

# Minister Heappey: UK support for the Lebanese Army continues

The UK Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heappey MP, conducted a one-day visit to Lebanon yesterday. This was Minister Heappey's first visit to Lebanon where he saw first-hand how UK projects support the Lebanese Armed Forces in their mission to maintain stability across Lebanon.

The British Ambassador to Lebanon, Dr. Ian Collard, and the British Embassy's Defence Attaché, Lt. Col Lee Saunders, accompanied Minister Heappey.

The Minister met the caretaker Minister of Defence, Maurice Sleem, and the Lebanese Army Commander, General Joseph Aoun. They discussed military cooperation between the UK and Lebanon.

At the Third Land Border Regiment (LBR) on the border with Syria, Minister Heappey heard from senior Lebanese officers how the UK's work to enhance the capabilities of the LBRs has improved efforts to counter cross-border smuggling and terrorist activity. This has made the area safer for local communities. UK support has enabled deployment of four Land Border Regiments (LBRs), the construction of over 78 border towers, provision of 350 Land Rovers, 100 armoured patrol vehicles, and training of over 20,000 Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) personnel.

At the end of his visit, Minister Heappey said:

The UK and Lebanon are close friends and partners. I was proud to see first-hand the positive impact of the military cooperation between our two countries that has spanned more than a decade.

In times of need, the UK stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Lebanon and our partners around the world to tackle shared challenges. In the current context, it is more important than ever that we continue to work together to combat threats to global peace and security.

I have greatly enjoyed my first visit to this beautiful country and hope to return.

The British Ambassador to Lebanon, Dr. Ian Collard, said:

I am delighted to host the Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heappey, on his first visit to Lebanon. The Lebanese Armed Forces is crucial to ensuring Lebanon's stability and safeguarding the

Lebanese people during these challenging times. Since 2010, the UK has committed over £87 million to optimise the LAF's capabilities which underlines the UK's government commitment to a safe and stable Lebanon.

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## CMA investigates Amazon over suspected anti-competitive practices

This new investigation follows a current European Commission probe looking into similar concerns, which does not cover ongoing issues affecting the UK now that it has left the European Union.

Some of the products on Amazon's Marketplace are supplied through its own retail business. However, a large proportion are supplied by third-party sellers. Amazon provides services to these sellers, including those that are essential to make sales, such as matching sellers with consumers. It also offers optional services that incur additional fees, such as Amazon's 'Fulfilment by Amazon' service. This handles some aspects of the sales process, including storage, packaging, and delivery.

The Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) investigation will consider whether Amazon has a dominant position in the UK and whether it is abusing that position and distorting competition by giving an unfair advantage to its own retail business or sellers that use its services, compared to other third-party sellers on the Amazon UK Marketplace.

The investigation will focus on 3 main areas:

- How Amazon collects and uses third-party seller data, including whether this gives Amazon an unfair advantage in relation to business decisions made by its retail arm.
- How Amazon sets criteria for allocation of suppliers to be the preferred/first choice in the 'Buy Box'. The Buy Box is displayed prominently on Amazon's product pages and provides customers with one-click options to 'Buy Now' or 'Add to Basket' in relation to items from a specific seller.
- How Amazon sets the eligibility criteria for selling under the Prime label. Offers under the Prime label are eligible for certain benefits, such as free and fast delivery, that are only available to Prime users under Amazon's Prime loyalty programme.

Sarah Cardell, General Counsel at the CMA, said:

Millions of people across the UK rely on Amazon's services for fast

delivery of all types of products at the click of a button. This is an important area so it's right that we carefully investigate whether Amazon is using third-party data to give an unfair boost to its own retail business and whether it favours sellers who use its logistics and delivery services – both of which could weaken competition.

Thousands of UK businesses use Amazon to sell their products and it is important they are able to operate in a competitive market. Any loss of competition is a loss to consumers and could lead to them paying more for products, being offered lower quality items or having less choice.

A formal investigation will allow us to consider this matter properly.

The CMA has not reached any conclusions at this stage as to whether or not competition law has been infringed.

The European Commission has previously opened 2 investigations covering the same areas. The CMA will seek to liaise with the European Commission as its own investigation in the UK progresses.

Alongside this case, the CMA also has an [open investigation into Amazon and Google](#), under consumer protection laws, over concerns that they have not been doing enough to combat fake reviews on their sites. The CMA has not reached any conclusions at this stage as to whether or not consumer laws have been infringed.

More information can be found on the [investigation into Amazon's Marketplace case page](#).

