



International Relations and Defence Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: The UK and sub-Saharan Africa: follow-up

Wednesday 26 January 2022

10 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Lord Anderson of Swansea; Baroness Blackstone; Lord Boateng; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Fall; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Stirrup; Baroness Sugg; Lord Teverson; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 12

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 115 - 128

Witnesses

I: Vicky Ford MP, Minister for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Debbie Palmer, Director for West and Southern Africa, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Simon Mustard, Director for East and Central Africa, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

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Examination of witnesses

Vicky Ford MP, Debbie Palmer and Simon Mustard.

Q115 **The Chair:** Good morning. I welcome to this meeting of the International Relations and Defence Committee in the House of Lords Vicky Ford, Debbie Palmer and Simon Mustard.

Thank you all for joining us today, but particularly, Minister, for giving us time with you today. I know you had a gruelling and fascinating week last week, visiting Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. This is our opportunity to follow up on some of the issues we raised during our inquiry on the UK and its relations with the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, and to hear from the Government the current position on our work with the countries in that region.

At this stage, I always remind both members and witnesses that the session is on the record; it is transcribed and, of course, broadcast. I also remind our members that before they ask any of the questions they should declare any relevant interests. Throughout our session today, members will be able to ask a supplementary after their initial question and if, by any good chance, there is time remaining at the end I shall open the floor to broader questions.

The first question, as ever, is from me. It is more general in nature and will not surprise you too much, given the thrust of our report. In our report, *The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa: Prosperity, Peace and Development Co-Operation*, which was published in summer 2020, we called for an overarching government strategy. The integrated review published in spring last year underlined the importance of Africa, but fell short of setting out a strategic approach to the continent. Minister, can we expect the Government to publish their strategy for Africa and, if not, how will we know what government policy is?

Vicky Ford MP: Thank you very much. It is a pleasure to be here this morning. The integrated review sets out the Government's approach to working with African countries and then we continue to share information on the implementation of our approach through speeches, visits, articles, social media, et cetera.

For example, I set out our priorities for Africa in my speech to Chatham House just before Christmas on 14 December last year. Further information on our approach will be published in the new international development strategy later this year. The vision is to build a network of liberty through partnerships with African countries, one that promotes British interests and leads to countries, and indeed the continent, being freer, safer, more prosperous, healthier and greener.

HMG intend for the UK to be the partner of choice for a number of African countries. Our approach is to maximise the benefits from the harmonisation of our trade, security, diplomatic and development work, as set out in the integrated review. We will continue to work in partnership with regional powers to further our shared diplomatic values,

security interests, and economic, climate and development goals, including empowering women and girls.

Now, we recognise the diversity of the continent, so the approach is differentiated by countries. We focus our resources where they can have the most impact and influence. Thematically, our priorities are, first, to promote freedom and democracy, strengthen economic partnerships, deliver a cleaner, greener planet, build defence and security partnerships, and empower women and girls.

In addition, we promote the best of Britain through our reputation as a principled humanitarian donor. We prioritise resources according to need. We are modernising the international crisis architecture and championing the protection of civilians. We also look to make better use of our research expertise and commercial acumen in science, technology and digital; for example, harnessing the potential of big data and digital technologies. This is all underpinned by the UK's long-standing commitment to promoting the benefits of a stable, rules-based international order, advancing human rights and inclusive politics in Africa.

The primary delivery mechanism is the work of our posts across the continent and at headquarters. It is backed by nearly £900 million in bilateral overseas development assistance, as well as other UK programme funding and unlocking other financing. That includes British International Investment—the relaunch of CDC, as was—UKEF, and private investment and financing of the third sector. We also look to use our soft power assets, the knowledge and expertise of our African diaspora communities, strategic communication tools and campaigns, and a strengthened network of international partners.

We need to improve how we communicate to the people of the UK some of the outstanding work we do in other countries. You will have seen from my trip last week that there was also coverage in the UK press. I would like to see a particular emphasis on how we can be held to account by the people of the UK for what we do, by making sure they get further clarity, transparency and information as to what we are doing on the ground in different countries.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You have listed so many of the issues on which the committee has formed views. You mentioned the publication of the ODA strategy. I was a little concerned that you just said “later this year”. That is something members may pick up either today or on another occasion, because we were thinking it was early this year, but I may of course be overimagining the impact of the words you have said.

