

UK warns of “catastrophic environmental threat” from hazardous Yemeni oil tanker

The UK warned the UN Security Council today 15th July that the FSO SAFER oil tanker, which has 1.14 million barrels of crude oil on board, poses a devastating threat to the environment. Its poor condition means it is now close to leaking millions of gallons of oil into the Red Sea.

The tanker is moored in Houthi-held territory off the west coast of Yemen, and the UN is seeking access for a mission to assess the tanker’s condition, conduct any possible urgent repairs, and make recommendations for the safe extraction of the oil.

The tanker has the potential to cause an oil spill four times larger than the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989, which involved 257,000 barrels of oil and the effects of which are still being observed over 30 years later.

It would cause unprecedented damage to the surrounding Red Sea marine environment which is home to over 1200 species of fish, of which 10 per cent are only found in the Red Sea. Any spill would also devastate the livelihoods of nearly four million people, with fishing stocks taking 25 years to recover. It would close the vital port of Al Hodeidah for up to six months and cost up to £16 billion to clean up.

If there was a spill, it would make responding to the already challenging humanitarian situation in Yemen even more difficult.

Minister for the Middle East, James Cleverly, said:

The FSO SAFER oil tanker is an environmental disaster waiting to happen and unless UN experts are allowed to access it, we are facing a catastrophic environmental threat.

The Houthis cannot continue to hold the environment and people’s livelihoods to ransom. It is in everyone’s interests, especially the suffering people of Yemen, that this tanker is made safe immediately.

We will continue to use our seat on the UN Security Council to do all we can to stand up for and protect the Yemeni people.

Yemen is suffering from the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, with 24 million people – a staggering 80% of the population – in need of humanitarian assistance. This devastating situation is now being compounded by the rapid spread of coronavirus, with UK-funded modelling estimating that Yemen has already had over one million infections.

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Minister for the Armed Forces James Heapey MP: The Ministry of Defence Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to speak to you today about the MOD's response to the Covid pandemic.

The beginning of the year already feels like a lifetime ago. And it's hard to remember that, back in January, Covid wasn't really in the news.

Equally, what's also, perhaps, hard to remember, is that period when Covid was very much in the news for being overseas but not yet here

With the numbers of cases rising alarmingly in Italy and horrendous pictures on our TV screens of overstretched Italian intensive care units, the nation was genuinely concerned about Covid. About how we would make up for the lack of intensive care beds. And about how would we procure and distribute the billions of items of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that would be needed.

As our plans to respond to the pandemic developed, we were confronted by the challenges of delivering millions of meals to the many vulnerable people who would be shielded.

And, as our response developed further still, we wanted to know how we would achieve the testing of hundreds of thousands of people per day.

Make no mistake. When those lines of activity and the many moving parts, both in the UK and abroad, were brought together this became a logistical and operational challenge the like of which we hadn't seen since the end of World War 2.

Now, all of these challenges, were fundamentally owned by Other Government Departments. And I am keen to say up front that the work of my colleagues in the Department for Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Defra, the Treasury and elsewhere has been truly extraordinary.

That said RUSI has invited me here today to talk about Defence's contribution. So you'll forgive me if I speak with some pride over what we've achieved whilst supporting those other departments...

Whether that was creating new mechanisms for the procurement and distribution of PPE

... developing vast Nightingale hospitals from London to Manchester, Birmingham to Bristol ... so that thousands more intensive care beds were available

... providing additional clinicians from the Defence Medical Services to meet the increasing demand on the wards

... designing and establishing the structures that could test hundreds of thousands of people a day.

Or whether it was embedding planners in every local authority to co-ordinate our response at all levels.

This wasn't our fight and so, rightly, our soldier, sailors, airmen and air women were not the ones on the TV screens.

The real heroes of this crisis were our NHS and our wider public services.

But behind them over 14,000 military and civilian personnel from within the MOD have stood tall. I'm grateful for all they've done.

Today I would like to delve into the detail with five vignettes showing-off just some of this fantastic work.

Let me begin with Major Eb Mukhtar.

In his civilian job Eb leads operations for Google shopping. But in his spare-time he serves with the Reserves as a Staff Officer with National Reserve HQ attached to 16 Air Assault Brigade in Colchester. And when his nation needed him Eb really stepped up.

Realising that the shortage of PPE meant that many smaller health care providers couldn't receive the necessary equipment from their traditional suppliers, Eb, working in conjunction with E-bay, designed an e-portal that allowed up to 45,000 different users including NHS customers and GPs to access the NHS supply chain.

Next I want to draw attention to the efforts of soldiers from 66 Works Group Royal Engineers.

