

Speech: Call to Stop the Devastation Facing the People of Eastern Ghouta

Thank you Mr President, and thank you also to Under Secretary General Lowcock for your very detailed and clear briefing today. It was very powerful to hear through you the voices of the people of Eastern Ghouta.

Mr President,

Russia called this meeting today to allow us to present our understanding of the situation on the ground and to come up with ways of getting out of this situation. Well, we've heard very clearly from Under Secretary General Lowcock today and from the Secretary General yesterday about the situation on the ground.

This is hell on earth.

The scale of the human suffering and destruction is unbearable.

The suffering of the Syrian people, while primarily the responsibility of the Syrian regime, brings shame on all of us in this Council.

Let us be very clear about the main cause of this hell on earth. It's the direct result of an escalation by the Syrian regime of its aerial bombardment of civilian areas using cluster bombs, alleged chemical weapons use and systematically killing hundreds of its own civilians.

As others in this chamber have said today, these are breaches of international humanitarian law and are war crimes.

The UK will be unrelenting in our campaign to ensure accountability and justice for these crimes using all mechanisms at our disposal.

Mr President,

We owe it to the people of Eastern Ghouta to highlight the utter devastation facing them and then to take measures to stop it.

According to the Syrian American Medical Society, in the first 48 hours of this week, 250 civilians have been killed and 460 injured. Those that survived these attacks have been further targeted by the regime whilst trying to get help for their injuries. There have been 22 separate attacks on 20 different hospitals in the three days since Monday. We applaud the incredible work of the brave doctors on the ground who risk their own lives to save others. And like the Netherlands, we salute the heroes of the White Helmets who have demonstrated incredible bravery, courage and resilience to save the lives of thousands of Syrians from all sides of this conflict.

From the start of this conflict the Assad regime has peddled the myth that all of those opposing Assad are terrorists. This is manifestly not the case.

The people of Eastern Ghouta are not terrorists. Jabhat al-Nusra have only a small presence in Eastern Ghouta; their fighters numbering less than a quarter of one percent of the population of that area. Nothing can justify the barbaric bombardment we've seen in recent days, or the blocking of humanitarian aid, or the denial of medical evacuations.

We also condemn the mortar shelling from Eastern Ghouta of civilian areas of Damascus and attacks against the Russian Embassy in Damascus.

Mr President,

This Council has failed to uphold its responsibilities in Syria. We all know why this is. But we have all agreed that there can be no military solution to the conflict, only a political one. The actions of the Assad regime in recent weeks, the military escalation in an area guaranteed by Russia and Iran as a "de-escalation zone" shows cynical disregard by the regime for every member of this Council and for our resolution. So it is vital that we all send a clear and unified message in response.

The solution to this situation is not difficult. We need to see an immediate cessation of hostilities, including an immediate end to the aerial bombing of Eastern Ghouta. If everyone in this chamber were to commit to this unequivocally today, it could have an impact on the ground. It could save the lives of thousands of innocent men, women and children who are being killed as we speak here today in this chamber. We therefore welcome the resolution put forward into blue by you, Mr President, and by Sweden, and we look forward to a vote later today.

To conclude Mr President,

Yesterday, we discussed the principles of the UN Charter which our predecessors drafted in the name of the peoples of the world to help save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. It's clear we have fallen woefully short of this aim. We have failed the people of Eastern Ghouta. But let us reverse this trend today. Let us adopt your draft resolution and take the concrete actions needed to ease the suffering in this zone of death and destruction.

Thank you.

[News story: Peatlands to be restored in the North West](#)

Work is underway to restore peatlands to their natural state across Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire after £160,000 of funding was secured through the Department Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The Environment Agency will be working with a number of partners including Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Warrington Borough Council and United Utilities at six sites.

The funding will be used to restore upland and lowland peatlands to their natural state by increasing their capacity to prevent carbon entering the atmosphere, reduce flood risk by slowing the flow of rain water and creating habitats for vulnerable wildlife.

Natural England has been advising the partners about the best design for the schemes, and approving methods used on the Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

By blocking drainage ditches, building peat bunds and working with the local topography, the work will help keep water on the sites, encouraging the typical bog plant species and discouraging the dry-loving grasses and birch.

They provide 70% of our drinking water

Peatlands cover 11% of England's landscape and they provide a great habitat for a wide range of wildlife and birds including merlin, dunlin and golden plover. They also provide 70% of our drinking water and reduce greenhouse gases by locking away at least 3.2 billion tonnes of CO².

There are six projects across the Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire that have secured this funding, part of a Defra peatlands restoration pot of £500,000, with further projects around the country.