Q116 Lord Anderson of Swansea: Two days ago there was a military coup in Burkina Faso, which up to that time had been as stable as its neighbour Ghana. This followed such coups last year in Chad, Guinea and Mali, civil wars in Sudan and Ethiopia, and jihadist insurgencies in Somalia, Sahel and Mozambique. Does this mean there is a crisis in democracy in Africa? Do you agree with Secretary Blinken that there is what he called a

“democratic recession” in Africa?

Vicky Ford MP: That is a really important question. We are intending to publish the international development strategy in the spring. I would caveat that there is a lot going on in foreign affairs at the moment, as you may have noticed, but it is our firm intention to publish it this spring. Yes, we share Secretary Blinken’s concern about the attack on democracy, not just in Africa, but globally.

We also have great belief in the strength of democracy. In Africa, while democracy may have been threatened in some places, it is vibrant and fiercely alive in others. With this complex picture, we must be very clear that the opportunities and challenges in each country are different. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all response.

Regarding Burkina Faso, I made a Statement yesterday which outlined that we condemn the coup by military forces, and that it is vital for all parties to remain calm and respect human rights, and for Burkina Faso to return to democratic, civilian, constitutional rule without delay. I also called for the immediate safe and unconditional release of all members of the civilian Government who have been detained, including the President. Any attempt to impose a change of leadership by force, including through forced resignations, is unacceptable. We are monitoring the political and security situation closely, and working with partners to encourage swift, peaceful and constructive resolution to events. Thank you for allowing me to put this on the record this morning, because it is important.

Dialogue between all parties is required to tackle insecurity across Burkina Faso and to respond to the needs of the Burkinabe people. The UK remains completely committed to supporting stability and development in Burkina Faso, and will continue to provide aid to those most in need.

In the spirit of the network of liberty, we work really closely with key allies such as the US and the EU, but we also rely on the efforts of the African Union, the United Nations and the relevant regional groupings to resist the draw towards authoritarian practices. We support Africa’s democratic traditions by working in partnership with the ordinary people who are fighting for their rights. We have various tools. On a daily basis, with our ambassadors and high commissioners, I will use diplomacy and persuasion to make the case for democracy and human rights.

We also use our programming to provide a wide range of practical support. For example, using the CSSF, we supported the reform of the police in Kenya and other countries. In the Gambia in December, we had the UK’s first independent election observation mission, led by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which was deployed to observe the election. Across Africa, the Rule of Law Expertise Programme—ROLE UK—has supported partnerships that provide high-quality, pro bono legal and judicial expertise. We also provide significant funding to promote and protect human rights, working in close partnership with civil society organisations.

We know that the road to liberty can be very difficult. That was shown to me first hand on my visit to Sudan last year. We should not take for granted that progress is irreversible. We must nurture and protect gains that are made. In Somalia, there is good news that new dates have been announced for the elections, but we must remain vigilant and ensure that we keep up the pressure for those elections to actually happen, including by working closely with the troop-contributing countries to ensure that we deliver a credible successor to AMISOM.

In Ethiopia, I welcome the new efforts to mediate peace. I discussed the importance of peaceful resolution to the conflict when I met Prime Minister Abiy last week, but we are in no doubt that peace will be extremely challenging. We must continue all our efforts and leave no stone unturned to try to keep supporting that road to peace.

In Guinea, Mali and Chad, in the face of undemocratic change, we have been pushing for the restoration of democracy to support people in those countries, but we have also been working closely with like-minded international partners and with regional organisations, including ECOWAS, to support the dialogue and seek peaceful resolution of political differences, including the protection of human rights. I am pleased that these efforts have helped support some progress in Chad, for example.

I am also very excited by the peaceful democratic transitions of power that we saw last year in Zambia, Cape Verde and Niger. Those countries provide encouraging evidence that freedom and democracy can and does flourish. We now need to support them to sustain that progress. This means not only engaging with them on areas of mutual interest such as free trade but providing practical support to help them build democratic institutions.

The Chair: Donald, that was a very extensive answer from the Minister. Do you wish to add a supplementary?

