



Department
for International
Development



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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House of Lords
London
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My Lords,

On Monday 18 May, during the debate on the UK's international response to COVID-19, I committed to write to address remaining points I was not able to answer in the time allocated. I'm afraid this is a fairly lengthy letter given the number of contributions to the debate, but I was keen to address all the important points raised.

Lord German asked what steps the UK Government is taking to ensure the effectiveness of a system of co-operation through shared institutions. Lord Monks asked about funding for the \$6.7 billion UN COVID-19 appeal. Baroness Northover and Lord St John of Bletso asked if we agree that we must work with our European allies to build a more co-ordinated response to the current situation and for the future. The Government fully agrees on the importance of greater multilateral cooperation to fight COVID-19. We are working closely with international partners including the EU, G7, G20, the UN and other multilateral institutions to call for coordinated global action and ambitious funding commitments, particularly to address the needs of the most vulnerable countries and peoples according to the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

So far, we have committed up to £764 million of UK aid to support the global efforts to combat the outbreak of COVID-19, including £145 million for UN appeals. We recently co-hosted the Global Coronavirus Response Summit with the EU and other European partners. The Secretary of State, alongside her Canadian counterpart, has established an informal Development Ministers' Contact Group that includes our European partners. We are also working closely with our partners in Europe and beyond ahead of the UK-hosted Global Vaccine Summit on 4 June.

The Prime Minister and senior Ministers are in regular contact with their opposite numbers across the world. As co-chairs of the G20 Framework Working Group, we (with India) have also secured agreement for an ambitious Action Plan to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, that (among other things) calls for rapid implementation of the \$200 billion support package for vulnerable countries, through the World Bank Group and Regional Development Banks.

As a leading donor to the COVID-19 global response and one of the biggest humanitarian donors globally, we are also ensuring that our support goes to those who need it the most, including marginalised communities, women and girls, and refugees.

Lord Blencathra, Lord Hannay, Baroness Northover, Lord Alton and Lord Rennard raised the role of China. The UK's approach to China remains clear-eyed and rooted in our values and interests. Right now, our focus remains on the immediate response and working alongside other countries, including China, to stop the spread of the virus and save lives. The Government has always stressed that for all countries, including China, transparency and accuracy of information is an essential part of an effective global response. Without this, we risk damaging our ability to prevent another pandemic.

Lord Hussain asked about the impacts of the suspension of funding to the WHO by the US and how to address the potential shortfall. The UK is the second largest state donor to the WHO and have already committed £75 million to help the organisation lead international efforts to stop the spread of the virus and end the pandemic. We will continue to monitor the needs of key agencies working on the international response, including WHO, OCHA and others.

Lord Alton asked about the Christian community in Pakistan during the COVID-19 crisis. DFID Pakistan is paying close attention and working to ensure that all COVID-19 assistance is inclusive and does not discriminate on religious grounds. We are actively engaged with the Government of Pakistan to shape their COVID-19 response so that those most at risk of being left behind, including religious and other minority groups, can receive assistance. Through our cross-government work on freedom of religion or belief in Pakistan, we promote more inclusive approaches and legislation to stop forced conversions and safeguard minority rights. The FCO, for example, is working for enactment of the Christian Marriage and Divorce Bill.

I share Lord Alton's concerns regarding incidents reported by International Christian Concern, the National Commission for Justice and Peace and the media. We welcome the establishment of the Pakistani Government's Ehsaas Rashan Portal, which seeks to connect the private sector and civil society organisations with those most in need of assistance. We will continue to monitor the situation closely and take action to ensure that any incidents of exclusion of minorities from aid distribution or forced conversions are raised for the attention of appropriate government or donor coordination mechanisms.

