

PM remarks at the CHOGM opening ceremony: 24 June 2022

Your Royal Highness,

President Kagame,

Madam Secretary General,

Your Excellencies,

ladies and gentlemen,

I'm honoured to perform the final duty of the United Kingdom as Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth

and hand over the baton to President Kagame, and wish him every success as Chair of our unique association,

encompassing 54 countries and a third of humanity.

One of the newest members is now at the helm,

and more nations are seeking to join,

which tells you everything about the health and vitality of our Commonwealth,

because for all the differences between us,

we are united by an invisible thread of shared values, history and friendship.

The Head of the Commonwealth, Her Majesty the Queen, incarnates everything that brings us together

and it's fitting that in the year of her Platinum Jubilee,

the association she cherishes should be gathering in the continent where she became Queen.

When the UK became your Chair-in-Office in 2018, the word "Covid" had not been invented

many of us had no idea what a "coronavirus" was, and nobody could have known that the worst pandemic for a century would soon claim millions of lives.

The British government put together the partnership between Oxford University and AstraZeneca that produced the world's most popular vaccine,

and during our time as Chair-in-Office, the UK supported the delivery of

more than 1.4 billion doses of Covid vaccines to Commonwealth countries.

The pandemic posed a common threat to all humanity and the same is true of catastrophic climate change.

No-one understands this better than our Commonwealth friends in the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean

who can see the incoming tides surging ever higher up their beaches, threatening to inundate their villages and towns,

and, in time, the entire land mass of some island states.

For them, the baleful effects of climate change are not vague or theoretical, but already happening before their eyes.

When we hosted COP26 in Glasgow last November,

it was these fellow Commonwealth leaders who spoke with greatest urgency and authority about the perils of quilting the earth with greenhouse gases.

And we in the developed world have an obligation to help our friends to cope with a danger they had no hand in causing,

and during the UK's time as Chair-in-Office,

the Commonwealth Finance Access Hub mobilised over \$38 million for the most vulnerable members,

but of course we must press on and do more.

And if I could imagine a silver bullet that would solve an array of problems and transform countless lives,

it would be to give every girl in the world the chance to go to school.

At the last CHOGM in London in 2018, the UK announced £212 million for the Girls' Education Challenge,

and I'm delighted to say that this initiative is now at work in 11 Commonwealth countries,

ensuring that girls are able to gain at least 12 years of quality education.

We need to empower them to play their full part in the economy when they leave school,

so the UK is funding the "She Trades" Commonwealth programme,

which has already helped over 3,500 women-owned businesses to become more competitive and generate more than £32 million of sales.

And if there is anyone who doubts the ability of the Commonwealth to speak with one voice,

it was in 2020 that the UK delivered the first ever Joint Statement by all 54 Commonwealth members before the Human Rights Council in Geneva,

recalling – and I quote – our “proud history of acting to strengthen good governance and the rule of law”.

One of the gravest affronts to everything we stand for is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine

and Putin’s blockade of the ports that would otherwise be shipping food to the world’s poorest people.

At this moment, nearly 25 million tonnes of corn and wheat is piled up in silos across Ukraine, held hostage by Russia.

Britain supports the United Nations plan to get that food out

and we will invest over £370 million in global food security this year, including £130 million for the World Food Programme.

We want to work alongside our Commonwealth friends to understand your needs and priorities

and deliver joint solutions to a crisis that Putin has deliberately engineered.

For now, it only remains for me to thank every Commonwealth member for having given the United Kingdom the chance to serve as Chair-in-Office.

And as I pass on this responsibility to President Kagame,

a close friend and partner,

I know that he shares my boundless optimism

about the future of the Commonwealth at the forefront of the international agenda, and benefiting all our peoples.

Thank you all very much.

ENDS