

The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
London
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31 March 2020

Dear Dominic,

First of all, please pass on my thanks to your officials for all of the work that they are doing to get British nationals home at this very difficult time. I'm also grateful to your consular staff for the help they have provided on particular issues following our meeting last week.

Following your press conference yesterday, I have a number of questions and areas of concern that I would like to flag. I would be grateful for your thoughts on these matters and any further details that you can provide about the proposals you outlined.

When we met last week, I explained that I had received around 800 emails on this issue from people around the world. Since then I have received hundreds more emails and I have sought to pass on some of the most pressing questions that have been raised with me in this letter, as well as those where I am myself still seeking answers.

1. Scale of the problem

Your statement rightly referred to the unprecedented nature of the challenge the government is facing in attempting to deal with the repatriation crisis, but we still lack some basic detail on the scale of that challenge.

1.1 What is your latest estimate of the number of British travellers still stranded abroad? If you are not able to provide this exact number, would you be able to provide figures for the number of individual British nationals who have been in contact about their travel problems since the start of the outbreak, minus those who have now returned home?

1.2 Can you provide more detail on (a) the geographic spread of this issue (i.e. how many countries are affected in total?), and (b) the geographic concentration (i.e. what are currently the top 20 countries with the highest number of stranded British nationals, and roughly how many are stranded in each of those countries?)

2. Repatriation Flights: Costs and Priorities

In your statement yesterday, and please correct me if I am summarising you incorrectly, you outlined the three options by which a British national might now obtain a repatriation flight:

(i) where commercial routes are open, and flights are available with the airline with whom they were originally booked to fly home (or an alternative provider arranged by that airline), they can fly with them “*at little to no cost*”; or failing that

(ii) where commercial flights are available with one of the government’s airline partners instead (BA, Virgin, etc.), they can change their tickets and fly with them; or failing that

(iii) where commercial routes are closed and no commercial flights are available at all, they can fly via a plane specially-chartered by the UK government.

You said £75 million would be allocated to “*support those flights and the airlines in order to keep the cost down and affordable for those seeking to return to the UK*”, which I take to mean subsidising Options (ii) and (iii) above, in order to keep the price of tickets for UK nationals at the £250-£500 level specified in the FCO briefing.

2.1 In the FCO’s planned budget for these measures, what proportion of the £75mn has it assumed will pay for subsidies to the government’s airline partners under Option (ii), and what proportion has it assumed will pay for charter flights under Option (iii)?

2.2 Can the government provide a list of confirmed countries (or visitor locations within countries) where – based on the options set out above – charter flights would be the only option at present to provide repatriation flights to British nationals, listed – if possible – by rough estimate of the numbers affected?

2.3 As a point of principle, can you confirm how you will determine the circumstances when it is appropriate to fund charter flights: will this be (a) **regardless of cost, all cases** where neither Option (i) or (ii) are available, and charter flights are the only option; (b) or all cases that can be paid for **up to the budget cap** that has been allocated for these costs?

2.4 If there is a budget cap in place for the funding of charter flights, is it right to assume that the government will prioritise its expenditure in line with the order of the list requested under Q2.2, or will it have some alternative process of prioritisation?

2.5 What financial assistance will be available to people who cannot afford to book onto new commercial or charter flights, even at the subsidised rates proposed by the government, including support with upfront costs, repayable in due course once they are back in the UK, as has been done for many of these on charter flights back from Peru?

2.6 Will special consideration be given to people who have been compensated for the cancellation of their original commercial return flights not with cash refunds, but with credit for future bookings with a particular airline?

2.7 What is the government doing to encourage the relevant airlines in Q2.3 to provide people with full cash refunds, rather than lines of credit?

3. Repatriation Flights: Logistics

As you yourself have said, many of the difficulties in relation to organising this repatriation exercise involve the limitations on the number of, and airports from which, international flights can be undertaken.

These difficulties include, but are not limited to, the need to organise internal (or regional) flights to get British nationals from where they are based to an international airport or transit hub, from where they can complete their journey back to the UK via a commercial flight.

For example, in New Zealand, British travellers are still able to get commercial planes back to the UK from Auckland, but many have told me that they are unable to reach the airport from other parts of the country, especially the South Islands.

3.1 What specific steps are being taken as part of this repatriation strategy to transport British nationals from their current locations to airports from which they can travel home?

3.2 To the extent that this part of the process will involve additional costs for the government (e.g. arranging internal charter flights), can you confirm whether (a) those are provided for within the £75mn announced yesterday, and (b) they will be covered by the estimated £250-£500 extra travel costs which each passenger may need to incur in order to get home?

3.3 What discussions have you had with our overseas partners on combining efforts to transport travellers from our respective countries to suitable international airports, to reduce costs and maximise the use of passenger capacity on board internal flights?

3.4 Have you considered using military aircraft specifically to conduct these internal shuttle flights, potentially in tandem with our overseas allies, and potentially with the use of the RAF's Voyager Fleet of passenger transport planes?

