

News story: Slovakian Air Force Firefighters train in the UK

Six Slovakian Air Force firefighters have undergone training in the UK to learn vital skills needed to tackle major aircraft fires.

Held at the Defence Fire Training and Development Centre in Manston, Kent, the week-long course for one of our key NATO partners included learning incident command techniques and aircraft firefighting tactics.

A mixture of British military fire safety personnel and MOD civilian experts provided the training, which is needed because the UK and its NATO partners often land aircraft in Slovakia.

Staff Sergeant Michal Fusi, of the Slovakian Air Force firefighting service, said:

In Slovakia we don't have the these kind of facilities, so when the opportunity came up to come to the UK we took it. This is a big experience for us and a chance to improve our skills, it is very beneficial for us. We will be able to pass on the skills we have picked up here to our colleagues back home.

The training included classroom and live firefighting exercises which featured a variety of retired RAF aircraft donated to the facility including a Nimrod, Tornado, Harrier Jump Jet, Jaguar, Sea King and Lynx helicopters.

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The training area also featured fire simulators such as a "fire wall" and one that is shaped like a large aircraft with seats inside, which can be used to mimic aircraft such as a C-17 Globemaster.

The Defence Fire Risk Management facility at Manston is used for training firefighters across all three services, with more than 3,000 people passing through its doors every year.

Area Manager Ken Cross, the brigade training manager at Manston, said:

We are delighted to have them here. With many British C-17 aircraft landing in Slovakia as part of NATO, the offer of training was extended. Our facilities replicate realistic fire conditions.

The Slovaks loved every minute of what has been a busy and interesting week. They have learnt quickly and are very energetic.

They are very, very good firefighters.

It is hoped that this course, the first time that the Slovaks have done this training in the UK, will lead to further opportunities for fire safety personnel from their country to come to Manston.

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The UK and Slovakia have longstanding ties, as evidenced most recently in February, when Air Vice Marshal Edward Stringer represented the UK at the funeral service of Major-General Ivan Otto Schwarz, the last surviving veteran of the Second World War Czechoslovak Squadron.

And in September 2017, the Chief of Defence Staff Sir Stuart Peach visited Slovakia to reaffirm the strong bilateral defence and security relationship that our two countries share.

News story: Met Office Chief Executive stands down

Nick Jobling, currently Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer, is now interim Chief Executive with immediate effect, pending the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive in due course.

This will ensure continued leadership of our world-class national meteorological service.

Met Office operations and services are wholly unaffected by this decision.

Press release: PM speech on housing to set out changes to planning rules

Theresa May will today [5 March 2018] warn developers who are too slow to build houses that their past record could count against them when they bid for new planning permissions.

The Prime Minister will also highlight the “perverse incentive” in the bonus structure of some house builders which does not encourage them to build homes

that are affordable.

In a speech in London, the PM will say the government is “rewriting the rules on planning” to help developers and local authorities build more properties – restoring the dream of home ownership.

The new planning rules will make the system fairer and more effective by streamlining the process, cutting red tape and ending barriers to building.

While progress has been made in building more homes – over 217,000 new homes were built last year – the PM will say “for decades this country has failed to build enough of the right homes in the right places”.

Speaking at a national planning conference in London, the Prime Minister is expected to say that we “cannot bring about the kind of society I want to see, unless we tackle one of the biggest barriers to social mobility we face today: the national housing crisis.”

She will say “in much of the country, housing is so unaffordable that millions of people who would reasonably expect to buy their own home are unable to do so” and the “failure to match demand with supply really began to push prices upwards”, and “higher prices brought with them higher rents”.

“The result is a vicious circle from which most people can only escape with help from the Bank of Mum and Dad. If you’re not lucky enough to have such support, the door to home ownership is all too often locked and barred.”

She will go on to say:

I still vividly remember the first home I shared with my husband, Philip. Not only our pictures on the walls and our books on the shelves, but the security that came from knowing we couldn’t be asked to move on at short notice.

And because we had that security, because we had a place to go back to, it was that much easier to play an active role in our community. To share in the common purpose of a free society.

That is what this country should be about – not just having a roof over your head but having a stake in your community and its future.

The Prime Minister will warn that “the gap between permissions granted and homes built is still too large.”

She will say that, when used incorrectly, planning rules can create barriers to building, tying up councils in red tape and allowing some developers to game the system. Once planning permission is granted, a variety of factors can slow down delivery and the Oliver Letwin Review is looking at explaining the gap.

