

Speech: Home Secretary speech on measures to tackle child sexual exploitation

It's a great honour to be with you all in London for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

Our 53 countries are home to 2.4 billion people. And over seven decades, our association has helped nations to deepen and strengthen their democracies, by working together in partnership on issues that affect all of us.

Today across the Commonwealth, we face an unprecedented security threat, threats that do not respect borders and require us to work even closer together to tackle them.

We no longer just need to be concerned about the threat of terrorism.

We face security including serious and organised crime, cybercrime, violent extremism, human trafficking and Hostile State Activity.

So I am pleased to be with you today for the first ever Commonwealth security event. The theme for this year's summit is 'Towards a Common Future' and I want to talk a bit today about what the threat picture looks like in the UK, and how we can have a more secure future, and achieve that together.

The threat faced by Commonwealth countries from terrorism is clear to us all.

Last year in the UK, five terrorist attacks took place in London and Manchester. And 36 people were killed, and many more injured.

As Home Secretary, there are various stages of horror and shock you go through when you learn that there has been a terrorist attack.

The first of course is when you hear for the first time what has happened. That moment when you get the initial news about what's gone on. When you learn where the attack has taken place, the casualties the scale of the tragedy.

The 2nd stage of horror is when you learn more about the personal stories of the victims and their loved ones.

And there's one encounter which really sticks in my mind.

It was in the aftermath of the terrorist attack here in London in June 2017, after a van left the road and struck a number of pedestrians on London Bridge. After the van crashed, the three men ran out to the nearby Borough market area and began attacking people enjoying themselves in and around the restaurants and bars

Eight people were killed and 48 injured.

One of the victims was Sara Zelenak, a 21-year-old Australian who had been working in London as a nanny.

She was stabbed while out celebrating getting a new job with a friend.

It was meeting her parents, which I did a few days later, that really brought home to me the agony of losing a loved one in such appalling circumstances.

They told me she had come to London for a once in a lifetime experience.

I really felt their grief.

It's moments like this that really reinforce how important strong national security is.

And in the UK, we continue to disrupt terrorist plots. Since 2017, 10 Islamist terrorist plots and four extreme right wing plots were successfully disrupted.

And under the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, we work to reduce the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from terrorism, so that people can go about their daily lives freely and with confidence.

But the terrorist threat is changing, evolving and moving more quickly than ever. And as the threat we face from terrorism becomes more complex, our strategies need to evolve, and they will continue to do so. For instance, like many of you, we are looking at the issue of online radicalisation more closely than ever before.

But recent events here in the UK are a reminder that terrorism is not the only threat to our national security and prosperity.

Last month's nerve agent attack in Salisbury shows us that we need to be increasingly wary of other states who wish to subvert our democracy, attack our rule of law and are prepared to endanger us with the unchecked use of chemical weapons.

Though the attack in Salisbury has been shocking in its indiscriminate and reckless nature, it is just one part of a progressively worrying picture that we've seen in recent times.

Last year, we saw a number of major cyberattacks including the 'Wannacry' and 'Not Petya' incidents which had significant economic repercussions.

We saw numerous attempts to influence democratic elections through illegal and subversive means.

And we saw significant evidence uncovered of abundant disinformation campaigns being committed in our democracies in an attempt to divide our societies and challenge our values-based approach to domestic and international issues.

But we are determined not to let that become the new normal.

The UK has led the response to this hostile state activity, and we will continue to do so, engaging our friends and partners across the world to provide a coordinated international response to the threat.

We have shown this in our recent response to the Salisbury attack, where we have led the international response to what the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons deemed the first use of a chemical weapons on Western European soil since the Second World War.

And we thank allies who have taken measures in support of the UK's position. The expulsion of more than 150 Russian diplomats from 28 different countries sent a clear message to Russia that its hostility will no longer be tolerated. However, this is not the end of the story, and we stand ready to go even further should Russia wish to continue its blatant aggression towards us or others.

But there's another group who pose a significant risk to our security and our prosperity.

That's the serious and organised criminals.

In the UK there are around 6,000 organised crime groups, comprising approximately 40,000 individuals.

These groups target vulnerable people and ruin the lives of victims and their families, local communities and legitimate businesses. They use online tools and services designed for legitimate purposes – such as end-to-end encryption, cryptocurrencies and the dark web – to facilitate their offending.

Overall, serious and organised crime costs the UK over £24 billion each year.

As the threat evolves rapidly, so must our response.

And I think that there is significant potential for strengthening law enforcement cooperation between Commonwealth countries to tackle serious and organised crime.

Only this morning, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office announced that it is spending nearly half a million pounds to establish a new partnership between the UK's Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre and the Commonwealth Secretariat to help combat illicit flows of firearms.

Significant potential also exists for strengthening co-operation between Commonwealth countries, including through our enhanced use of INTERPOL. I'm delighted that INTERPOL's Secretary General, Jürgen Stock, is here to join us today and we will be hearing from him shortly.

But let's not forget that security is also about safeguarding – safeguarding citizens to make sure they can live freely and without fear.

But it's a sad fact that around the world today, millions of men, women and children are cruelly enslaved and trafficked.

And to combat this too, we need a truly global response.

In September 2017, we announced we would give £150 million to tackle these crimes internationally.

This includes a £33.5m Modern Slavery Fund to tackle trafficking and exploitation in partnership with countries the UK receive a high number of victims from.

And today I'm pleased to announce that we will give a further £5.5m for projects aimed at strengthening the Commonwealth's response to these crimes.

These projects, delivered in countries across the Commonwealth, will work to support the development of human trafficking legislation in parliaments, and will strengthen law enforcement capabilities to disrupt the criminal networks behind human trafficking and identify those most at risk of becoming victims and protect them.

Because we can only hope to succeed in our ambition of combating this detestable crime at home if we work in partnership with our neighbours around the world.

That is also why last year, the UK Prime Minister endorsed a Call to Action to end Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking at the UN General Assembly, alongside over 20 world leaders.

I think there is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to show real leadership on this agenda.

Over 50 countries have now endorsed this Call to Action, including more than a third of the Commonwealth, and more are expected to do so during the Summit.

I encourage all of you to make very clear that these crimes are not acceptable in the 21st century, by endorsing the Call to Action if you have not done so already.

Now, there's another crime which I haven't yet talked about which is a real threat to the security of all of our children and that's the threat of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

We've done a lot of work to tackle this both in the UK and internationally, but today I am pleased to announce that we will be going even further.

We will be taking further measures to combat child sexual exploitation across the Commonwealth.

This will include £2 million of Commonwealth funding for international projects to tackle child sexual exploitation online.

A number of Commonwealth countries will receive a share of the £2 million for projects to teach children and young people how to protect themselves online and to put in the infrastructure to prevent child sexual exploitation.

We will also give an additional £600,000 funding for projects to support UK victims. This will help fund a national helpline for victims and bespoke therapy to help children with learning difficulties to share and recover from their experiences of abuse.

And we have begun the process of ratifying the Lanzarote Convention against Child Sexual Abuse. Ratifying this shows our continued determination to play a global role in tackling this crime across the globe.

I hope that these comments have given some insight into the threats we face here in the UK and the threats we are aiming to tackle abroad as well. I've talked a lot about the importance of working internationally. And that's because I am clear that when we stand together as one Commonwealth, we are better prepared to face the threats which challenge us.

Thank you.