Lord Anderson of Swansea: You mentioned the importance of democratic strengthening in our policy. Do you believe this is linked to sustainable development?

Vicky Ford MP: Yes, we do believe that democracy is the building block of a free society and that, where a people are freer, they tend to have more peaceful and more prosperous countries. Fundamentally, building peace, prosperity and stability is at the heart of what we do in trying to deliver sustainable development. At the root of helping countries develop is helping to create that stability, peace and opportunity. We believe that opportunity is greater where people are freer.

Q117 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** Obviously, Russia is on everyone's minds at the moment. We know that it is expanding its presence in Africa and probably considering the forms in which it expands its influence, perhaps opening military bases, such as in the CAR. We have seen Russian troops moving into Mali after the withdrawal of French troops from Timbuktu. How concerned are the Government about Russia's military presence and

seemingly growing activities in Africa? Is it too heroic to think of Russia as an ally in Africa or is it in fact, particularly given what is happening elsewhere, a potential adversary in Africa?

Vicky Ford MP: It is important to say that Russian influence across the continent as a whole is not currently significant, but aspects of that influence are very concerning; for example, the use of proxies such as Wagner. Since 2015, Russia has concluded military co-operation agreements with over 20 countries in Africa. There are press reports that Russia is seeking a naval base agreement in Sudan and may be seeking to build military bases in a number of African countries, possibly including the CAR. We are monitoring those developments continually.

The Russian navy also seeks a wider network of maritime access and bases internationally that allow it to operate more widely and build influence, as well as projecting naval power globally. We expect interest to grow in west Africa, especially in the Gulf of Guinea, and in the Red Sea in east Africa.

Increasing Russian influence in certain African countries such as the CAR is a cause for deep concern. Wagner mercenaries operating in the CAR have been reported as being responsible for multiple breaches of international humanitarian law and abuses of human rights, including numerous reports of indiscriminate killing of unarmed civilians. As fellow permanent members of the UN Security Council and other multilateral organisations, we continue to engage with the Russian Government on matters of international peace and security, and to address global challenges, but we and others will continue to call out Russian behaviour that capitalises on or contributes towards instability in Africa. I will leave it there, because I am sure you have follow-ups.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Thank you for that answer. I wanted to ask a follow-up specifically about Mali. What is your assessment of the security situation there, particularly after the withdrawal of French forces? There is a deadline for democratic elections to be held, which the international community is pressing for by the end of February. How realistic do you think that is? Perhaps you could say something about the 300-strong UK troop presence in the peacekeeping mission in Mali and how effective deployment is going there.

Vicky Ford MP: On 23 December, we worked with France, Canada and other European partners and released a joint statement condemning the deployment of mercenary troops from Wagner Group in Mali. We are monitoring the situation and co-ordinating with partners. We continue to advocate for sustainable peace and prosperity there, not only in Mali but across the rest of the countries.

Regarding the elections, we are deeply concerned by the transitional authorities' proposal to extend the transition period by up to five years. I have been clear about the importance in preparing for elections without delay and for the Malian authorities to negotiate with ECOWAS, in good faith, in developing a credible timetable for elections. We have been

pushing this with the UN Security Council and in meetings with officials and Ministers in Bamako. You may have seen that ECOWAS also announced sanctions. We stand by ECOWAS's mediation efforts. Our priority remains providing support to those most in need in Mali.

Regarding the troops, we have 300 peacekeepers in MINUSMA, supporting the French-led counterterrorism operation. We are also supporting efforts to protect civilians and build long-term stability in Mali.

Q118 Lord Boateng: Minister, thank you for your commitment in getting out and about in Africa as much as you do. It is hugely appreciated. You mentioned in your opening remarks to the Lord Chairman human rights and inclusive politics. The committee has long been concerned about the situation in Cameroon, where human rights are regularly abused and the politics is anything but inclusive. The anglophone peoples have been effectively sidelined in the Government of that country and, indeed, in their own anglophone provinces, where there is an escalation of tension.

What are the Government doing to influence the Cameroonian authorities? I know your predecessors have visited on a number of occasions and statements are regularly made, but there seems to be very little product from that engagement. Can you point to any signs of hope there at all or any improvement in the situation of our fellow English speakers in that country?

