

## [News story: PM call with Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands: 30 March 2017](#)

This evening the Prime Minister called Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte following yesterday's UK letter of notification to the European Council.

The Prime Minister underlined the UK's determination to agree a deep and special partnership between the UK and the European Union.

Both Prime Ministers agreed that the UK would remain a close and committed ally, and that they would approach the talks to come in a constructive manner.

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## [News story: Bradford & Bingley asset sale to raise £11.8 billion for UK taxpayers](#)

The loans will be sold to Prudential plc and to funds managed by Blackstone. There will be no changes to the terms and conditions of the loans sold. Borrowers do not need to take any action.

The price achieved reflects the strong credit quality of the portfolio and the outcome of a highly competitive sale process. It delivers value for money for the taxpayer and compares favourably with the 'fair value' of the B&B loan book disclosed in B&B's accounts last year. The fair value of the B&B loan book is less than its book value, reflecting the low interest rates payable on the loans.

UK Asset Resolution (UKAR) manages Bradford & Bingley and NRAM's closed loan books on behalf of the taxpayer. Allowing for today's transaction, UKAR's balance sheet now stands at £22 billion, down from £37 billion in September 2016 and from £116 billion in 2010.

Chancellor Philip Hammond said:

The sale of these Bradford & Bingley assets for £11.8 billion marks another major milestone in our plan to get taxpayers' money back following the financial crisis.

We are determined to return the financial assets we own to the private sector and today's sale is further proof of the confidence investors have in the UK economy.

At [Budget 2016](#), the government announced that it would explore a programme of sales designed to raise sufficient proceeds for Bradford & Bingley (B&B) to repay the £15.65 billion debt to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) and, in turn, the corresponding loan from the Treasury. Today's (31 March 2017) sale is the first in the programme.

The programme of sales is expected to conclude in full before the end of 2017-18. Any further sales will be subject to market conditions and ensuring value for money.

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## **[South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation \(SASEC\) facilitating trade for speedier clearances with reduced transaction costs and greater predictability for trade](#)**

South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) is facilitating trade guided by the SASEC Trade Facilitation Strategic Framework (2014–2018) in the sub-region through various projects. The key projects underway in

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## **[Press release: Landmark day in devolution as powers pass to Welsh Assembly](#)**

Today marks an important milestone in implementing the Wales Act 2017 with powers coming into force that pave the way for the introduction of Welsh Rates of Income Tax, enable the Welsh Government to invest more in infrastructure and allow the National Assembly to decide what to call itself.

These important powers put more decisions into the hands of the Assembly and the Welsh Government and give them important new levers to grow the Welsh

economy and to deliver better public services across Wales.

The provisions which come into force today:

- Remove the requirement for a referendum before the Welsh Rates of Income Tax are introduced
- Increase the amount that Welsh Ministers can borrow to fund capital expenditure from £500m to £1bn
- Reaffirm the Assembly and Welsh Government as a permanent part of the UK's constitutional arrangements
- Enshrine the convention that Parliament will not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the Assembly
- Allow the Welsh Government and UK Government to agree a protocol for managing water resources that flow between the two nations

The changes also mark the end of the Secretary of State for Wales' annual address to the Senedd on the Queen's Speech and his entitlement to take part in Assembly proceedings.

Alun Cairns, Secretary of State for Wales, said:

Today marks the transfer of important new powers to the Assembly. These are powers which affect the lives of everyone living in Wales and are a major step towards the clearer, stronger and fairer devolution settlement that we are putting in place.

The Assembly and Welsh Government are, for the first time, formally recognised as permanent parts of the UK's constitutional fabric. There is no longer a need for a referendum before the Welsh Rates of Income Tax come on stream and Welsh Ministers will be able to borrow up to £1bn to invest in renewing Wales's infrastructure.

Devolution has developed significantly since 2010 and these powers mark the maturing of the Assembly into a fully fledged Parliament. From today, the Assembly can decide on a new title if that's what Assembly Members want. I and my successors will no longer be entitled to a seat in the Assembly nor will we be required to give an annual address to the Assembly on the Queen's Speech.