The Lord Bishop of St Albans and the Lord of Bishop of Durham asked about our plans to work with local community leaders, including faith-based communities and church leaders on COVID-19 awareness and containment. Faith groups are key policy and delivery partners for our development work. The Ebola crisis showed us that faith groups are among the first to respond and can play an essential and effective role in behaviour change to reduce infection, illness and death during epidemics. As such, we are committed to working with and alongside faith groups to meet the challenges posed to both the UK and internationally by COVID-19. DFID funding for civil society includes faith groups, as we recognise the contribution, they can make to poverty reduction through provision of services, humanitarian assistance and improving accountability.

The Lord Bishop of Durham and Lord Robathan raised the issue of fake news and misinformation, which has a detrimental effect on containing the virus in developing countries. Building on our experience from the 2015 Ebola outbreak in Africa, we are challenging harmful misinformation about the virus at source in South and South East Asia and Africa before it can spread worldwide. DFID has provided £500,000 of UK funding to the Humanitarian-to-Humanitarian (H2H) Network, made up of organisations such as BBC Media Action which address the spread of misinformation during epidemics.

Lord Chidgey asked about our work to tackle COVID-19 in Africa. In addition to the information I gave in my response, since the debate we have announced a further £20 million of funding to the African Union's COVID-19 Response Fund, which includes an initiative to provide 10 million tests over 6 months.

Baroness Smith asked how the Government can assist with the availability of vaccines in the Global South. We are at the forefront of global efforts to ensure equitable access to potential COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and tests. We have committed over £313 million of UK aid to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Wellcome Therapeutics Accelerator and the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics. CEPI, for example, will develop a portfolio of COVID-19 vaccines that, once available, will be available to all. CEPI works with partners to ensure equitable access. This funding, alongside our £330 million per year pledge to GAVI, the Global Vaccine Alliance, will help drive development, manufacture and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and tests for people across the world, including in developing countries.

Lord Holmes asked about the involvement of the UK tech sector in our international COVID-19 response. Through Partnerships for Development, DFID is funding the Government Digital Service to build partnerships with developing country governments and share learning on how digital technologies and platforms can be used to improve access to and quality of public services. This initiative will help governments to better digitally prepare and manage their COVID-19 responses as well as build the digital foundations to respond to future crises. DFID is also using tech across different programme responses, such as remote learning tech to keep children in school, and mobile phone network data and mobile-enabled solutions. Our Frontier Tech COVID action calls are catalysing the tech innovation pipeline for critical COVID-19 interventions across different fields including data analysis and oxygen therapy.

Lord Holmes and Lord Bilimoria asked about COVID-19 tracking apps and interoperability across different countries. The new NHS COVID-19 app will work alongside swab testing and enhanced contact tracing services to minimise the spread of the virus. Developed by NHSX and a team of world-leading scientists and doctors, the app is designed to significantly improve the effectiveness of contact tracing, to rapidly identify people most at risk of infection so they can protect themselves and their communities. This work draws on approaches used by other countries. At this stage, our primary focus is on developing a system that can be deployed at scale across the UK. Ultimately, we will also seek to ensure that apps deployed in the UK can be interoperable at a broader level.

Baroness Blackstone raised the issue of climate change in developing countries. Climate change poses a significant risk to agriculture, food security and livelihoods. We remain committed to helping developing countries adapt to climate change, to mitigate impacts and avoid environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. Our international climate finance has already helped over 57 million people cope with climate change impacts.

To respond to COVID-19 impacts on agriculture and food security, we are reviewing and flexing existing programmes so they can continue to address the underlying causes of hunger and food insecurity, for example through our bilateral Commercial Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusiness and multilateral Global Agriculture and Food Security Programmes. Through our wider climate and environment portfolio, we continue to invest in building resilient global supply chains, helping to secure sustained improvements to land and forest governance and providing more resilient, diversified livelihoods for small-scale farmers. UK funded research into climate-resilient crops is now also in use in many agricultural-dependent economies. We look forward to co-hosting COP 26 next year, to bring about greater ambition and transformative global action on the climate agenda.