Environment Minister Thérèse Coffey said:

Well-maintained peatlands are an iconic aspect of the English landscape and are a vital part of the natural ecosystem. They provide key habitats for wildlife, supply us with clean water and reduce carbon emissions.

This scheme will help fulfil our ambition to be the first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state while returning thousands of hectares of peatland to their natural state.

Lisa Whelan, Environment Programme Manager at the Environment Agency, said:

Peatlands are a fantastic resource and these restoration projects have multiple benefits to the environment. Work at the sites will include creating fire breaks and peat bunds, introduce new plant species, block ditches along with further initiatives to restore the peatlands.

Some projects will also serve as study sites for trials of innovative new restoration techniques. As well as having > a huge environmental benefit such as reducing greenhouse gases it will enhance habitats for wildlife.

Work is underway at six sites across Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire

Risley Moss, Cheshire – working with Warrington Borough Council (funding of £20,000) Danes Moss, Cheshire – working with Cheshire Wildlife Trust (funding of £15,000) Holcroft Moss, Cheshire – working with Cheshire Wildlife Trust (funding of £46,000) Goyt's Moss Bridge, Peak District – working with United Utilities (funding of £16,000) Peak Naze and Sykes Moor, Peak District – working with United Utilities (funding of £36,300) Crompton Moor, Greater Manchester – working with City of Trees (funding of £30,000)

Total funding is £163,300

Speech: Conference for Commonwealth Education Ministers

Thank you Dr Mohamed. And thank you also to those fellow Education Ministers I have had the opportunity to meet over the last few days. I think this has been a very successful conference. I would like to congratulate the Secretary General and the Fijian Government for hosting a very successful conference. It has been wonderful for me to have had so many productive, interesting and warm conversations with fellow ministers, in meetings and at the very successful receptions that have been held throughout the course of the conference. I have really valued the opportunity to learn about other education systems and to discuss so many shared challenges that we all face across the Commonwealth. I am sure that many of us will stay in touch in future and continue to support each other where we can.

The UK government is looking forward to welcoming your Heads of Government to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April. We will discuss shared challenges, and move forward – I hope – renewed, and revitalised after that conference.

These international gatherings are helpful in shaping shared policy objectives and working collectively to overcome challenges. For example, the Millennium Development Goals focused minds on universalising access to education. And now, the Sustainable Development Goals are going further.

In recent years, great strides have been made across the world. It should not be forgotten that in 1990 there were 1.8 billion people living in absolute

poverty. This has been reduced over those years since by a billion. But, there is still much more to do. As our Foreign Secretary wrote recently:

Look at those countries where population is growing the fastest, where unemployment is highest, and where the tensions are greatest, and without exception you will find a common factor: female illiteracy.

Boris Johnson was correct when he went on to state that this is both a moral outrage and 'contrary to the interests of world peace, prosperity, health and happiness.

Globally, 130 million girls are not in school. So I would urge member states to commit to work together and individually to ensure 12 years of quality education for all by 2030.

But we must be more ambitious than seeking universal access. We must turn our attention to ensuring pupils receive the high-quality education they deserve.

Of those pupils in school in low income countries, 90 per cent are not on track to master the basics of maths, reading and writing by the end of primary school.

Raising school standards for pupils from all backgrounds has been the driving force behind the government reforms in my country since 2010. The government's mission is to provide pupils with the knowledge-rich education that will prepare them for the rigours and opportunities of the 21st century.

Core academic subjects have returned to the heart of the secondary curriculum and we have pursued evidence-based approaches to teaching, raising standards for all. At the same time, the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has narrowed both at primary and secondary schools in England since 2010.

In education, there is nothing more important to spreading opportunity than ensuring all pupils are taught to read effectively. Figures from the UK show that pupils who are reading well by age 5 are 6 times more likely than their peers to be on track by age 11 in reading, and 11 times more likely to be on track in mathematics.

But, in the years just before we came into government in 2010, we knew something was wrong with the way our primary schools taught reading. England was stagnating in the international league tables and the international data also showed a wider gap between top and bottom performers than in most other countries, leading to England being known for its 'long tail of underachievement'.

And data from 2012 showed that we were the only OECD country where the maths and reading abilities of our 16-24 year olds was worse than that of our 55 to 65 year olds. A misguided move away from evidence-based approaches to teaching children to read was stifling opportunity for too many children.

For decades, the overwhelming weight of international evidence – including the influential longitudinal study from Clackmannanshire in Scotland – pointed to systematic phonics as the most effective way to teach children to read.