3.5 Separately, has the government also given an official instruction to the Ministry of Defence to provide Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) concerning the logistics of this exercise, e.g. mobilising civilian aircraft and aircrews, and negotiating airspace and landing facilities at civilian or military airfields?

There are a number of other logistical questions that have arisen concerning the repatriation flights that I wanted to ask you about:

3.6 As you know, some British nationals are in quarantine either because they have Covid-19, or have been in close contact with somebody who has; many have been told they cannot leave and will be locked down for months. What long-term arrangements is the FCO making for those who cannot fly home at present under the plans set out yesterday?

3.7 What steps can you take to ensure that – where they are available as an option within the FCO's plan – commercial airlines prioritise the most vulnerable travellers, including those who are running out of medicine or are in the higher-risk groups for infection?

3.8 Will you consider organising some chartered flights for more vulnerable individuals if it becomes clear that they are struggling to get home via commercial routes?

4. Health and Welfare

As I said during our meeting on Thursday, and as I know you appreciate, the personal difficulties facing British nationals with their health, finances, accommodation and other essential practicalities are increasing the longer they are stranded abroad.

While I understand that your statement yesterday was primarily concerned with the repatriation process, you will be conscious that the personal difficulties people are

encountering go hand-in-hand with the length of time they will have to wait for a flight home, so I know that many British nationals were disappointed not to hear these issues addressed.

I hope therefore you can answer some of the outstanding questions below:

Financial Hardship

British nationals who have spent thousands of pounds on flights which have gone on to be cancelled are facing particular financial hardship. I received one typical email from a British national in Singapore advised by the High Commission to take out loans, use credit cards and ask family and friends for money to cover the cost of booking flights home.

4.1 Can we assume that the kind of advice referred to above, advising British nationals to spend whatever it takes to get home, is being formally rescinded following your statement yesterday proposing to limit the cost of any new tickets they need to buy?

4.2 As well as considering help for British nationals with the upfront cost of any new tickets (see Q2.5), will the government consider a system of emergency loans for individuals who run out of money while waiting to have their flight options confirmed?

4.3 In cases where British nationals will continue to have to wait a while before returning home, will they be able to apply for government schemes such as Universal Credit and support for the self employed from overseas?

Accommodation

As we discussed, there has been a growing problem with British nationals being told to leave their original hotels and other accommodation, and struggling to find other places to stay, compounding the uncertainty over how long they will have to wait for a flight home. You updated me on the work being done to help people in this situation in Spain and Cyprus.

4.4 Beyond Spain and Cyprus, what wider assistance can you provide to British nationals who are struggling to cover the cost of their accommodation or are being asked to leave?

4.5 It might be sensible for many British nationals to find accommodation closer to transit hubs while they wait for their flights home, but some are unsure what will be available for them there. Has the government considered booking out entire hotels or apartment blocks to facilitate this process, and charging cost price to those British nationals who stay there?

Health and Insurance

As you know, there are a number of issues arising for British nationals stranded abroad in terms of actual or potential problems with their healthcare, which are naturally of huge concern given the fear of infection they are all experiencing, and which their families back home are also deeply worried about on their behalf.

Several of these problems relate to travel insurance companies, which – as you know – play a vital role in helping people with their medical costs if they require treatment or need to purchase medication.

4.6 What is being done to help those British nationals, especially pensioners and those with other long-term health conditions, whose supplies of NHS-prescribed medicine are starting to run out, and who cannot obtain replacements or alternatives where they are?

4.7 What advice is being offered to British nationals whose travel insurance has now expired, especially those who (for cost reasons, or because they suffer from serious health conditions) could only afford to purchase travel insurance for the duration of their trip, and/or those who are meeting resistance from their insurance company when trying to renew their policy?

4.8 What discussions have you or your counterparts in other departments had with the major travel insurance companies concerning their position on these cases; in particular, have they been urged to make a commitment to honour their customers' original insurance policies until they are able to return home?

4.9 What contingency plans do the government have in place if some travel insurance companies go into administration? Will the state step in as an insurer of last resort if this happens? And where travel insurance companies are e.g. providing ongoing supplies of treatment and medication to those in need, will the government take up that role?

4.10 What is the government doing to ensure there is clear and consistent advice given to returning UK nationals, and to the airline staff, border office staff, etc. who are dealing with them, in terms of their self-isolation? At present, I have been told the advice on return has varied from instructions to undertake 14 -days self isolation to no advice at all.

4.11 Similarly, what is the government doing to ensure staff at airports dealing with returning British nationals have appropriate PPE. I can appreciate that PPE is rightly being prioritised for health and social care staff, but I would be grateful if you would be able to look into this point too and work with your colleagues in the Home Office and Department of Transport to ensure that the UK Border Force and other essential staff are adequately protected.

I hope that you will be able to consider the points that I have raised in this letter and provide me with a detailed response to these questions as soon as possible.

Thank you for your assistance with this matter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

Emily

Rt Hon Emily Thornberry MP

Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs