

17 MARCH 2020

Foreign and Commonwealth Office - Oral Statement

COVID-19: Foreign Secretary update

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the Prime Minister has said, the Coronavirus pandemic 'is the worst public health crisis for a generation.'

It is an unsettling time for families up and down the country.

So we need a united effort to tackle COVID-19 effectively, And come through this challenge ... as I am confident we can and will.

Following on from, and consistent with, the domestic measures announced by the Prime Minister yesterday, And based on the fast-changing international circumstances, Today I am announcing changes to FCO Travel Advice.

UK travellers abroad now face widespread international border restrictions, and lock-downs in various countries.

The FCO always considers the safety and security of British nationals.

So, with immediate effect, I have taken the decision to advise British nationals against non-essential travel globally ... for an initial period of 30 days, and subject to review.

This decision has been taken based on the domestic measures introduced here in the UK, Along with the changes to border and a range of other restrictions, Which are now being taken by countries around the world.

The speed and range of those measures across other countries is unprecedented.

Some of those decisions are being made without notice.

In some cases, even in countries or particular areas where cases of COVID-19 have not yet been reported, Local authorities have nonetheless imposed restrictions on movement ... and done so with little or no notice at all.

In light of these circumstances, we want to reduce the risk of leaving vulnerable British tourists and visitors stranded overseas.

We will, of course, keep this advice under review and amend it as soon as the situation allows.

The Government is keenly aware that international freight services... Such as shipping and haulage are vital for ensuring the continuity of the supply of essential food, goods and material to the UK.

We regard this kind of travel as essential, And we will work with industry to issue detailed advice which maintains the flow of goods, Whilst also protecting the well-being of staff working on those routes.

The Department for Transport will be leading this work with the freight sector, With the objective of minimising disruption to these routes as far as possible.

At the same time, Mr Speaker, FCO consular teams are working around the clock to provide the best and most up-to-date information available to UK nationals.

In the last week alone, we made over 430 changes to FCO travel advice, and we continue to keep that advice under close and constant review.

We are providing support to British Nationals who have been impacted by Coronavirus while travelling.

During the initial outbreak, or 'containment phase', we arranged the repatriation of more than 200 vulnerable British nationals from China between 31 January and 9 February.

We took that particular action to support British nationals and control the return of those possibly exposed to Covid-19,

At the earliest point in the crisis, When it appeared that the virus might be contained in China.

In other cases, like the British Nationals affected by a COVID-19 infection in a hotel in Tenerife, We have worked with travel companies and airlines... To ensure that those concerned are brought safely home.

We also changed our Travel Advice to advise people over 70, or with underlying health conditions, against travelling on cruises ... to protect those most at risk from Coronavirus.

And we have arranged repatriation from cruise ships, including most recently the 131 UK nationals returned from the Grand Princess, docked in California, who arrived home last Wednesday.

We have been working intensively with the Cuban authorities and Fred Olsen Cruise Lines to ensure that all British nationals are able to return quickly and safely to the UK.

We are doing all we can to ensure that they return to the UK on flights from Havana within the next 48 hours.

I am very grateful to Foreign Minister Rodriguez Parrilla and the Cuban government for swiftly enabling this operation and for their close cooperation to ensure its success.

As well as those repatriations, UK consular teams are working with those who are affected by difficult quarantine conditions, The closure of tourist resorts for example in Europe and North Africa, Or new regulations introduced in various countries where UK nationals are visiting.

We will do everything in our power to get those British nationals affected the care, support and advice they need.

Mr Speaker, we also need to be clear about our capacity to repatriate people from abroad.

We have taken action where necessary.
But no one should be under any illusions.
It is costly and complicated to coordinate.
So Government-supported repatriations have only been undertaken in exceptional circumstances.

Ultimately, the primary responsibility for managing outbreaks of COVID-19 and quarantine measures

Must rest with the country in which the outbreak has occurred.

FCO teams around the world are working urgently to ensure that governments have sensible plans to enable the return of British and other travellers, And, crucially, to keep borders open for a sufficient period of time to enable returns to take place on commercial flights, wherever possible.

Following today's change in Travel Advice, British Nationals who decide that they still need to travel abroad should be fully aware of the increased risks of doing so.

That includes the risk that they may not be able to get home, if travel restrictions are put in place.

So, we urge anyone still considering travel to be realistic about the level of disruption they are willing and able to endure, and to make decisions in light of the unprecedented conditions we face.

Mr Speaker, today's travel guidance follows the domestic measures announced yesterday.

It forms part of our national effort to meet the international challenge presented by the Coronavirus,

A challenge we will rise to, as a government and as a country,

And I commend this statement to the House.