commercial sector.

Finally, the UK has a responsibility to protect the safety and the security of the people of the Overseas Territories, most of whom are British nationals.

So we have been providing tailored support to our Overseas Territories, ensuring that the appropriate resources are provided to them during the coronavirus response.

Mr Speaker, the scale and impact of this pandemic has been unimaginable.

But working alongside our international partners, the UK has been able to demonstrate the kind of leadership, cooperation and collaboration that will get us through this crisis.

Further information