The PM will say:

this government is rewriting the rules on planning. With the major overhaul being published today, we're giving councils and developers the backing they need to get more homes built more quickly...The reforms driven forward under our last Prime Minister led to a great and welcome increase in the number of planning permissions granted. But we did not see a corresponding rise in the number of homes being built.

The new rules will see around 80 of the proposals set out in the Housing White Paper implemented, including using land more efficiently, fast tracking planning permissions into homes, giving greater certainty to local authorities and putting local plans in place to give communities more control.

The Prime Minister will be clear that "it's also time for builders and developers to step up and do their bit."

She will say "the bonuses paid to the heads of some of our biggest developers are based not on the number of homes they build but on their profits or share price."

In a market where lower supply equals higher prices that creates a perverse incentive, one that does not encourage them to build the homes we need.

The Prime Minister will highlight some areas where action could be taken, such as:

allowing councils to take a developer's previous rate of build-out into account when deciding whether to grant planning permission. I want to see planning permissions going to people who are actually going to build houses, not just sit on land and watch its value rise. Where councils are allocating sufficient land for the homes people need, our new planning rulebook will stop developers building on large sites that aren't allocated in the plan – something that's not fair on residents who agree to a plan only to see it ignored.

She will continue "I expect developers to do their duty to Britain and build the homes our country needs."

Along with developers, councils also need to ensure local communities are at the heart of the process and they know what infrastructure they will be getting and when. The PM will be clear developers and councils need to work together to meet their communities' needs in a more joined up way.

The Prime Minister will urge councils to "do all they can to find sites, grant planning permissions and build homes" including through adopting a new

nationwide standard that shows how many homes authorities need to plan for in their area.

She will say “our new rules will also see to it that the right infrastructure is in place to support such developments” and the planning changes will also allow more affordable homes prioritised for key workers, including nurses, teachers, and firefighters, and the PM is today enabling local authorities to prioritise these workers.

But the Prime Minister will also be clear that the “answer to our housing crisis does not lie in tearing up the Green Belt.”

She will announce that the government is maintaining existing strong protections, “so that authorities can only amend Green Belt boundaries if they can prove they have fully explored every other reasonable option for building the homes their community needs.” There will also be stronger protections for ancient woodlands and historic coastlines.

Only 10 per cent of England has been built on and only 13 per cent is covered by Green Belt – the purpose of which is to prevent urban sprawl. The PM will be clear that developers and local authorities must only allocate Green Belt sites for development for exceptional reasons. Should development have to go ahead it must first make use of brownfield sites, and where land is removed, they must create new spaces.

This major overhaul to the National Planning Policy Framework, the first in six years, will be launched today to provide a comprehensive approach for planners, developers and councils so they can build the homes this country needs.

The plans will be consulted on over the next 8 weeks – with a final version expected to be published in the summer.

Statement to Parliament: Minister Field statement on visas to Burma for the International Development Committee (IDC)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Like him, I am deeply disappointed that the Government of Burma have not granted visas for members of the International Development Committee. That displeasure has been communicated to the Burmese authorities. The Committee does vital work, providing oversight of UK aid programming in Burma and beyond.

The hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the International Development Committee, was due to travel on 27 February, with the rest of the Committee due to travel on 28 February. When no decision on visas was received by early yesterday morning, the Committee understandably cancelled the Burma leg of its visit. I understand that the Committee will continue with the second element of its trip, namely to travel to Bangladesh to review the Department for International Development's work there, including support for the Rohingya refugees displaced to Cox's Bazar and the vicinity.

My officials were informed this morning that the IDC's visa applications had been formally denied. Burmese officials have indicated three reasons for the refusal: first, that there is an extended public holiday in Burma; secondly, that access to Rakhine state remains restricted for security reasons; and finally—I think the Chair of the IDC mentioned this in a press release yesterday evening—that they were unhappy that individual members of the IDC had signed a letter calling for the senior general of the Burmese army to be held to account for Burmese military behaviour in Rakhine.

