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My Lords,

During the Statement on Ebola Outbreak: Democratic of the Congo, on Monday 20 May, noble Lords raised several points which I was unable to respond to at the time and I promised to write.

I was asked for more information about the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and Red Crescent Societies funding appeal. I am pleased to let you know that during her visit to the DRC on 26 and 27 May, the Minister of State for Africa, Harriet Baldwin, announced that new UK Aid funding would go to support IFRC's work on safe and dignified burials. This new support will provide burial teams with essential protective equipment and will be used to socialise local communities to the risks associated with burials in a culturally sensitive way – this knowledge and use of preventative measures will allow more involvement in the funerals of their loved ones.

Baroness Northover quite rightly praised the bravery and commitment of health workers who are helping fight this deadly disease on the ground, Congolese and international alike. As I mentioned in the House, the UK Public Health Rapid Support Team have provided specialist staff into the response, and the Secretary of State for International Development is in the process of considering further deployments to the region. Baroness Northover will also be pleased to hear that Professor Chris Whitty, who she knows well from her time as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at DFID, is heavily involved in the UK's response in his role as Chief Scientific Adviser for the Department of Health and Social Care. Fortunately, the risk to the UK remains negligible-very low, as assessed by Public Health England.

Lord Patel asked about vaccines. Thus far, the experimental Merck vaccine (rVSV-ZEBOV-GP) has been deployed to good effect in the response using ring vaccination. During the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in west Africa, DFID, working in partnership with the Wellcome Trust, commissioned several research studies, amounting to over £5m of UK Aid funding, including work to test the effectiveness of the Merck vaccine. Baroness Northover correctly identified that part of this included trials at the Jenner Institute at Oxford University. Over 125,000 people have been vaccinated in the DRC, and more in the surrounding region, particularly at-risk health workers. The WHO monitors the situation regarding vaccine stockpiles on a weekly basis. To date, there has been no gap experienced in the vaccine doses required in the DRC. The WHO Strategic Advisory Group of

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Experts (SAGE) on Immunisation recently recommended changes to the vaccination protocols to address the challenges of North Kivu province.

As has been pointed out previously by the Secretary of State for International Development, the UK has been a major supporter of this response from the very start. UK Aid funding has gone to support the whole range of WHO and UNICEF activities as part of the Strategic Response Plan. This includes setting up treatment centres, carrying out vital checks, delivering vaccination, improving infection prevention and control, enhancing preparedness in currently unaffected areas and giving support to survivors, including children. Local ophthalmologists are learning to provide specialized care to Ebola survivors, psychosocial support is being offered, while survivors have been contributing to the response by acting as community volunteers in health facilities. Moreover, this support complements ongoing work undertaken by DFID in DRC to improve health systems, water, sanitation and hygiene, and outbreak preparedness.

Baroness Marsham asked about preventing the virus spreading and whether schools are closed as a result. Unlike in Sierra Leone, schools in North Kivu and Ituri currently remain open as they have not thus far been identified as a major source of transmission. In west Africa, the international community learnt that school closure can have many negative long-lasting effects on children and the surrounding community, so any decision to do so this time would have to be taken very carefully. However, our support to UNICEF helps fund infection prevention and control work in schools nearby confirmed cases and, although any decision to close schools ultimately rests with the Government of DRC, this is something the UK monitors carefully.

The Earl of Sandwich asked particularly about funding to the response. UK funding for this response is channelled as grants through the WHO, UNICEF or direct implementing partners, all of whom work under the Strategic Response Plan. He was right to raise the situation of Sierra Leone. While the country is not currently in debt distress, it is at high risk. UK bilateral aid to Sierra Leone therefore includes ongoing support to increase revenue generation and improve public financial management to help address their debt position.

The UK is taking this outbreak extremely seriously. Not only are we providing funding and technical support, but we are urging other international donors to step up in terms of their engagement – momentum must be maintained if we are to help the people of the DRC end the outbreak.

I hope you find this letter helpful. I will also place a copy in the House library.

*Yours sincerely,
Annaser Su. Goldie*

BARONESS GOLDIE