Vicky Ford MP: Thank you for your interest in Cameroon. We share your deep concerns about the crisis in the north-west, the south-west and the anglophone regions. The Government are working with the Government of Cameroon and international partners to promote a peaceful resolution to the crisis through bilateral and multilateral dialogue, and by providing development and humanitarian support.

As you noted, last year my predecessor travelled to Cameroon. He met President Biya, Prime Minister Ngute and Foreign Minister Mbella Mbella to push for a peaceful solution to the north-west/south-west crisis. We continue to call for all parties to facilitate the delivery of vital humanitarian aid across the country.

We are also working closely with the Government and the international community to tackle violent extremist organisations in the Lake Chad basin, and are very concerned about instances of intercommunal violence. We have urged all parties to engage in dialogue to try to de-escalate tensions and to ensure delivery of vital humanitarian assistance. We are also providing support across key areas of humanitarian assistance, stabilisation and defence.

At the UN Security Council, our permanent representative has reiterated the UN Secretary-General's call for the violence to end and for attacks on civilians to stop. There is a Swiss-led process to promote a peaceful resolution and we urge all parties to engage with that process. We have humanitarian funding in Cameroon in financial year 2021-22 of about £5 million. It gives support to those in the north-west/south-west crisis and those suffering the violence in the far north and Lake Chad basin area. It

sustains support to the World Food Programme and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

We are also delivering Conflict, Stability and Security Fund programming, aiming to prevent human rights violations. That includes training of human rights monitors and improving the quality of human rights reporting—I know you understand how important that reporting is—as well as supporting human rights defenders and enhancing the quality of community policing.

Lastly on Cameroon, we were sad to wake up yesterday morning to the news of the crush at the football match. Our hearts and thoughts are with all those affected. We really hope the rest of that wonderful tournament can continue in peace, because it is such a moment of joy for so many across the continent. Debbie may come in with some more detail because she has been following this very closely.

Lord Boateng: Your comments about the football and the tragedy there will no doubt be much appreciated. This is where it might be helpful if your official came in too, because the Swiss-led process seems to have stalled. There has been no progress made there for many months.

You very rightly talked in your opening remarks about the importance of strengthened networks of international partners. I wonder whether the time has come for you and your French counterpart to launch our own initiative. I am old enough to remember the plebiscite—incredible though that seems—and it was an English-speaking and francophone event. It was two colonial powers that came to an agreement. France and Britain have a responsibility. Might you and your French counterpart not make a joint visit and launch an initiative? Somebody has to do something, because people, particularly vulnerable people, women and children, are dying daily in the north-west and south-west as a result of this conflict.

Vicky Ford MP: I will bring Debbie in. There was a joint statement made by us, the Swiss, the US and Canada in November last year, so we are continuing to engage with them. France has major elections at the moment so there is a lot of focus on that, but I hear what you are saying. It is an important aspect. Debbie, maybe you would like to come in with more detail on how you see this.

Debbie Palmer: Good morning, everybody. As the Minister said, we are very concerned about the situation in Cameroon. As Lord Boateng pointed out, the Swiss dialogue has stalled over the last period, with the Swiss envoy unable to visit Cameroon now for quite some time. As we know, that is largely because it has been stymied by Cameroonian actors who are seeking to disavow the process.

On a better note, a retreat was held in Toronto towards the end of last year, I think in October, which created a new platform for collaboration across many of the influential diaspora organisations, including some of the armed groups. This is an initiative to try to generate greater political unity and to think about the wider concerns we have about the abusive

practices by non-state groups—the ghost towns and enforced school closures, as well as the targeting of civilians.

There is an effort, which we have got behind, with the Canadians to see how far that platform can go forward, but more is needed, as you rightly say. One of the main armed coalition groups has still not signed up. The long and short is that we need progress from the Cameroonian Government to move this forward and, as we know, that has been in very short supply. President Biya is very focused at the moment on his African Cup of Nations and various other things.

We will continue to engage with all our international partners on this going forward. We will continue to try to apply pressure with our like-minded allies. As the Minister has said, we put out a statement fairly recently on this. It is of ongoing concern and we raise it very regularly in many fora. It is one where we shall keep trying to apply pressure and see where we can move things forward.