They recognised a gap in testing coverage and developed the concept of the Mobile Testing Unit in just under seven days.

After adopting a 'Scrapheap Challenge' approach in a Royal Engineer workshop, they transformed crew transport vans into the specialised MTUs being used today.

From engineers to our brilliant DSTL scientists working at Porton Down.

They didn't just enhance the UK's testing capacity, they addressed another very basic challenge.

PPE face masks used by the NHS must fit properly, so a special spray helps medics determine whether the masks both fit and can resist droplets expelled by patients.

But the spray used to test those masks was unavailable in the time frame. So a new solution had to be found. Enter DSTL. They developed and manufactured sufficient spray to help tackle this challenge and protect NHS clinicians on the frontline.

Meanwhile, our colleagues over at Defence Equipment and Support were immensely active in procurement.

They established a special team that enabled the Department for Health and Social Care to approve and place an order for almost 10 billion items of PPE – many hard to source – worth £5.3 billion with suppliers across the world.

Through their Defence Logistic Hub at Donnington, they also distributed more than 10,500 different pieces of critical medical care including more than 3,700 ventilators.

Not only did they adapt Air Separation Units used by aircrew to treat COVID-19 patients, but they worked with industry and the RAF to use 3-D printing technology to improve face masks for frontline NHS staff.

Finally, there is what CDS likes to call our neural network.

By which he means the embedded expertise that we plugged into Public Health England and the NHS, and into our national, regional and local partner organisations.

Between them they helped bolster plans to delay, contain and manage the impact of the virus across different sectors.

They brought specialist assistance in everything from medical, logistics and engineering to data analytics, problem solving and information management.

Together they ensured the national response functioned at scale and moved at pace.

But it would be wrong for me to imply our people were exclusively busy on the home front.

They also provided tireless support to local government and civil authorities in our overseas territories.

In Gibraltar, they assisted with logistics and planning as well as bringing in essential food and medicine.

In the Falkland Islands, they brought their medical expertise as well as supplies and an oxygen generation plant.

After departing earlier than planned, the crew of RFA Argus and HMS Medway have spent the last few months supporting countries in the Caribbean tackling Coronavirus. And they are still there now – ready to assist in any relief effort required during hurricane season.

In Ascension and St Helena, our people delivered vital kit and in the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Cayman Islands they provided essential security assistance.

Now we're on the road to getting Coronavirus effectively under control in the UK, the question for us is how we support other countries around the globe who are still at the peak of the pandemic.

Throughout this unprecedented crisis, our Armed Forces have continued to maintain our nation's resilience.

Our adversaries have continued to test us during this difficult time and, if anything, the global environment has become even more competitive.

But our brave Defence personnel have continued to keep our nation safe, maintaining our nuclear deterrent and protecting our sovereign airspace and territorial waters while countering the international terrorist threat from Daesh and deterring malign state and non-state actors.

Even as Coronavirus raged, our aircraft continued to police NATO airspace.

Our flagship aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, was able to remain at sea for over 10 weeks so that her crew could complete operational training with minimal risk of infection – taking us one step closer to the carrier strike capability that can project British Influence across the globe.

All the while, we have continued training and generating the forces required for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, even if the reduced tempo meant they haven't yet needed to deploy.

And we have done so in a disciplined way – respecting social distancing and minimising the risk to our people.

All this has been a monumental effort.

And today is my opportunity to place on record our appreciation for the awesome work of our military and civilian workforce.

Those who put duty to our country ahead of spending time with their families during the pandemic.

Those who never stopped stepping up.

And – arguably even more impressively – those who quietly worked in the background keeping the Defence of our nation going whilst the nation's

attention was on Covid-19.

Thank you all for keeping us safe.

But, ladies and gentlemen, RUSI is a serious academic institution and you haven't invited me to speak to you simply to express my pride in the exceptional effort of our Armed Forces.

You want me, rightly, to offer some more considered thoughts on what we can learn from this crisis.

Moreover, there will be lessons we must learn around the resilience of defence and the nation which should inform our Integrated Review of foreign, defence, security and development policy.

So now let me touch on just a few of those lessons:

First, there is the importance of mass.

As was widely reported 20,000 service personnel were placed at high readiness during the crisis. Including

...1,000 people standing by in case our prison service needed support

...1,500 drivers ready to deliver essential supplies

...and 10,000 individuals able to step in at short notice to support the police.

In the end none of those contingencies were activated and the highest number of service personnel deployed in response to Covid at any one time was 4,820 – the majority of which are involved in the testing process.

But the fact we've not used the full 20,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen who were put at readiness...shouldn't lead us to conclude that they were not important to the government's response.