Phonics teaches children to associate letters with sounds, providing pupils with the code to unlock written English. And despite the evidence in favour of this approach – a traditional approach – the government's phonics reforms were controversial and met with widespread opposition from teaching unions and other vested interests.

All primary schools in England are now required by law to use phonics as they teach pupils to read. But more controversially, the government introduced the Phonics Screening Check in 2012. This is a short test comprising a list of 40 words that 6-year-old children read to their teacher at the end of year 1.

The proportion of pupils passing the Phonics Check has increased every year since it was introduced by us in 2012. In 2012, the first year of the Phonics Check, just 58 per cent of 6 year olds reached the pass mark of 32 out of the 40 correctly read words, so 40 per cent were failing. This year, 81 per cent of 6-year-olds reached that standard, with 92 per cent of children reaching that standard by the end of year 2.

This year, 154,000 more 6 year olds were on track to be fluent readers than in 2012. Last year, 147,000 more 6 year olds were on track compared to 2012.

And the success of this policy has been confirmed by the international PIRLS results (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). The international study of 9-year-olds' reading ability in 50 countries showed that England has risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016, thanks to a statistically significant rise in our average score.

But more importantly, these tests show that we are dealing with the 'long tail of underachievement' that has stifled opportunity. The PIRLS results show that reading has improved for pupils from all backgrounds, but it is the low-performing pupils who are gaining most rapidly.

The report found that performance in the Phonics Check was strongly predictive of PIRLS performance, vindicating the government's drive to universalise this evidence-based approach to teaching. The PIRLS national report for England states that, and I quote:

Pupils who scored full marks in the phonics check were also the highest scoring group in PIRLS 2016, with an average overall PIRLS score of 617. In contrast, pupils who did not reach the 'expected standard' in the Year 1 phonics check perform below England's overall average, with lower phonics check scores being associated with decreasing average PIRLS scores.

So that is why our government is determined to go even further and see more pupils reach the expected standard at age 6. And if I could just quote the

New Zealand Minister's earlier quote:

We have gone so far, we're going to go further still.

The government has also faced-down much opposition to the drive to increase the proportion of pupils studying core academic GCSEs at age 16. The English Baccalaureate, that we introduced as a performance measure, requires pupils to study GCSEs in English, maths, at least two sciences, either history or geography, and a foreign language.

Schools are measured now on the proportion of their pupils entering GCSEs in all 5 categories, and on the attainment of their pupils in these subjects.

Since 2010 – following a long-term decline in pupils taking these core academic subjects – there have been sharp increases in most of these subjects. For example, the proportion of pupils taking the science component of the EBacc has risen from 63 per cent to 91 per cent, and the proportion studying history or geography has risen from 48 per cent to 77 per cent.

Nationally, nearly two-fifths of pupils are entered for the EBacc. This is up from just over one-fifth in 2010. But again there is still much more to do, to reach the government's ambitious target of 90 per cent of pupils studying towards the full suite of EBacc GCSEs by 2025.

Since 2010, the proportion of pupils studying a language to GCSE has risen from 40 per cent to 47 per cent and we are determined to raise participation in languages much further in the years to come, particularly as Britain raises its eyes to the opportunities that await post-Brexit.

Evidence supports the government's desire to drive up participation in these core academic subjects. Evidence from the Sutton Trust found that pupils in a set of 300 schools that increased their EBacc entry, from 8 per cent to 48 per cent, were more likely to achieve good English and maths GCSEs, more likely to take an A level, or an equivalent level 3 qualification, and more likely to stay in post-16 education.

And these findings were corroborated by work carried out by the Institute of Education in London examining the effect that GCSE choice has on education post-16, and I quote:

Students pursuing an EBacc-eligible curriculum at 14-16 had a greater probability of progression to all post 16 educational outcomes, while taking an applied GCSE subject had the opposite effect. There were no social class differences in the advantages of pursuing an EBacc-eligible curriculum which suggests that an academically demanding curriculum is equally advantageous for working class as for middle class pupils.

And this year more pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds entered the EBacc

than at any point since the measure was created.

Again, there is still much more to do. Disadvantaged pupils remain almost half as likely to be entered for these subjects than their more affluent peers. But it is essential that all pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are given access to the core academic subjects that widen opportunities at post-16.

But the government is making progress in widening opportunities, whilst raising standards for all. Recent figures from national assessments that are published on a school by school basis taken at 11 and 16 reveal that the attainment gap has closed since 2011 at both primary and secondary schools, by 10.5 per cent for primary and 10 per cent for secondary.