Q119 Baroness Fall: I wanted to move on to British investment and ask you about your conference last week. I noted that a big theme of the conference was green growth, sustainability and infrastructure. I wonder whether you could tell us a bit about the outcomes, especially in that respect.

Vicky Ford MP: Would you like me to talk about the conference first and then trade afterwards? Would that be helpful?

Baroness Fall: That sounds excellent.

Vicky Ford MP: Last January, to mark the first anniversary of the UK-Africa Investment Summit and to reinforce our commitment to investment in Africa, the Prime Minister opened a virtual business-to-business Africa Investment Conference. Then, to sustain that momentum and mark the second anniversary, the Prime Minister hosted the second virtual Africa Investment Conference this month, on 20 January.

The key distinction between the conference and the summit is that conferences are business to business, whereas summits have been Government to Government. The purpose of the second conference was to highlight the opportunity that Africa offers to UK businesses, and that message came through confidently from the UK businesses that participated in the event. The conference focus was on clean growth. It highlighted the scale and positive impact of UK investment, capability and expertise. For example, the UK is the largest investor in renewables in South Africa.

Given the conference's commercial focus, we had an expert panel of investors and African capital seekers, which examined the key elements that make projects investor friendly. The conference also flagged emerging opportunities across the continent, but it was designed to solicit proposals for a second African investment summit, should we decide to have one in future. Lord Grimstone therefore concluded the proceedings

by calling for project proposals from capital seekers, which adds that forward-looking element and keeps it going.

There was not a tally of deals at the conference, but some of the following were stated. First of all, CDC, which has now been relaunched as BII, announced that it has already attained the commitment it made at the African investment summit to invest £2 billion in Africa. DIT announced that it has supported a further £2.4 billion of UK investment into Africa this financial year. UKEF announced that its support has exceeded £2.3 billion. UKEF also announced the support of £42 million from Mabey Bridge to export 87 bridges to Ghana, which I understand will really help unlock hard-to-reach parts of Ghana. Participants were reminded that the UK was the first non-African nation to sign a co-operation agreement with the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The preliminary figures I have seen are that over 3,000 delegates attended the conference, with over 800 UK and 1,300 African businesses participating on the day. Over 2,000 business engagements—meetings, conversations and dialogues—took place between the delegates, so it was clearly an extremely busy day.

Regarding trade, we have, as it says in the integrated review, already provided generous market access to 46 sub-Saharan countries through our economic partnership agreements. Our trade preference scheme also provides preferential access to qualifying sub-Saharan African countries by removing or reducing import tariffs to the UK. This year we will launch the UK's new preference scheme, the developing countries trading scheme, which will be more generous and simpler for partner countries and businesses to understand.

In fact, when I was in Uganda just last week, I was talking about the economic partnership agreements. One of the benefits is that it is not just the zero tariffs on individual products but the ability to use cumulation. The country could be bringing different products from other nations into a manufacturing sector, adding value through manufacturing into that product, and then using cumulation to make sure that final, finished product was zero-tariffed into the UK. It helps to get that value-added manufacturing investment.

We have also secured trade agreements with 17 African countries, including trading relationships worth around £18 billion in 2020. That covers about 68% of our trade with Africa. As I have said, we were the first foreign partner to sign an MoU with the African Continental Free Trade Area. We are working to ensure that the trade agreements are successfully implemented. That means we need to progress opportunities for African and UK economic objectives in tandem. There is more that we want to do. Our trade policy offer will be a key part of the international development strategy that I have mentioned.

Baroness Fall: China is still the biggest investor in Africa. We have heard Americans talk about no ties. Are there lessons to be learned from the hugely effective and slightly concerning way in which China continues

to invest so heavily in Africa?

Vicky Ford MP: We have questions about China coming up in a minute. A key part of our strategy is making sure that, when countries do choose to take investment—for example, through British International Investment—it is honest and reliable, it is transparent, and they know when they are signing a deal that it is delivering terms that they know about and it is clear what they are getting into. I am a former banker myself and, many years ago, in my previous career I was involved in infrastructure finance. We also really need to take care that we are not adding to debt burdens on countries that they would not be able to afford. That is a key part of our work.