On the contrary, I recall vividly from those early ministerial implementation groups the scale of the contingencies the government thought it might need.

And the ability of the MOD to step up and say "we've got this" offered some easy answers to an otherwise extraordinarily complicated challenge.

In Australia, the design of the force is in part driven by homeland resilience requirements. And whilst I don't think that is the answer here, there's no escaping the fact that the ability to generate thousands of people to do anything from the swabbing of throats to the stuffing of sandbags in a time of crisis is a reassurance to us all.

Second, beyond the simple and quick availability of mass, Covid has demonstrated that Defence has the ability to draw on a wide range of operational and technical expertise.

Although we have capabilities principally to achieve our military aims, it

has been satisfying to see how transferable those skill sets have been in the civilian environment during our pandemic response.

Our logisticians, engineers, drivers and medics, scientists, planners, intelligent analysts, communication specialists, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear specialists...have all been involved and added value in surprising ways.

I think we've been surprised ourselves by how our contribution to this crisis has really been about brains over brawn. And it goes to show how modern Armed Forces need mass but that mass achieves nothing without battle winning technical know-how

Which leads me to my third lesson and that is that we cannot hold that breadth of expertise exclusively within the regular Armed Forces. And so we will need to ensure that we recruit and retain the eclectic skill-set that has proven so valuable...often within the Reserve.

This Integrated Review was always going to look at how we can further break down barriers between Regulars and Reserves...and how we generate a wider sort of expertise within our people...irrespective of their term of service.

The fact that some of the real heroes of the military response over the past four months have been Reservists really rams home the need to do this.

Finally, outside of times of crisis, we must maintain stronger relationships with the NHS, local authorities and other parts of the public sector.

Before my ministerial colleagues from other departments start to twitch; this is not an MOD land grab.

During the pandemic we forged strong partnerships at scale in double time.

We built up trust and mutual respect with our counterparts. We can't afford to lose that connection.

So we must make sure the appropriate people in our organisation retain an awareness of the way our public services work so that, whenever we have to work together again in future, whatever the challenges of tomorrow might be, we have maintained that trust, that understanding, that unity of purpose and that sense of belonging to one team.

Interestingly, this is a network that won't just be to the advantage of our homeland resilience.

As we move into a new age of great power competition it is the fusion of effort across Whitehall, allowing us to successfully compete with our adversaries and sow mutual understanding and awareness between departments, that will give us an edge away from home as well.

To conclude: Planning for sudden, fast-moving events like pandemics is the military's stock in trade.

We have tried and tested systems in place.

These were the systems we drew on when we helped co-ordinate the response to Foot and Mouth disease.

These were the systems we turned to when it came to security for the London 2012 Olympics.

These were the systems that made sure we had large numbers of military personnel at readiness during preparations for a 'no-deal' Brexit.

And these were the systems that made sure we could come to the aid of the citizens of Salisbury after the use of Novichok on British streets back in 2018.

Defence is good at this stuff! And our people have done a great job over the past few months.

In the midst of a deadly pandemic, in the middle of the greatest crisis we've faced in more than half a century...Defence has once more held firm and proven its worth.

We might now be in the 'new normal', bringing inevitable instability and insecurity

But we should draw enormous confidence from the fact that our UK Armed Forces have shown their mettle and proved that they are trained and ready to respond... wherever and whenever the country requires.

I finish, however, with a word of caution. History teaches us that crisis brings economic instability and economic instability brings insecurity. At times of insecurity Defence is at its busiest.

So it should come as no surprise to all of you that as we draw down our response to the pandemic and generate forces at readiness – just in case there is a second wave – the MOD is already recocked...and generating the military solution our country may need in the uncertain world that lies ahead.

[UN Human Rights Council 44: Interactive Dialogue with the SR on Contemporary Forms of Racism](#)

Thank you, Madame President.

There is no place in society for racism. The British Government is committed

to combatting all forms of racism, both at home and abroad; and to promoting respect, which is the foundation of community cohesion.

Internationally, we believe that one of the most effective ways to tackle injustices and advocate for respect amongst different ethnic groups is to encourage countries to uphold their human rights obligations, particularly through institutions such as the United Nations.

The UK is firmly committed to participating actively with those UN mechanisms – like yours – that can make a real difference on racism, as well as speaking out against instances of racism, prejudice and hatred.

At home, we have made great strides towards becoming a fairer and more inclusive society, but we have further to go. The Prime Minister recently announced a new commission to look at inequality in the UK, demonstrating our commitment to doing more to address this issue.

Madame President, this year, we have all witnessed a global movement calling for racial equality. How can we make better use of existing mechanisms to listen and engage in conversations about racism and equality?

