

Speech: Speech by UK Ambassador to Somalia at Hargeisa Book Fair

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am honoured to be here at the Hargeisa International Book Fair on this, my first visit to Somaliland. It is a privilege to address this vibrant, outward-looking and thought-provoking gathering. I congratulate Dr Musse Jama and Ms Ayan Mahmoud on driving this festival from its inception nine years ago to the internationally celebrated fixture it is today and thank them for offering me this opportunity to reaffirm British support for the event.

As we meet at this festival of Somali poetry, influence and ideas, it is right to remember the severe and ongoing drought afflicting the people of Somaliland. To help those most affected, the UK has increased its emergency aid to over \$200m. This support has so far provided safe drinking water and food to some one million people and emergency healthcare to nearly half a million people, including tens of thousands of Somalilanders. I will shortly be seeing some of this work for myself.

Our purpose today is to appreciate the global impact of the Somali cultural heritage and, prompted by the theme of connectivity, I salute the longstanding diaspora and historic ties that bind Somaliland and the UK. The many Somalis in Britain with roots in Somaliland are making a huge contribution to security, democracy and prosperity here in Somaliland. They are also supporting social integration and cohesion in the UK.

In turn, the UK commitment to you, the people of Somaliland, is steadfast. We are the largest international donor to Somaliland. Together with your government and in partnership with many of you, we are helping to improve healthcare, education and other essential services, as well as advocating the full participation of women in public life.

The great Hadraawi, who you will recall spent part of his life in London, observed 'How good it would be to reason clearly, to settle the world into peace, preserve it within its proper bounds'. Thanks to the institutions of democracy we are able to do just that. You have the opportunity this autumn to reinforce Somaliland's reputation as a beacon of democracy with a fourth presidential election.

The UK is pleased to support your independent electoral institution in its efforts to oversee a fair electoral contest. Besides contributing to the registration of voters, the UK is deploying a team of 60 independent election observers to give an impartial view of the election process. Some of them are already here.

But a functioning democratic system is about much more than casting ballots. It is underpinned by rights and institutions. Democracy depends on the media, academics and publishing houses sharing the information we need to develop

and inform critical thinking. Our theme of connectivity reminds us that the internet is a rich seam of information. The November election offers you, the voter, the opportunity to speak your mind and influence decisions to shape your future and that of your children. Journalists have a critical role to play in enabling us to determine how to vote. That is why we support reporters, advocate effective media regulation and champion free speech.

Democracy depends also on the rule of law. In Britain, over 800 years ago, the Magna Carta established the principle that all subjects, including the king, were subject to the rule of law and had a right to a fair trial. That notion remains fundamental to democracies around the world and nurtures the equality we all cherish. In support of the rule of law, we are working with your judges to help ensure any disputes arising from the election are settled swiftly, fairly and in accordance with the law.

'If', as Aristotle said, 'Liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost'. To quote the motto of the first Hargeisa International Book Fair 'Freedom is not for free'. It is incumbent on us all to use opportunities such as this to debate the issues that matter to us, to seek and respect the views of others, and to vote. Democracy is not something that is done. It is something we do.

Your staging of a fair, transparent and timely election, your participation in it and your acceptance of the outcome will help sustain the stability of which you are rightly proud. Beyond the election, the UK looks forward to continuing to support you, the people of Somaliland, as you build on your achievements of recent decades so everyone here gets the education, healthcare and opportunities they crave wherever their heritage, wherever they live. I am confident that, with the support of the diaspora and your many friends, you, the people of Somaliland can fulfil your tremendous potential to prosper in a way that benefits of every man, woman and child here.

Thank you