1. Sarah Cardell is currently General Counsel and will assume the role of Interim Chief Executive of the CMA on 26 July. [Find out more about Sarah Cardell's appointment](#).
2. The competition legislation relevant to the CMA's investigation is the Competition Act 1998. The Chapter II prohibition in the Competition Act 1998 prohibits any conduct on the part of one or more undertakings which amounts to the abuse of a dominant position in a market, and which may affect trade within the United Kingdom.
3. The CMA may launch an investigation under the Competition Act 1998 if it has reasonable grounds to suspect that there has been an infringement of competition law.
4. "Amazon" refers to the corporate group in its entirety, including Amazon.com, Inc. (US parent company), Amazon Services Europe SARL, Amazon EU SARL, Amazon Europe Core SARL and Amazon UK Services Ltd.
5. All enquiries from journalists should be directed to the CMA press office by email on [press@cma.gov.uk](mailto:press@cma.gov.uk) or by phone on 020 3738 6460.
6. All enquiries from the general public should be directed to the CMA's General Enquiries team on [general.enquiries@cma.gov.uk](mailto:general.enquiries@cma.gov.uk) or 020 3738 6000.

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## Freedom of Religion or Belief: UK voluntary report to the OSCE

Thank you Madam Chair for convening us today and to our key note speaker Dr Polak for her insights on how to tackle intolerance and discrimination. I have chosen to focus on freedom of religion or belief under this topic in light of our Foreign Secretary convening an [international conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\)](#) in London this week.

Right across the world today, people are being discriminated against, marginalised, threatened, tortured, and killed because of their religion or belief, and too often by their own authoritarian governments – the very governments with a duty to protect them. No one should face discrimination, hatred or violence simply because of what they believe, and yet in the 21st Century, millions do.

In Copenhagen 1990 Russia alongside the other participating States reaffirmed that everyone will have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to manifest one's religion in public or in private, through worship, teaching, practice and observance.

We have already seen over recent years that in temporarily Russian controlled areas of eastern Ukraine taken by Russian backed armed formations in 2014, freedom of religion or belief is severely restricted. A law passed in 2018 made it illegal for any religious community to gather, indeed therefore to exist, without permission from the authorities. All Baptists, Seven Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal and other protestant communities have been denied this permission.

We hear of unregistered groups meeting to worship in a climate of constant fear, being subject to surveillance and repeated raids. We hear of contact with other believers in other areas of Ukraine being made difficult or impossible, of social welfare activities carried out by these groups being stopped, and of an increasing list of allegedly extremist books being banned.

And now, during Russia's grievous war in Ukraine, we are hearing of church pastors simply disappearing. Freedom of religion or belief is one of the freedoms the leadership of Ukraine and its brave people today are fighting for right now, along with other essential fundamental freedoms – right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association.

The UK hosted International Conference on FoRB brings together government representatives, faith leaders and civil society activists from over 50 countries around the world. Participants are looking at how countries, civil society groups, faith leaders, and individuals can together protect and promote freedom of religion or belief and prevent violations of it.

We are using the conference to focus on the positive role of education in combatting intolerance, and alongside international partners, we will call for renewed support for education reform, promoting the benefits of pluralism and the importance of human rights.

Madam Chair – in conclusion, I would like to emphasise that freedom of religion or belief is important in and of itself but also because it is so closely connected with other rights such as the right to life, privacy, assembly and expression, as well as social, economic and cultural rights. Freedom of religion or belief can often be seen as “a bellwether human right” – and by that I mean that the targeting of others on the basis of their religion or belief can often be an early warning of other rights violations to follow. We must continue to keep this topic high on the agenda. Thank you.

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## Artificial intelligence in the driving seat

The participants, from the Defence, Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl), had three days to transform a ‘dumb’ car into one which could navigate a course using [artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#) .

The challenge aimed to demonstrate the benefits of reinforcement learning and the differences between the virtual and physical environments.

[## AI in the Driving Seat] ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab\\_q2ZmxxNc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab_q2ZmxxNc))

Dstl organiser David said

When you are faced with a problem you have not faced before you’re forced to think laterally and think outside the box. That’s why we love to give our teams and particularly our early career staff these different and exciting challenges. It gives us the opportunity to engage with new technologies which are going to be really important to us in the future.

In DeepRacer someone is controlling the speed but the car is doing all of the rest of the navigation and that is all powered by the AI developed over the last few days. The idea is that you go as quickly as possible around the track. There are countless different approaches you can take.