Baroness Blackstone, Baroness Smith, Baroness Jay, Lord Hannay, Baroness Sheehan and Lord Collins raised the issue of debt relief and the UK's international economic response. The UK, alongside the G20 and the Paris Club of official creditors, has already committed to a temporary suspension of debt service repayments from the poorest countries. This official sector effort could provide up to \$12 billion of additional fiscal space until the end of the year, allowing countries to redirect finances towards mitigating the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. In the future, some countries, especially those entering the crisis with significant debt vulnerabilities, may require debt relief. If debts do require restructuring or reduction, this will need to be done evenly amongst creditors, including non-Paris Club G20 creditors and the private sector. We continue to work with out partners in this area.

In terms of supply chains and SMEs, hundreds of thousands of companies will need urgent working capital to survive the market disruption caused by the pandemic. Without government subsidies, these industries will have to look to local banks and microfinance institutions, who are also facing a liquidity crunch. To inject additional liquidity into these markets, the CDC – the UK's Development Finance Institution - is stepping up its own trade and supply chain finance operations with existing partner banks to quickly get money where it is needed.

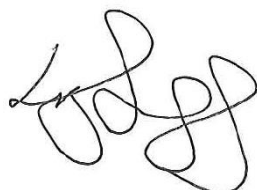
Viscount Bridgeman asked about appointing a Royal Commission to review our NHS and identify best practice. First, I want to recognise the incredible efforts of NHS and care staff who have ensured that our health and care systems have not been overwhelmed by the pandemic. The NHS continues to face significant COVID-19 demand and continues to focus on providing world leading care for COVID-19 patients and keeping NHS services open for non-COVID-19 patients. As and when we see case numbers decrease, we can think about how we support the NHS through recovery and transformation. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) will support the NHS through this process. Given ongoing significant pressures facing the service, DHSC is considering how best to conduct a comprehensive review of the COVID-19 response. Timing will be essential, to ensure that the NHS is able to continue its primary objective of protecting and saving lives. We would welcome external support and challenge to such a review in due course.

Lord Turnberg asked about the immigration health surcharge (IHS) for NHS staff. As the Noble Lord will have seen, on 21 May the Prime Minister asked the Home Office and DHSC to ensure that frontline health and care staff are made exempt from paying the IHS. The purpose of the IHS remains the same, to ensure that those who benefit from the NHS have paid into it, however it is right that frontline health and care workers are exempt from the charge as they contribute through their work. This is another step we have taken to show how we value the contribution of overseas health and care staff.

Lord Lucas asked about overseas alumni of UK schools and universities. Through the UK Commonwealth Scholarship programme, the Government supports scholars and fellows in developing countries to attend UK universities. When students return to their home countries, we establish and maintain alumni networks, events and programmes, to encourage skill sharing and professional development. Many scholars go on to take up senior leadership positions in their home countries, and the strong bond they have formed with the UK enhances our direct and indirect influence abroad. We are proud of Chevening alumni working directly to address COVID-19 – their stories are available on the Chevening website. For those unable to study abroad, UK aid also supports education systems in developing countries. For example, our Strategic Partnership for Higher Education, Innovation and Reform Programme will benefit more than 78,000 students, 1,620 academics and 600 teachers in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Lord Bilimoria asked if there will be quarantine-free bubbles for cross-border travel. We are exploring alternatives to requirements for passengers arriving into the UK to self-isolate. This includes risk-based approaches by departure airport or country where there could be a mutual agreement between participating countries not to require additional measures, if there were a common set of measures to minimise the risk of the transmission of COVID-19 and the rate of infection was low. Ultimately, we will be guided by the science in any decision to pursue travel corridors, and public health and our NHS will always come first.

I hope this further information is helpful and would like to again thank everyone who took part in the wide-ranging and interesting debate. I have copied this letter to all those who participated in the debate, and a copy of this letter will be placed in the House Library.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sugg', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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