

# Statement to Parliament: Safeguarding in the aid sector

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on my Department's response to the sexual abuse and exploitation perpetrated by charity workers in Haiti in 2011, and the measures we are taking to improve safeguarding across the aid sector.

I'd like to start by paying tribute to Sean O'Neill of The Times and the two sets of whistleblowers – those in 2011 and later – for bringing this case to light.

On February ninth, The Times reported that certain Oxfam staff when in Haiti in 2011 had abused their positions of trust and paid for sex with local women. These incidents happened in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2010, which killed hundreds of thousands of people and left millions more homeless and reliant on aid for basic needs such as food and shelter.

This is shocking, but it is not by itself what has caused such concern about Oxfam's safeguarding. It was what Oxfam did next.

In chaotic and desperate situations the very best safeguarding procedures and practices must be put in to place to prevent harm, but when organisations fail to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing that occur, it undermines trust and sends a message that sexual exploitation and abuse is tolerated. We cannot prevent sexual exploitation and abuse if we don't demonstrate zero tolerance.

In such circumstances we must be able to trust organisations not only to do all they can to prevent harm, but to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing when they occur.

In this duty Oxfam failed under the watch of Barbara Stocking and Penny Lawrence.

They did not provide a full report to the Charity Commission. They did not provide a full report to their donors. They did not provide any report to prosecuting authorities.

In my view Mr Speaker they misled, quite possibly deliberately. Even as their report concluded that their investigation could not rule out the allegation that some of the women involved were actually children.

They did not think it was necessary to report to the police in either Haiti or the country of origin for those accountable.

I believe their motivation appears to be just the protection of the organisation's reputation. They put that before those they were there to help and protect – a complete betrayal of trust.

A betrayal too of those who sent them there – the British people – and a betrayal of all those Oxfam staff and volunteers who do put the people they serve, first.

Last week, I met with Mark Goldring, Chief Executive of Oxfam, and Caroline Thomson, Oxfam's Chair of Trustees.

I made three demands of them –

That they fully cooperate with the Haitian authorities, handing over all the evidence they hold.

That, they report staff members involved in this incident to their respective national governments.

And, that they make clear how they will handle any forthcoming allegations around safeguarding – historic or live.

And I stressed that for me holding to account those who made the decision not to report and to let those potentially guilty of criminal activity slip away, was a necessity in winning back confidence in Oxfam.

As a result of those discussions, Oxfam has agreed to withdraw from bidding for any new UK Government funding until DFID is satisfied that they can meet the high safeguarding standards we expect of our partners.

I will take a decision on current programming after the twenty-sixth of February as I will then have further information which will help me decide if I need to adjust how that is currently being delivered.

Given the concerns about the wider sector this case has raised, I have written to every UK charity work working overseas that receives UK aid – 192 organisations – insisting that they spell out the steps they are taking to ensure their safeguarding policies are fully in place and confirm they have referred all concerns they have about specific cases and individuals to the relevant authorities, including prosecuting authorities.

I have set a deadline of the twenty-sixth of February for all UK charities working overseas to give us the assurances that we have asked for and to raise any concerns with the relevant authorities.

We are also undertaking in parallel a similar exercise with all non-UK charity partners – 393 organisations in total and with all our suppliers including those in the private sector – over 500 organisations – to make clear our standards and remind them of their obligations, and we are doing the same with all multilateral partners too.

The UK Government reserves the right to take whatever decisions about present or future funding to Oxfam, and any other organisation, that we deem necessary. We have been very clear that we will not work with any organisation that does not live up to the high standards on safeguarding and protection that we require.

I will also be sharing details of this approach with other governments departments, who are responsible for the ODA spend.

Although this work is not yet complete it is clear from the Charity Commission reporting data – and lack of it from some organisations – that a cultural change is needed to ensure all that can be done to stop sexual exploitation in the aid sector, is being done.

And we need to take some practical steps. Now.

We should not wait for the UN to take action. We must set up our own systems now.

My department, and the Charity Commission, will hold a safeguarding summit on the fifth of March, where we will meet with UK international development charities, regulators and experts to confront safeguarding failures and agree practical measures, such as an aid worker accreditation scheme we in the UK can use.

Later in the year, we will take this programme of work to a wide-ranging, global safeguarding conference to drive action across the whole international aid sector.

And I'm pleased to say the US, Canada, the Netherlands and others have already agreed to support our goal of improved safeguarding standards across the sector.

The UK is not waiting for others to act. We are taking a lead on this.

I will also be speaking to colleagues across government and beyond about what more we can do to stop exploitation and abuse in the UN and broader multilateral system.

The message from us to all parts of the UN is clear – you can either get your house in order, or you can prepare to carry out your good work without our money.

I welcome the UN's announcement on the fourteenth of February that the UN does not and will not claim immunity for sexual abuse cases. This sends a clear signal that the UN is not a soft target, but we must hold the UN to account for this.

Further actions we have taken in the last week include the creation of a new Safeguarding Unit. We have also promoted our whistleblowing and reporting phone line to encourage anyone with information on safeguarding issues to contact us.

We have appointed Sheila Drew Smith, a recent member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, who has agreed to bring her expertise and her challenge to support my Department's ambition on safeguarding. She will report to me directly.