The AWS DeepRacer Re-invent 2018 track, sized 26 feet long by 17 feet wide, included twists and turns designed to put the newly trained cars through their paces.

In just three days the 1/18 scale small cars, 'trained' by participants using reinforcement learning, had managed to complete the track in just under eight seconds – within a second of the world record speed.

The top virtual time was 7.865 seconds while the top track time was 8.069 seconds.

The event was hosted by Dstl in conjunction with Amazon Web Services (AWS) at Porton Science Park.

During the event participants had to deal with physical factors that they would not encounter in an online simulation such as lighting and roughness of the track.

AWS account manager Shea Hindman said:

DeepRacer is a fun and exciting way for people to get started with reinforcement learning. They are actually working with a fully autonomous vehicle. One of the real arts of creating a winning DeepRacer model is that difference between virtual and reality.

The winning time from Dstl is only a second off world record time – that really underscores the level of expertise and talent that Dstl has.

Dstl participant Nick said:

It's been quite interesting seeing how online results compare to real world results and learning how we can train better models. It leads on to what you see in autonomous vehicles and AI driving. My own simulation did really well online and then on the track didn't end too well. It's been a fun and enjoyable experience.

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## [UKHO calls for UK-based companies involved in seabed mapping to join newly unveiled UK Centre for Seabed Mapping](#)

The UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO) is inviting UK-based public organisations involved in seabed mapping who share common interests in optimising the UK's national maritime assets to become a member of the newly unveiled UK Centre

for Seabed Mapping.

The UK Centre for Seabed Mapping (UK CSM) is administered by the UKHO, and was submitted as a UK Government Voluntary Commitment to the United Nations at the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, on 27 June 2022.

The UK CSM has a remit to increase the coverage, quality and access of seabed mapping data collected using public funds, as well as to better promote it as a critical component of national infrastructure. Created to spearhead a coordinated approach to the collection, management, and access of seabed mapping data – and to champion a more integrated marine geospatial sector in the UK – the UK CSM has established three initial working groups which members can join and contribute to: National Data Collaboration, International Data Collaboration, and Data Collection Standards.

These working groups will further the discussion and coordination of data accessibility, collection and collaboration, as well as progress work on data standards, by creating the conditions and developing infrastructure to enable the diverse community of marine geospatial stakeholders to come together to deliver significant, sustained, and strategic benefits to the UK – particularly in the context of the Integrated Review and the UK's Global Britain vision.

Twenty two government agencies have already been involved in the inaugural Management Group meeting of the UK CSM and volunteered to participate on the working groups, an encouraging response which shows a great desire to work across industry and help to raise the profile and improve outcomes of seabed mapping.

Commenting on the announcement, David Parker, Head of Hydrographic Programmes at the UKHO, said:

We are happy to start welcoming UK-based organisations with any seabed mapping remit to the UK Centre for Seabed Mapping and we are keen for all relevant organisations to join.

This important and timely initiative, which supports the UK's contribution and commitment to the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development running between 2021 and 2030, will meet the growing need for a more collaborative, cohesive, empowered, and better promoted marine geospatial community, and we are excited to work with organisations in the public sector to make this a reality.

Quality marine geospatial data is essential for almost every activity undertaken in the marine domain, including maritime trade, environmental and resource management, shipping operations, and national security and infrastructure. Due to the UK's role as a

world leader in seabed mapping, there is a clear opportunity for us to establish a collaborative seabed mapping community which coordinates the collection, management, and access of publicly funded data. More interoperable and usable data will support more informed ocean governance and policy, which in turn will support greater innovation and prosperity.

In line with the fulfilment of our public duty, our vision is for the UK CSM to become the key focal point for our seabed mapping community and a unified voice for policy support, with the capability to develop a network of stakeholders and to enable meaningful cross government coordination.

The UK CSM will lead collaboration to develop specifications which support UK and international standards for the collection of marine geospatial data. This will provide much needed consistency and interoperability in developing the marine geospatial ecosystem – in line with the “collect once, use many times” principle – and will provide the private sector with confidence of direction. The UK CSM will also improve and increase accessibility and enable free access to data whilst honouring intellectual property (IP) rights, national security, and good data governance.

Having a dedicated centre will also help stakeholders to understand what data collection activities are planned in the future and identify opportunities for collaboration, in turn removing duplication, and optimising economies of scale and the quality and quantity of data being collected under current public funding.

If you would like to know more about the membership process and how to join the UK CSM, contact the team at [UKCSM@UKHO.gov.uk](mailto:UKCSM@UKHO.gov.uk) or visit the [ADMIRALTY website](#).