Many members of the international community have re-affirmed their pledges to tackling racism. But how can we learn from one another's efforts, to ensure best practice is shared internationally?

Thank you.

[Prvt Hammond receives letter from HRH The Prince of Wales](#)

HRH The Prince of Wales has honoured 95-year-old World War Two veteran Private Joseph Hammond for his contribution to Ghana's coronavirus recovery. Inspired by the UK's Captain Sir Thomas Moore, Private Hammond walked two miles every day for a week in early May to raise money for Ghanaian veterans and frontline health-workers impacted by the global pandemic. Private Hammond, like Sir Thomas Moore also fought in Myanmar during World War Two.

Deputy British High Commissioner Thomas Hartley and British Defence Attaché to Ghana Lieutenant Colonel Alastair Mckechnie visited Private Hammond at his home in Osu to deliver a handwritten letter from The Prince praising Private Hammond's efforts and offering a donation to the cause.

After visiting Private Hammond Deputy British High Commissioner Thomas Hartley said:

Even at 95 years young it is clear that nothing will slow Private

Hammond's commitment to serve his country. His walk has raised hundreds of thousands of cedis for health workers and veterans across Africa, and inspired many across Ghana to support their own communities too.

I am delighted that I could present Private Hammond with a Point of Light award from HM the Queen, and deliver a personal letter and a private donation from HRH The Prince of Wales to Private Hammond. The amount of support for his cause is incredible and it was a privilege to convey the message from His Royal Highness. It was humbling to see Private Hammond visibly moved. We all hope the support will inspire others to donate too.

His Royal Highness also congratulated Private Hammond for the Commonwealth Points of Light Award that he received from Her Majesty The Queen in June for his fundraising work. Commonwealth Points of Light Awards are given to people throughout the Commonwealth by The Queen as Head of the Commonwealth, to thank inspirational volunteers across the 53 Commonwealth nations for the difference they have made to their communities and beyond. Mr Hartley and Lieutenant Colonel McKechnie also delivered Private Hammond's Points of Light certificate to him.

Defence Attaché Colonel Alastair McKechnie said:

Private Hammond walked to support the hardest hit by Covid-19, he is an inspiration to me, Ghanaians and the world.

Deserving of this 144th Commonwealth Points of Light certificate and letter from Prince Charles.

The Duke of Sussex Prince Harry also wrote to Private Hammond in June recognising his contribution to veterans across Ghana, The Duke said:

Even at 95 years young I imagine it was not an easy task...However, given the service and selflessness you have demonstrated throughout your life, it does not surprise me that you would take on a challenge such as this – and that you wanted to walk even more miles. As you said yourself, it is amazing!"

Private Hammond met Prince Harry during at Westminster Abbey in London last year.

Private Hammond has now raised more than £40,000, and is working to continue his fundraising efforts with the hope of raising half a million pounds for his cause.

Mapping recovery through environmental sustainability

Thank you very much. It's an honour to be joining you all today, and it's a particular honour to follow Honourable Pamela Castillo from Costa Rica, which is one of the great environmental examples of the world, doing extraordinary work on many levels. I hope everyone is safe and well in these difficult times.

First thing I wanted to say is an obvious thing to say, and that is that COVID-19 and the effects of this pandemic are going to be felt for many, many years to come. It has brutally exposed our vulnerabilities and it is – or it should be, at least – a wake up call.

In the narrow sense, we have already known for a very long time that the majority of new infections and diseases, many of them household name diseases, are zoonotic. So we know that link exists, and yet we've done very little to either reduce or mitigate that risk over the years. But the wake up call goes much, much wider than that. It goes wider than pandemics or zoonosis. The crisis is itself a symptom of our dysfunctional relationship with the natural world. And terrible though the experience has been for many, many families around the world, the truth is that the effects will be dwarfed by the effects of climate change and environmental degradation unless we act very quickly and decisively.

And the news is relentless and stark; around a million species now face extinction, many of them within decades. Every minute we're told the world loses approximately 30 football pitches with the forests and our oceans no better – warmer, more acidic, increasingly polluted, choked up with plastic. Only this month, the IUCN warned that species from North Atlantic Right Whales to African Primates are fading under the pressure that they're under.

And it is an ecological tragedy, but it is also a human disaster as well: locusts, drought, lethal temperatures, cyclones, dwindling fish stocks, disease and so on.