Despite the controversy and claims from many in my country that the government's standards-raising policies would hurt the performance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, in fact universalising access to evidence-based teaching methods and widening opportunities to study core academic subjects has been to the benefit of all, particularly those most in need.

There is more to do of course. There are still too many pupils not reading at the expected standard by age 6; and there are too many pupils – particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds – not being entered for the full suite of core academic GCSEs. But much progress has been made since 2010 and the government – in step with teachers – is ambitious and determined to go further in the years to come.

Thank you very much chair for listening. I am very happy to answer any questions you may have on what has been a very controversial seven years of education reform in England.

News story: Penny Mordaunt represents UK Prime Minister at Sahel Conference

Representing the UK Prime Minister alongside world leaders including President Macron of France and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Ms Mordaunt announced further support to help strengthen security across the Sahel, where extremist groups including Da-esh, Al Qaeda and Boko Haram often operate freely.

The Sahel area of Africa (Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso) is beset by trafficking, violence, instability and extremism – which present significant future risk to the UK. The Sahel also has the fastest growing population in the world and the humanitarian situation is acute and precarious – 21.7m people don't have reliable access to their next meal.

As announced by Prime Minister Theresa May and President Macron of France at the UK-France Summit last month, the UK is providing £50m of lifesaving UK aid to the area, three chinook helicopters for strategic airlift and considering options to enhance UK diplomatic presence in the Sahel – in order to tackle significant future threats.

The additional support announced today will help improve the accommodation of Niger's army, who are currently living in tents while tackling armed groups along the border with Mali, and will contribute to emergency medical evacuation airlift provision.

The International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt said:

The Sahel is one of the poorest places in the world, where over 40% of people struggle to live on less than \$2 a day, and where violence, conflict and extremism are widespread.

It's essential we act now with our European partners to help the Sahelian nations build security and stability, while continuing to deliver emergency humanitarian aid to those in desperate need.

By helping to keep hundreds of thousands of people safe from starvation and harm, we are tackling the causes of both migration and terrorism, to keep Britain safe.

- Today the International Development Secretary announced £2 million non-ODA CSSF for the G5 Sahel Joint Force to be spent over the next two years. The G5 Joint Force is a Sahelian regional security initiative and so this will involve supporting Sahel states to improve their own security. This will include:
 - Better infrastructure to improve the living conditions of the Nigerien G5 battalion – who are currently living in tents while tackling armed groups along the border with Mali.
 - support to medical evacuation for G5 forces for troops in need of urgent medical care.
- The announcement was made at the G5 Pledging Conference which saw international donors such as France and Germany provide additional funding to support the G5 Joint Force.
- The G5 countries are Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.
- The humanitarian need in the Sahel is acute and precarious. 21.7m people don't have reliable access to their next meal – that's 1/3 of the population of the UK. The Sahel is poor relative to the rest of Africa, and the Human Development Index rankings in the region are amongst the lowest in the world.
- Extremist groups such as Da-esh, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram already operate freely in much of the Sahel, and the area risks becoming a place of shelter for displaced extremists. It is also beset by widespread trafficking in people, drugs, weapons and illegal wildlife.
- The Sahel is also a key transit zone for modern slavery from Nigeria and the key illegal migration transit route for those travelling from West

Press release: Welsh Secretary calls on Welsh Government to improve welfare standards in Welsh slaughterhouses

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns has called on the Welsh Government to take further steps to drive up animal welfare standards in Wales as the UK Government today (23 Feb) laid legislation in Parliament to make CCTV cameras mandatory in slaughterhouses in England.

The legislation will come into effect in England from May 2018, once it passes through Parliament, at which point businesses will have six months to comply. It forms part of a package of reforms implemented by the UK Government designed to drive up welfare standards.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

This legislation is a clear demonstration of the steadfast and focused commitment the UK Government has to ensuring the highest possible animal welfare standards in the UK.

There is clearly a real strength of feeling among the public that all animals should be treated with the utmost respect at all stages of life and be subject to the highest possible welfare standards.

I would urge Welsh Ministers in Cardiff Bay to listen to those voices and to investigate fully what further steps they can take to apply the same legislation to slaughterhouses in Wales to ensure the highest standards of animal health, welfare and food safety across the board.

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS

In August 2017, the UK Government's Environment Secretary Michael Gove launched a consultation on the plans to deliver a manifesto commitment for CCTV to be required in every slaughterhouse in England in all areas where live animals are present, with unrestricted access to footage for Official Veterinarians – reassuring consumers that high welfare standards are being effectively enforced.

[A summary of responses](#) published in November showed that of almost 4,000

respondents, more than 99% were supportive of the plans.