

The Philippines and the United Kingdom: old friends, new horizons

As the United Kingdom's Minister with responsibility for relations with the Philippines, I was delighted to visit Manila for the first time this week. I met leading figures in government, business and beyond and was pleased to play my part in building on the broad and ever expanding range of areas where our two countries work together. Although I'm sorry that because of COVID-19 I wasn't able to get out and about to see the country and meet as many people as I would have liked.

Our countries, while separated by nearly 11,000 kilometres, enjoy close and longstanding links. But we have never rested on our laurels and have always sought to do more together.

I am delighted that next year, the 75th year of our formal diplomatic relations, will see the launch of an Enhanced Partnership. This will allow us to continue to drive forward our trade relations building on an already strong £2bn of bilateral trade and investment and growing the more than 200 British companies currently operating in the Philippines such as Shell, AstraZeneca, GSK and Diageo to name a few.

It will allow us to deepen our strong collaboration on combatting climate change, with the UK hosting COP26 next year, bringing together heads of state, climate experts and campaigners to agree coordinated action. The UK is already partnering the Philippines across areas such as low carbon energy transition and protecting the Philippines' incredible biodiversity.

We can strengthen our links on defence, security and counter-terrorism and foster stronger consular cooperation to protect our citizens and make their lives better when they are a long way from home.

Indeed, our bilateral relations would not be what they are without the close connections between our people. This includes the 20,000 British nationals who have chosen to make the Philippines their home. It also includes the 200,000 Filipinos who have settled in the UK including around 30,000 who have chosen to work in the UK's National Health Service where I can personally attest that they are respected for their compassion, dedication and professional excellence.

It was exciting to discuss our plans for the future this week. My visit also allowed me to spend time discussing the key political issues relevant to our citizens' lives, including human rights. And I was able to take steps to expand our already strong bilateral cooperation on higher education, by signing a statement of commitment, which will help widen the access of Filipino learners to quality higher education and build the competitiveness of higher education institutions in the Philippines.

I know the Philippines has faced great challenges already this typhoon

season. I was saddened to watch the dreadful impact of Typhoons Quintas, Rolly and Ulysses in quick succession over recent days, and continue to be inspired by the fortitude of the Philippine people. I was pleased the UK was able to donate £500,000 (PHP 32 million) through our Red Cross partners to support those in greatest humanitarian need immediately following Typhoon Rolly.

Similarly, we must continue to work together to beat the COVID-19 global pandemic which continues to affect our daily lives. I am proud of the work my country has taken forward to ensure that all nations and people around the world will be able to have access to safe and effective vaccines when they are ready. Progress is happening fast. During my time in Manila I discussed cutting-edge collaboration with the Philippines on global access to vaccines, and learned how the UK's public health partnership and support programmes are having an impact.

Alongside our Enhanced Partnership with the Philippines, the UK has deep and enduring relationships with countries across the ASEAN region, and we are committed to bolstering our relationship with ASEAN. We want to cement our commitment to ASEAN through becoming a Dialogue Partner. We believe this status reflects the strength and breadth of the UK offer, both now and in the future. We are grateful for the warm support we have received from the Philippines for this ambition.

Whilst our countries may indeed be old friends, I am confident that we are ready to embrace some brand new horizons in our relations.