For the first time in its 15 year history, environmental risks filled the top five places of the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report. And the IPCC, the IPBES, the Global Commission on Adaptation, Professor Desgupta's review, they all tell the same somber story. We are undermining our very foundations and it makes as little sense ecologically as it does economically because it really shouldn't need saying but it sometimes does: we depend, all of us, completely on the world around us. Over a billion people, for example, depend on forests for their livelihoods directly. Ultimately, of course, we all depend on it. And yet their value barely registers. The Amazon, for instance, today is worth more dead than it is alive. And the financial incentives that destroy forests outstripped those in favour of their conservation and

protection by around 40 to one – possibly much more.

COVID-19 therefore gives us an opportunity, I think, to begin to correct that imbalance. As co-host of the next Climate COP, the UK is going to encourage countries to move beyond treating climate change and environmental degradation as just one of many tasks facing government – or even worse, putting that task to one side as we frantically tried to crank up our economies postcode. We instead need to inextricably combine, tackling this existential crisis with the need to rebuild following coronavirus. Because if we get this right, our recovery from the crisis could transform our cities. It could reconcile our economies with nature. It could bring us closer to living within nature's means. The transition to net zero, I think, could be one of the great stories of the 21st century. Countries are already designing their economic recovery packages. So far governments around the world have committed around \$9 trillion to COVID recovery. And how they choose to spend those funds will have ramifications for decades. We can stick with the status quo of bailing out high carbon, environmentally damaging industries and locking in decades of environmental destruction, carbon emissions, or we can choose to make environmental sustainability and resilience the lens through which we map out our recovery. And I'm delighted, you won't be surprised to hear that our own Prime Minister is committed to build back better, build back greener.

The second point that I wanted to make is that it makes no sense for us to treat climate change and environmental degradation as separate issues. You cannot tackle one without also tackling the other. And an obvious example is forests. In addition to providing livelihoods for over a billion people and a home to some 80 percent of the world's terrestrial biodiversity, deforestation is the second biggest source of emissions. Now we're told that nature-based solutions could provide up to a third of the cost effective climate change mitigation that we need over the next decade, while also helping communities adapt to become more resilient. In truth, it's probably a lot more than a third. But despite that huge contribution, nature-based solutions currently attract a measly three percent, just marginally less than three percent of global climate funding. And that makes no sense whatsoever. So as COP hosts, our focus, of course, will be on clean energy, zero emissions vehicles, finance, adaptation and resilience but at its core will be a major emphasis on nature.

At home, we are already switching our agricultural subsidies away from rewarding destruction towards a system of public money in return for public goods like environmental stewardship. We've established a new £640 million Nature for Climate Fund to help protect and restore our forests and peatlands. We've doubled our international climate finance to £11.6 billion and we're going to be spending a significant part of the uplift on nature. And we're going to be asking other countries to do the same.

But the cost of renewing and protecting nature is vastly more than public money can provide and we know that. Just as for carbon, we need to attach a value to nature recovery and a cost to its destruction. I know the Seychelles have led the way on Blue Bonds, for example. We need to tackle those perverse incentives. Consider, for example, that agriculture causes around 80

percent of natural ecosystem conversion, including deforestation and yet the top 50 fruit producing countries in the world spend around \$700 billion a year in support for often destructive land use. Imagine the impact if global support shifted in favour of sustainability, as we are doing here in the UK. That's over four times the budget of all the world's aid agencies combined. It would be huge.

Equally, we're determined to address the fact that our ecological footprint here in the UK extends vastly beyond our shores. The commodities we import alone come with devastating levels of deforestation. So we will clean up our own supply chains and work directly with other countries, consumer and producer countries, to deliver change internationally. I note that China is committed to taking steps to exclude illegal forest products from its own gigantic supply chains. So I encourage them to really pursue that course of action. If we get it right we can protect forests and livelihoods and consumer and producer countries around the world. I'm convinced that the UK can make a meaningful difference, perhaps even turn the tide as hosts of COP26 in 2021. With nature as a core priority, clearly we're going to be working very closely with the Chinese as hosts the CBD.

We're using this extended run-up that we now have as a consequence of coronavirus to build a critical mass of countries willing to go much further on setting ambitious targets to protect land and sea, to clean our supply chains, to tackle marine plastic, to transform land use subsidies to reach net zero emissions, and to dramatically increase support for nature-based solutions. It's wonderful, incidentally, to have Belize, the Seychelles and Costa Rica in our Global Ocean Alliance to protect at least 30 percent of the ocean by 2030. Please do encourage your colleagues and friends from other countries to sign up as well.

This is the moment, I think, for a seismic shift. As every nation renews and rebuilds, as we all must, we can turn this experience to the good by making environmental sustainability and resilience the lens through which we map out our recovery. We can and we must now reset our relationship with this, the only planet that can sustain us. We have all the tools we need. We need to start using them.

Thank you very much.