

# Coronavirus (COVID-19): Foreign Secretary's statement on support for British people abroad

Mr Speaker, we have Foreign & Commonwealth Office staff in all our 280 posts in 168 countries and 10 overseas territories. And they are working around the clock to respond to this global pandemic.

## **What we have done**

Over the last 3 days, we have seen 80 countries place restrictions on their borders.

That situation is unprecedented in scale and our over-riding priority now is to assist the thousands of British travellers who need and want to return home. Bearing in mind the hundreds of thousands of UK nationals who may be travelling at any one point in time.

Following [last week's decision to advise against all but essential travel globally](#), last night, I changed our travel advice again because of the rate of new border restrictions.

We [strongly advise those British people who are currently travelling abroad but live in the UK to return as soon as possible](#), where they are still able to because commercial routes are still running.

Where commercial options are limited or prevented by domestic restrictions, we are in close contact with the airlines and local authorities in those countries to overcome those barriers to enable people to return home.

With my ministerial team and indeed across the diplomatic network, we are engaging with numerous governments to keep commercial routes open, particularly in transit hubs.

The Department for Transport is working closely with airlines to ensure travellers can rebook or find alternative routes home.

## **Update on critical cases**

I know honourable members on all sides will have had constituents who have contacted them in relation to particular countries, so can I update on just a few of the countries.

On Peru, I spoke to the Foreign Minister at the weekend, and we have agreed special arrangements for flights to return British nationals later this week.

I spoke to the Singaporean Foreign Minister this morning and we have agreed to work together to help those stranded to get back to the UK, and indeed

Peruvian nationals get back to Peru.

Given Singapore's role as a transit hub, this commitment to work with us to enable UK nationals to transit via Singapore is particularly important. Not least for those currently in Australia or New Zealand.

In New Zealand, the High Commission is working with airlines, airports and the New Zealand government to keep flight routes open and reopen some that have closed.

In Australia, the High Commission is doing the same. They have also opened a register of British nationals hoping to return to the UK and are supporting British nationals via phone calls, and walk-in appointments at the Commission, as well as updating social media pages.

## **Update on consular Assistance**

For those trying to get home in other countries, we are providing as much practical advice as is physically possible.

We first of all would advise all travellers to take a look at the [Travel Advice](#) online. It is the best and most comprehensive source of information, and it is updated in real time.

If people are in need of urgent assistance, they should call our Embassies and High Commissions. They will be automatically connect to our consular contact centres – the global centres based in Malaga and Ottawa.

We know that there has been considerable pressure, because of the restrictions being placed by countries around the world and the rate at which it is being done with limited or no notice. We have doubled our capacity, we are now doubling it again to deal with the surge in demand.

Mr Speaker we are helping to reduce travel costs by encouraging airlines to have maximum flexibility on changing return tickets. Where people are in real need, our consular teams will work with them to consider their options and, as a last resort, we offer an emergency loan.

## **International strategy**

More broadly, the UK is working alongside our international partners to deliver our international strategy which rests on four key points:

- to provide resilience to the most vulnerable countries
- to pursue a vaccine
- to keep vital trade routes and supply chains for food stuffs, medicines and other things open, and
- to provide reciprocal support for return of our British nationals who otherwise are at risk of being stranded.

These are the right priorities. We are working day and night to keep British people safe at home and abroad.