Q120 **Lord Alton of Liverpool:** Perhaps I can follow up on what Lady Fall has just said to you. China is one of the most actively engaged outside powers in Africa; indeed, that is referred to in this committee's report on China, which was published last September. Issues include: the pursuit of natural resources, such as the mining of lithium using child labour in Congo; the enormous debt traps that you have just referred to, Minister; and plans to establish a permanent military presence from Djibouti to Equatorial Guinea. What are the Government doing to contest the challenges posed by China to the Commonwealth and the United Kingdom's interests in Africa?

Vicky Ford MP: China is an important source of aid and trade for many African nations, but there are potential risks. We recognise those risks, especially around debt sustainability and economic and political influence. We seek to maximise the positive contribution that China may make while absolutely working to mitigate those risks. Where we have concerns about Chinese activity, we raise them. Our high commissioners and ambassadors raise them on the ground. I raised some of those concerns in some of the countries I visited just last week. We are also working with partners to ensure that developing countries have those honest, reliable alternatives so that they can avoid having to be dependent on China or any other country.

We have encouraged China to adopt international sustainability standards; for example, to improve the effectiveness of trade and investment in Africa. We have been concerned about the lack of import controls and understanding of national requirements, which have led Chinese buyers to buy timber of illegal or unknown origin, and that has put the governance of forests in Africa at risk. Working through our forest governance, markets and climate programme, we have introduced the new provision of the forest law in China. That has made the import of illegal timber an offence in China. Through our outreach last year, we saw that, through the programme, we have stimulated above-market demand for certified, legal tropical timber from Chinese buyers. Initiatives such as this on specific industries can make a difference.

The big picture is honest, reliable, open, transparent finance, making sure that countries are aware that they can come to the UK and ask to bid on projects, making sure that we call out where we have concerns,

and working in this targeted way in particular industries that are of significant concern.

Lord Alton of Liverpool: If I can pursue that, I would invite you to perhaps delve a little more deeply. You are right to contrast the parameters that there are in an open society such as the United Kingdom with what we have come to expect from the PRC. Can you say something about the PRC's attempts to displace the United Kingdom's influence in the Commonwealth and the subversion of United Nations institutions by the CCP, forcing African countries to support it by buying their votes on issues such as the persecution of Uighurs and revoking of relationships with Taiwan? In Uganda, where you told us you were last week, there is £1.6 billion of debt to China. In November, it was reported that Entebbe airport was taken over by China after loans were not repaid. In the context of swingeing cuts to ODA, how can we meet these threats to our democratic interests?

Vicky Ford MP: I did discuss our offers of more open, transparent finance on key infrastructure projects with President Museveni when I met him last week. I am not going to go into the specifics on the airport deal. We have tried to make sure that China is participating in initiatives on debt. It is good that it is participating in the G20 initiatives on debt. China does need to deliver. It is too early to say how effective that initiative will be, but the debt relief negotiations take place within established multilateral frameworks.

Actually, China has suspended more debt service payments under the debt service suspension initiative than any other creditor, but it is clear that implementation of that initiative has not been perfect, with relatively low levels of transparency. That further complicates assessments of implementation. The debt service suspension initiative closed at the end of last year, but countries requiring further debt treatment can make use of the G20 common framework for debt treatments. We are closely following the ongoing discussions of debt relief in Chad and, through our seat on the creditor committee for Zambia, the UK will seek to ensure that any precedents set in those negotiations support the effective functioning of the common framework.

We have a shared aim of stability with China, but the feedback I continually get from African leaders is they do not want to be totally in China's orbit. They value their independence and they understand that. It is very important, what the Foreign Secretary has said in her "network of liberty" speech, and since, about the UK being there for the long term and being the investor that will bring transparency and reliability, not just in what we do through public contributions of ODA or through BII, but in harnessing private investment as well, to make sure that that, when it comes from the UK, comes with that level of transparency. That is what we must continue to do to make sure that our African friends have an alternative.