It is right that the House takes a close interest in this sort of crisis, and I know that all Members present will continue to do so. The Government fully support the work of the International Development Committee and have been active in supporting this visit. DFID Burma worked closely with the IDC to develop a comprehensive itinerary covering a range of projects in-country. The British ambassador to Burma, Andrew Patrick, and other FCO officials pressed repeatedly for visas to be approved, both in Burma and through the Burmese embassy in London. I myself spoke over the telephone to the Burmese ambassador yesterday morning to raise the status of the visas. That demonstrates just how seriously the FCO takes this matter, not least as a courtesy to the House. I understand that you, Mr Speaker, wrote to the Burmese ambassador, and that he intends to reply formally to set out the reasons for the refusal.

Through DFID, the UK is one of the largest single donors to the refugee crisis in both Bangladesh and Burma. Our aid is making a big difference. The first tranche of UK funding is providing emergency food to some 174,000 people and safe water and hygiene to more than 138,000. Following a diphtheria outbreak in the refugee camps, we deployed the UK's emergency medical team of more than 40 specialists to save lives.

This decision to deny visas is highly regrettable and will prevent the Committee from seeing some of DFID's work at first hand. However, this Government must and will remain committed to supporting Burma's poorest and most vulnerable people. Working with DFID, we will ensure that the Committee has access to all the information it needs to scrutinise the programme in Burma effectively.

Speech: Baroness Stowell's speech at Safeguarding Summit

It's a great pleasure to join Penny Mordaunt in welcoming you to this summit.

I endorse everything she has just said – especially her aims for today and vision for the future.

Before I turn to what action we are taking at the Charity Commission, and what I also think needs to change, I want to say something about language.

As the regulator, it's important to me that I always speak plainly.

As we now look ahead, it's vital we don't allow the shorthand, technocratic word of "safeguarding" to let us forget what the failings are that we are talking about.

And in this context, it is aid workers sexually abusing the most desperate and vulnerable people they were sent to support;

In some cases, your own staff and volunteers taken advantage of by those in positions of trust and power;

And charities abusing their trusted status by failing to put the welfare of the blameless ahead of their corporate reputation.

I also want to make clear that the Charity Commission is committed to working constructively with DFID and all of you to identify practical solutions to stop sexual exploitation and abuse within charities, to drive up safeguarding standards and – crucially – to rebuild public trust.

The Commission has already set up a special taskforce and intensified our efforts to ensure charities report serious safeguarding incidents, including historic incidents they may have failed to report previously.

The rate of reporting in the last couple of weeks has doubled as a result.

Among the reports we've received are those from 26 of the charities to which the Secretary of State wrote some weeks ago, requiring categorical confirmation that all incidents had been reported to authorities.

That shows the benefit of our collaboration and combined effort.

Our special taskforce is now examining the reports we've received and will ensure that the Commission and the charities involved take the right corrective action.

The Commission has also reflected on the way we communicate with informants who bring serious concerns to us.

Over recent weeks, it's become clear that those reporting problems are not always made aware of the difference they have made in coming forward.

That can't be right.

We should be reassuring genuine informants of the impact of their action in coming to us.

And in future we'll make sure we do.

But if we are to restore public trust, we must understand why people are angry.

And it's the same thing that has affected the corporate and political worlds too:

Important institutions acting in the interests of those in charge, rather than of the people they exist to serve.

It's bad enough when bankers disappoint. But when aid workers and charity bosses are self-interested it is incomparably worse.

This is a topic I will return to in more detail in the weeks and months ahead. Because it doesn't just apply to safeguarding – or just those of you in this room today.

But for now, let me say this.

Quite simply: the public expect charities to be selfless, not self-interested institutions.

They expect charities to have good aims, and to pursue those aims according to common standards of human decency.

It's vital for all of you as leaders to understand that, however noble your cause, it doesn't provide immunity from these basic expectations.

No cause, however noble, provides a licence to justify unacceptable means.

It is the combination of why you exist, what you achieve, and how you do it that generates the nation's pride and people's support.

This summit will be a failure in my eyes if one of the action-points is "helping the public understand better what it is aid agencies and charities do".

The public don't need to understand better.

We need to show we understand what the public expect of us.

Today marks the beginning of getting that right.

What we agree here today will, I hope, have a big impact, reaching far beyond this room.

We know that concerns for people's safety are not limited to charities working abroad.

Charities working in the UK have their own safeguarding challenges, and must be part of this transformation.

Tomorrow, the Charity Commission is hosting another summit, bringing together charities working in the UK. We will make sure the impact of what is agreed and shared here today feeds into their discussions tomorrow.

And that this week marks the beginning of our joint efforts to rebuild public trust.

Because with their trust and support, you will be able to achieve more.

Thank you.