Together, these changes reflect the coming of age of the devolved institutions in Wales and mark the beginning of the transition to the new settlement that the Wales Act will put in place. I look forward to these powers being used to deliver for the people of Wales.

The measures come into force automatically two months after Royal Assent. The Wales Act 2017 gained Royal Assent on 31 January 2017.

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## More must be done to place Syrian refugees; conflict sees worst violence in months – UN

30 March 2017 – The world's attention has moved away from Syria following the battle for Aleppo, despite the fact that the last few months have been "some of the worst" for civilians, the United Nations humanitarian chief today told the Security Council, reiterating calls for an end to the six year conflict.

"Violence continues to rear its ugly head in various parts of the country, even if it largely disappeared from the world's TV screens since the evacuation of East Aleppo," Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien told the Council.

"The last months have been some of the worst yet for civilians inside Syria," he added. "For Syria, that is saying something."

Today's humanitarian discussions in the Security Council come as political discussions are underway in Geneva, assisted by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. The latest discussions started on 23 March and will last through the week.

In today's comments, Mr. O'Brien reiterated the importance of the [intra-Syrian talks](#) saying he "cannot emphasize enough how high the stakes are," and voicing support for Mr. de Mistura.

### ***Civilians threatened in Raqqa and Ghouta***

As the conflict enters its seventh year, hundreds of civilians are believed to have been killed in the past weeks alone, with tens of thousands displaced and continued attacks on medical facilities and schools.

Mr. O'Brien expressed deep concern about the safety and protection of more than 400,000 civilians threatened by military operations in Raqqa governorate, which includes the de facto capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh).

As the fighting moves closer to Raqqa city, "concerns about the fate of civilians will only grow," Mr. O'Brien said.

"I urge all parties to do everything in their power to protect and spare civilians from the effects of the hostilities as required, not just requested, under international humanitarian law."

The UN and partners have been prepositioning stocks to enable a rapid response "access permitting."

In addition, Mr. O'Brien also said he was extremely worried about the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the besieged parts of

eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus, where some 400,000 people are trapped by Government forces.

The tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta

No UN humanitarian convoy was allowed access since October 2016 to eastern Ghouta, with some areas cut off since June prior.

In the past 10 days, Government forces have also reportedly prevented commercial trucks from entering, hiking up prices of staples and cutting informal trade.

“This tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta,” Mr. O’Brien said, calling for immediate access.

Delivery of humanitarian aid has been difficult throughout the country, the senior UN official lamented. He said that despite hopes that 2017 would lead to greater entry to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, “the bottom line is, however, that with a quarter of the year gone, our current levels of access are no better than this time last year.”

His comments come just days before an international pledging conference is due to be held in Brussels on 5 April. Entitled “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”, the conference is co-chaired by the UN.

Mr. O’Brien thanked donors for going “above and beyond” this year, but stressed the critical needs in Syria and the neighbouring countries.

The UN and its humanitarian partners have released the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria which outlines requirements of some \$3.4 billion to undertake a comprehensive humanitarian response in Syria, including saving lives, enhancing protection and building people’s resilience.

**AUDIO:** The UN Refugee Agency, wants more countries to fulfill their pledges on resettling those fleeing the conflict in Syria, which is now in its seventh year.

***Urging Governments to make good on promises of homes***

Meanwhile, new figures show that fewer Syrian refugees were resettled in the past year than originally planned, even as the total number of people fleeing the violence surpasses five million.

“Despite the call during that meeting in Geneva on 30 March 2016 to resettle and facilitate pathways for 500,000 refugees, to date 250,000 places have been made available,” said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. His remarks reference the High-level Meeting on Syria, held in March 2016, where participating Governments agreed to resettle 10 per cent of all Syrian refugees by 2018.

UNHCR, the agency that Mr. Grandi heads, said that while 250,000 locations have been pledged, some have not yet been made available for the people who need them.

Mr. Grandi called on Governments to make good on their promises to find new homes for the most vulnerable refugees: “We still have a long road to travel in [expanding resettlement](#) and the number and range of complementary pathways available for refugees.”