Q121 **Baroness Sugg:** I wanted to turn to vaccine equity. We have seen incredible success here in the UK on vaccinations, but sadly that has not

been replicated in Africa. I am afraid it has been a bit of a global failure on vaccine equity. I acknowledge the UK's contribution to early support for COVAX and 100 million doses, but, when you look at the WHO target for vaccinating 40% of the world population by the end of last year, we are seeing under half of the countries in Africa with over 10% and many with less than 5% of their populations vaccinated. What are the Government doing this year to support African countries with vaccine supplies, as well as the global health systems? What is your assessment of the success of COVAX so far?

Vicky Ford MP: It is a really complex situation. Last year there were delays to COVAX because of supply shortages, manufacturing delays, regulatory issues, demand from high-income countries and the export ban on Serum Institute of India supplies. There were real challenges, but despite those challenges COVAX has successfully delivered over 100 billion doses to 144 countries, including 362 million to 44 African AMC countries.

We were a leader in setting up COVAX. Our commitment of £548 million makes us one of its largest donors. We are committed to helping ensure that people in the poorest countries receive vaccines. We have also fulfilled our pledge to deliver 30 million bilateral doses by the end of last year, and that is part of our wider commitment to deliver 100 million doses by the middle of 2022. There were issues with short expiry dates on some donations, and we work closely with COVAX to allocate vaccines according to where they are needed and to facilitate the delivery. We ensure that our donations go directly from the manufacturers to COVAX, which helps to maximise the shelf life. We also ensure that recipients of bilateral donations have capacity to roll out the quantity of doses ahead of their expiry date. For example, last week I announced the donation of 1 million doses to Uganda and they will all arrive with more than three months until expiry.

Supply is improving. Last week, when I was in Addis, I met the deputy director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. He told me supply is not the greatest constraint. Much greater challenges exist with delivery mechanisms and facilitating the vaccine update. In Kenya, I saw first-hand how people are being offered a choice of vaccines. For example, in certain African countries, people tend to be quite specific about what vaccine they want. At the clinic I went to, people were being offered a choice: "Do you want Pfizer, AstraZeneca or Johnson?" All three were available at that clinic.

If you are in a remote area and you perceive that Covid-19 is not really a serious illness, which is the perception in some remote areas at the moment, prioritising your time, which is so precious, especially if you are living in a very poor background, is challenging. Do you prioritise your time to go and get the vaccine, or to work and earn some money to help your family?

It is really important to get the vaccine as close as possible to the people. In some countries, that is successful. In Ghana this month, they have

been vaccinating up to 500,000 people a day and will get a very high level of penetration, because they have the ability to roll it out. We have deployed public health rapid support teams to provide technical assistance to public health agencies in Nigeria, the Gambia and Tunisia, and to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. We have put money into the African Union's Covid-19 response fund to support provision of equipment and supplies, such as test kits, PPE and ventilators. We have deployed members of the UK emergency medical teams to 11 countries. We have provided equipment to Namibia and Zimbabwe, supporting patients with breathing difficulties.

There is also great interest in manufacturing. We have provided technical support that has helped deliver the business cases for vaccine production in South Africa and Morocco, and at the Institut Pasteur in Dakar, Senegal, which I have visited. It is challenging, but at the moment it is not a supply issue, it is a delivery issue in many of the countries.

Baroness Sugg: It is good to hear what you are saying on use-by dates. There is definitely more the Government could be doing on transparency. Lots of other Governments are publishing what they are giving and when the use-by dates are, so I hope the Government will look at that.

Vicky Ford MP: As I said, that is not an issue at the moment, okay?

Baroness Sugg: Well, as you point out, there is a broader issue around health systems as well as supply, as we move forward on that. Is it still government policy that all this action on global vaccinations has to be within the 0.5% reduced development budget? There is a concern that that will hamper activity if there have to be further rounds of cuts to pay for more action on global vaccination.

Vicky Ford MP: We have always used a significant amount of our ODA funding to help support health networks in different countries. We remain one of the largest spenders of ODA anywhere in the world. In terms of our commitment, as you know, it was a difficult decision due to the pandemic to reduce the ODA levels, but we are still going to be spending £1.3 billion on global health this financial year. In the Autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced that the forecasts show the Government may meet their fiscal test to return to 0.7% in 2024-25. That is before the end of this Parliament, so we are working closely with departments across government to prepare for this and ensure that aid spending delivers the priorities we set out in the integrated review.

