

Speech: UK-Afghanistan relations are in extraordinarily good shape: Speech by Sir Nicholas Kay

I welcome you and thank you for joining us to celebrate 92nd Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Why are we here tonight? Why do we and all embassies have this ritual of a National day? I offer two reasons.

First, for us it's all about the Queen.

We are here today to celebrate the official birthday of Her Majesty the Queen, who this year has reached the grand age of 92. I had the enormous privilege and great pleasure of meeting her last month, and I can assure you, she is the bright, kind and very insightful lady you see in this photograph. Her sense of duty, hard work and resilience over the last 76 years as Queen is an inspiration to many. It is hard to imagine that she started the job on 6 Feb 1952 – I imagine before most of us were born.

Second, this evening is a chance for us to share with friends and colleagues some hospitality and good cheer and to reflect – just briefly – on the state of the friendship between our two peoples and countries.

On this let me just say that UK-Afghan relations are, like HM the Queen, in extraordinarily good shape: vigorous, healthy, long-standing yet modern. This week we had our Foreign Secretary in Kabul; currently the First Lady is in London; and HE Dr Abdullah was in UK two weeks ago. Do not worry, I am not going to recite a litany of statistics and examples. Nor shall I boast about the great things we are doing together in the fields of development, education, security, institution building and more! I recognise that all in this garden tonight – in uniform and out of uniform – play an important part in the hard but noble work of helping build peace and reduce poverty.

I pay tribute to our Afghan brothers and sisters who bear the heaviest burden and also to international friends and colleagues, who far from homes, families and loved ones, labour with skill and some sacrifice to help Afghans enjoy a better future.

Our collective work is not easy. It needs patience and humility. But I am extremely confident that a brighter future is dawning in Afghanistan. The glimmering light of that new day was seen during the historic Eid ceasefire, when the whole world saw Afghans embrace and share in ways that many had not done before. In cities and villages across the country, we saw understanding and camaraderie of a sort which Afghans have been yearning, for so many years. In the humblest of backgrounds, with the peace caravan making its way towards Kabul, and the National Unity Government having made the bravest and most open of offers to the Taliban, society came together for a blessed weekend.

Like our Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said on Monday when he visited Kabul to commend the signs of progress he sees, he called on all countries with influence in Afghanistan, especially in the neighbourhood, to use it constructively at this crucial moment.

Conflict has sadly become so common in Afghanistan that it is sometimes hard to imagine what peace feels and looks like. Earlier this year, we held a photo competition asking Afghans to imagine a peaceful future, and to photograph what peace, cooperation and unity mean to them. You will have seen many of their photographs as you came in. Peace for these talented photographers meant everything from children playing merrily on a slide, to a friendly policeman helping a taxi driver out of a rut.

Peace is many things to many people. It is at the forefront of my Government's mission here, working always in strong support of the Afghan led and Afghan owned efforts in this field.

Now is an exciting moment. A moment of rare hope. I salute the efforts of Afghan religious leaders, civil society and the security forces to create and seize this moment of opportunity. I commend equally the National Unity Government for its courage and vision in listening to the Afghan people's thirst for peace and being led by them. As diplomats and friends of Afghanistan, we must support the Afghan people. We too must be bold, confident and imaginative.

The world is changing fast and Afghanistan is not alone in having to adapt to new realities. Geopolitics in the coming year will not get easier. All the more reason why we all need to seize the moment to make vital progress now.

Before we, inshallah, hold Her Majesty the Queen's 93rd birthday celebration in Kabul next year, I believe three important things will have happened in Afghanistan: timely and credible parliamentary and presidential elections will have been held (this is so important and I urge us all to redouble our efforts); the momentum towards peace will have become unstoppable and progress will have been made in ways which we cannot imagine today (and I urge all political actors not to play politics with peace) ; and thirdly – and possibly as importantly – Afghanistan's cricket team will have won their first matches in England in the World Cup series in 2019.

I thank you for your patience in listening. I thank you for your friendship and hospitality over the last year in Kabul.

[News story: Multi-million pound fund to support disadvantaged children in](#)

the early years

Parents who need help teaching their children reading, writing and language skills will get practical help such as home visits and online tools thanks to a £6.5 million scheme announced today (1 July).

Voluntary and community groups will get a share of the multi-million pound fund to run projects that help disadvantaged families and children with additional needs, building on the free childcare offer already available to the most deprived two-year-olds. These children are more likely to struggle with language and literacy skills when they arrive at primary school than their peers.

Studies have shown that helping parents and giving them the confidence to work with their children on speech and language is one of the most effective ways to ensure children arrive at school with the right foundations for a successful education.

Projects that can bid for the funding could include home visits from trained early years professionals, to help parents support their children in learning new words through simple steps like reading and singing nursery rhymes. Or they could involve easy-to-use online tools that help broaden the vocabulary parents use with their children in these early years.

Research shows that where there is a 'word gap' – the gap in communication skills between disadvantaged children and their peers – it can have a long term impact on a child's education, so projects like these will help close it once and for all.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

Giving every child the best start in life means making sure the right early development opportunities are in place. That starts in the home, which means giving parents the confidence to help their children read, learn new words and social skills at an early age.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with additional needs can face the greatest barriers in their early development, so it is important that where that help is needed it is in place as early as possible – such as through our free childcare for two-year-olds from lower income families which is used by more than 70% of those who are eligible.

This funding boost will go to organisations with a proven track record of breaking down learning barriers for children with additional needs. This is an important part of this government's work to improve education for every child, to make sure that this is a country that truly works for everyone.

National voluntary and community groups will also be able to bid for funding to work with disadvantaged communities to encourage families to access the Government's early education offers for children under five, as evidence shows high-quality early education can have a lasting impact on a child's future.

Today's announcement builds on the £13.5 million [investment](#) announced in April to improve early language and literacy for disadvantaged children. This includes £5million for the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to trial projects that support parents to help their children learn new words, and an £8.5 million programme for local authorities to make improvements in early learning for local communities.

Previous successful bidders from the scheme include the National Literacy Trust, a charity that trains early years staff and volunteers to work with families, building parents' confidence so that they can support their children's communication, language and literacy skills at home. The Trust used the grant funding to set up Early Years Together at 2, a programme which invites parents and carers into the nursery to watch how children learn, and gives them practical ideas of how they can continue this learning at home.

Tara Parker, Senior Programme Manager for Early Years at the National Literacy Trust, said:

We were thrilled to be selected by the Department for Education to receive the Early Years VCS Grant last year. The grant enabled us to help 130 parents develop the skills and confidence they need to better support their child's language and communication development at home.

We have already started to see great results, with the two-year-olds involved in the programme becoming more interested in and engaged with books and songs. We were able to train early years practitioners across 20 settings. Having reported improved confidence in supporting parents, most settings will continue to deliver the programme to help even more families beyond the funding period.

Grants have also been issued to the charity Home-Start UK, which works closely with families facing personal difficulties, which can have a negative effect on children's wellbeing and early development. The charity supports volunteers who work in communities, supporting families suffering from problems such as post-natal depression, physical health problems and bereavement. It received over £400,000 in grant funding to pilot a 'word pedometer' programme which provided disadvantaged families with coaching from trained home visiting volunteers, helping new parents increase the number and quality of words they use when interacting with their babies.

Rob Parkinson, chief executive, Home-Start UK:

We know the number of words children hear in their very first days, months and years has a huge impact on their development. The grant from the Department of Education has been instrumental in establishing the pilot of this programme. Home-Start home visiting volunteers have been specially trained to work with the [LENA Foundation's](#) word pedometer and resulting graphs, sharing them with the family in a positive and accessible way each week. The grant has been essential in being able to secure subsequent funding to help expand the project and giving us the opportunity to demonstrate its life-changing impact.

Funding will be awarded to organisations that can demonstrate that projects will be self-sustaining, to ensure they will last to support future generations of children.

The Department for Education is working to target resources where they can have the greatest success in helping the early development of children with special educational needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds. The competition opens to bidders from today (1 July).

Winning projects will be announced later this year and go live in October, running until 2020.

Press release: New measures to protect 10 million extra holidays a year

- government has today introduced new consumer protections that will protect an extra 10 million package travel holidays a year and save consumers tens of millions of pounds a year
- the Package Travel Regulations ensures consumers that book package holidays through travel websites enjoy same rights as those who book with a travel agent
- online bookings have transformed the way many people buy holidays, with 83% of Brits booking a holiday online in 2017 compared to 76% in 2016

The government has today (Sunday 1 July) introduced new measures that will protect an extra 10 million UK package holidays a year and help save British holidaymakers tens of millions of pounds a year with strengthened rights for consumers and new protections.

Online bookings have transformed the way many people buy holidays, with 83% of Brits booking a holiday online in 2017 compared to 76% in 2016. According to ABTA, the Travel Association, changes to how we book travel – such as using online booking sites – have created a gap in consumer protections, with 50% of holidays not currently financially protected if a company fails.

To address these gaps, close loopholes and protect more types of holidays, the Package Travel Directive enacted today includes new measures that will:

- ensure people who book holidays online through travel sites enjoy the same rights as those who book with a traditional travel agent
- broaden the definition of package holidays to capture modern booking models such as online and via mobile
- require that travel providers and operators provide better information to travellers, making it clear what their rights to refund are
- make online sites which enable consumers to put travel packages together responsible for the entire holiday, even if services are performed by third parties

Business Minister Andrew Griffiths said:

Britain is a nation of travellers and we each put aside around £23.10 per week to go towards package holidays. Given that commitment, when we are booking holidays it is reasonable for all of us to expect that if something goes wrong we are protected financially.

The measures that come into effect today will ensure holidaymakers are properly compensated if things do go wrong, removing the risks for consumers and building on our long, proud history of high standards when it comes to travel protections.

Since announcing the new protections earlier this year, the government has worked with travel industry leaders to develop guidance for businesses to help them comply with the new regulations which was published today. Alongside this, ABTA have also [published detailed guidance](#) for both consumers and businesses on the updated regulations.

The new measures follow the government having launched its Modernising Consumer Markets green paper in April, a key part of its modern Industrial Strategy, which will hold companies who fail consumers to account and looking to strengthen consumer protections.

[Press release: NI0 Ministers mark 102nd anniversary of the battle of the Somme](#)

The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP will represent the UK Government in France, whilst her Ministerial colleague, Shailesh Vara MP will attend the

commemorative service at Belfast City Hall.

The Secretary of State will lead tributes at the Royal British Legion service at Thiepval and the Somme Association services at the Ulster Tower and Guillemont. She will pay tribute to those soldiers from the volunteer Divisions raised in Ireland who made the supreme sacrifice on the battlefields of the Somme in 1916.

Ahead of travelling to today's ceremonies in France, Karen Bradley said:

I am truly honoured to be in this most beautiful part of France to represent Her Majesty's Government at today's ceremonies to commemorate the Battle of the Somme. It is important that we remember all those from across the island of Ireland who gave their lives for our freedom during the First World War. The Battle of the Somme in particular has an indelible link with Northern Ireland given the remarkable bravery shown, and the scale of the sacrifice made, by the 36th (Ulster) Division and the 16th (Irish) Division.

We are indebted to organisations such as the Royal British Legion and the Somme Association and Somme Heritage Centre who work tirelessly to ensure that their heroic contribution is always remembered.

Across the UK and Ireland we continue to commemorate the wider decade of centenaries, in which we have learned about our shared history, in a spirit of mutual respect and inclusivity. This year in November we will mark the centenary of Armistice and the ending of the Great War, and we will take a further step on our path towards a shared future.

It is difficult for us to comprehend the horror that these men faced as they went forward into battle, but their contribution and sacrifice was immense and we should never, ever forget it.

Press release: UK Government calls for more international support for

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

Minister Mark Field and Joanna Roper have held talks with senior ministers in Dhaka and have called for greater humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya refugee community, particularly to help support the provision of education for refugees and host communities.

Over 706,364 people have fled from their homes in Burma's Rakhine State into Bangladesh since August 2017, joining around 340,000 Rohingya who had previously fled.

In a visit to Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, where over a million refugees are living in crowded and unsafe refugee camps, Minister Field and Joanna Roper met refugee families and community leaders to learn about the persecution they suffered in Rakhine, and to hear about the challenges that life in the camps presents. They saw first-hand the damage caused by recent monsoon rains, and the work of the Government of Bangladesh and humanitarian agencies to protect the refugees.

They visited a UNICEF child-friendly site where they saw the efforts being made to keep young people safe and heard about efforts to provide education for refugee children. They also visited community and health centres, and met with a site management team to hear about the UK's contribution to monsoon preparedness. Joanna Roper was invited to see a safe space for women at the camp, and heard about their experiences of displacement.

Tomorrow (1st July) in Dhaka, Minister Field and Joanna Roper will hold talks with senior ministers on the Rohingya crisis, and the wider situation in Bangladesh. They will hear how Bangladesh is making strong inroads into providing twelve years of quality education for women and girls, and visit a factory where they will speak to the female workforce about labour rights.

Minister of State for Asia and the Pacific, Mark Field MP said:

What I witnessed today was truly heartbreaking, and only redoubles my determination to support the refugees and keep up the pressure on the Burmese authorities.

I call on the international community to work with Bangladesh to step up support for the refugees, both during this monsoon season and in the longer term through the provision of education and livelihoods.

The UK remains a leading donor to the crisis, committing £129m since September last year to support the refugees and vulnerable host communities.

We will continue to use international pressure and dialogue with the Burmese authorities to make progress, including through our support for the EU sanctions measures announced on 25 June.

UK Special Envoy for Gender Equality Joanna Roper said:

The stories we heard in the camps of violence against the Rohingya in Burma are deeply disturbing, but I was moved by the efforts being made to provide support to women and girls in the camps, as well as the learning centres for Rohingya children, displaying a thirst for education despite all that they have endured at such a young age.

Girls' education is the right thing to do: women and girls have the right to be educated, equal, empowered and safe. As the Foreign Secretary said at the UN Human Rights Council on 18 June, we must leave no girl behind and enable all girls to receive 12 years of quality education. That message is equally important for Rohingya girls to hear.

Further information