I have asked to meet leaders of the audit profession to discuss what more

they can do to provide independent assurance over safeguarding to the organisations that DFID partners with globally.

And I have held my own Department to the same scrutiny that I am demanding of others. I have asked the department to go through our centrally held HR systems and our fraud and whistleblowing records as far back as they exist.

I am assured that there are no centrally recorded cases which were dealt with incorrectly.

Separately, we are reviewing any locally reported allegations of sexual misconduct involving DFID staff. To date our review of staff cases has looked at 75% of our teams across DFID and will complete in a fortnight.

Our investigations are still ongoing and if, during this process, we discover any further historic or current cases, I will report on our handling of these to Parliament.

DFID, other government departments and the National Crime Agency work closely together when serious allegations of potentially criminal activity in partner organisations are brought to our attention and we are strengthening this, as the new Strategy Director at the NCA will take on a lead role for the aid sector.

I am calling on anyone who has any concerns about abuse or exploitation in the aid sector to come forward and report these to our counter fraud and whistleblowing team. Details are on the DFID website and all communications will be treated in complete confidence.

Later today I will have further meetings, including with the Defence Secretary, regarding peacekeeping troops, and the Secretary of State at DCMS regarding the Charity Sector.

My absolute priority is to keep the world's poorest and most vulnerable people safe from harm. It is utterly despicable that sexual exploitation and abuse continue to exist in the aid sector.

The recent reports should be a wake-up call to all of us. Now is the time for us to act, but as we do so we should note the good people working across the world in this sector – saving lives often by endangering their own – and all those from fundraisers to trustees who make that work possible across the entire aid sector.

In the last week alone UK aid and UK aid workers has helped vaccinate around 850,000 children against polio.

And we should also recognise that work can only be done with the support of the British people.

I commend this statement to the House.

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# [Press release: Minister for the Middle East statement following an increase in violence in Eastern Ghouta, Syria](#)

Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt, said:

The Asad regime's brutal siege of Eastern Ghouta, coupled with escalating bombardment and reports of chemicals weapons use, is causing unprecedented levels of suffering. The enclave has become a crucible of misery and violence, which is simply unacceptable in the 21st century.

Airstrikes, artillery and rocket attacks by pro-regime forces are at some of the most intense levels seen in the besieged area in years, leading to scores of civilian casualties. Over 700 people need medical evacuation, but the regime continues to refuse to allow this.

We call on the regime and its backers to cease this campaign of violence, to protect civilians and allow rapid and unhindered humanitarian access. As the international community has made clear to the Asad regime and its backers: the world is watching.

## **Further information**

- Follow the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa on Twitter [@AlistairBurtUK](#)
- Follow the Foreign Office on Twitter [@foreignoffice](#) and [Facebook](#)
- Follow the Foreign Office on [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#) and [LinkedIn](#)

## **Media enquiries**

For journalists

Email  
[newsdesk@fco.gov.uk](mailto:newsdesk@fco.gov.uk)

## **Government response: Aramark takes ownership of DIO Hestia contracts**

Aramark has assumed full ownership of the CarillionAramark operating company which will continue to provide services to the DIO for the duration of the existing Hestia contracts in respect of the South East & London, Scotland & NI and North Regions;

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## **Press release: South West Regional Flood and Coastal Committee has two vacancies**

More than 5 million people are at risk of the devastating effects of flooding in the UK, with thousands of properties at risk in the south west.

The Environment Agency is looking for enthusiastic people to help manage flood risk throughout the south west and make a real difference to people's lives and to the environment we live in.

The Agency is looking for people from all walks of life to fill vacancies on the South West Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (RFCC). Being an RFCC

member is an exciting opportunity to help guide local flood and coastal management across the whole region.

The RFCC covers Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

The successful applicants will play an important role in deciding on local priorities, approving programmes of work, and supporting the Environment Agency and lead local flood authorities in working with communities and other partners.

They will have a key role in balancing local priorities and making sure that investment is co-ordinated at the river catchment and shoreline scale, as well as promoting the consideration of climate change impacts in local decision making.

The Environment Agency is recruiting a member to represent land/country farming and another member to represent business interests.

### **Land/country farming**

- provide a land management perspective at committee – working with the inland member and conservation members
- help the committee to understand issues affecting inland communities, landowners and farmers and how this impacts on river process and the coast
- monitor and review flood risk management and the river needing to be addressed
- provide a link between the committee, land management and farming groups in the committee's area
- advocate good soil management with the farming sector to benefit flood risk and reduce diffuse pollution

### **Business interests**

- experience in securing funding/investment from/for the private sector
- currently working in the business sector and understands the impact that flooding can have on private business
- established links to economic/regeneration institutions such as chamber of commerce, local enterprise partnership and other business leader forums

People from a wide range of backgrounds are invited to apply for the posts, especially those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and women who are currently under-represented on regional flood and coastal committees.

A key role will be ensuring the aims of the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy are embodied within the committee's decisions and to ensure consistency between strategic and local plans.

Further information and how to apply is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/south-west-regional-flood-and-coastal-committee> or contact [pamela.udy@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:pamela.udy@environment-agency.gov.uk) on 02084 746298. The closing date for applications is Thursday 5 April at 5.30pm.