Q122 **Baroness Blackstone:** Good morning, Minister. I turn to development aid more generally. When the Government announced the cuts to their aid budget, they said that they were going to retain Africa as a focus for spending in this area. Given that, it is very surprising that the planned allocations for 2021-22 have actually been cut by 50% compared with the previous year. The amount of spending will be half what it was. Could the Minister comment on what seems to be somewhat of a mismatch between intentions and actions? I wonder why east Africa in particular, which was named as a policy focus in the integrated review, has also

been cut by these very large amounts. Why has this happened, and what are the plans for the future?

Vicky Ford MP: Let me be really clear. We are and we remain a leader in international development in Africa. We are committed to supporting the poorest people on the continent, but, as you know, the impact of the pandemic on the economy forced those tough decisions. Approximately half our global ODA bilateral aid is being spent in Africa in this financial year, including on critical priorities such as humanitarian support and woman and girls.

We remain a leader in projects such as tackling gender-based violence. We are supporting more than 3.3 million women and girls with access to modern family planning methods through the women's integrated sexual health programme. That has averted nearly 17,000 maternal deaths. We are helping over a million people in rural communities to access electricity. We are providing lifesaving humanitarian support, as I saw in east Africa just last week, because of the drought that has been affecting Somalia, southern Ethiopia and Kenya. That humanitarian support is also going into Madagascar, where we have the first climate change-driven famine. It is really sad. We are also strengthening the UK's regional and transnational response to disrupt illicit financial flows, which is really important because those financial flows often underpin corruption and crime.

In terms of where some of the other ODA spend has gone, yes, we have put money into COVAX. I am really pleased that we have done that. Many African nations have benefited from that funding to COVAX. We have also pledged money from ODA towards climate change, and many African nations will benefit from that climate funding. At COP, for example, we announced a sum of at least \$1.5 billion, £200 million of which the UK is putting in, to protect the Congo basin rainforest. It is vital work. We are also using UK Export Finance and British International Investment, and bolstering the work that they can do, so they it can be an extra tool on top of the ODA.

When the decision was made to reduce from 0.7% to 0.5%, obviously a lot of forward-looking commitments had been made to multilateral organisations for future years, which meant that the balance between bilaterals and multilaterals needed to change. Much of the work we do through multilaterals also goes to support African nations, for example through the IDA.

The Foreign Secretary has been very clear that we will restore the women and girls' development budget to the pre-ODA reduction levels, and that is really important work in many African nations. We will also be restoring our humanitarian aid numbers. We protected most of Africa ODA in what was a very difficult set of negotiations. It is a difficult time, but there is a positive trajectory. There are other areas where ODA is being spent, for example in climate change and in this increased focus on women, girls and the humanitarian, that will particularly benefit Africa as we go ahead.

Baroness Blackstone: It is really pleasing to hear that the women and girls programmes will be restored.

Vicky Ford MP: It is not individual programmes, because the programmes we worked on before may not be exactly the right ones here, but the overall funding for women and girls will be the same.

Baroness Blackstone: Thank you for that clarification. You said at the beginning, when you were talking about strategy, the Government regard soft power as important in bilateral relationships. If that is the case, I assume that you would count development aid as soft power. It is surprising that these cuts are, for the most part, continuing. I wonder whether you could tell the committee why that is. What impact assessments have you done on areas where the cuts have been quite deep?

Vicky Ford MP: It was a really difficult decision to reduce from 0.7% to 0.5%, but that was because of the economic impact of the pandemic and, during that pandemic, the unprecedented support the Government put in to keep lives and livelihoods supported across the United Kingdom. We all recognise that. It was a very difficult decision.

However, as I said, the Chancellor announced back in the autumn that if the UK continues with the growth that is forecast, we will be back at the 0.7% before the end of this Parliament. That is worth remembering and planning ahead for. Right now, we want to make sure that we are using all the different financial tools that the UK can bring together to make sure that it gets to the people who need it. Let us focus on making sure that we have the humanitarian aid where that is needed. That has to come from ODA.

Let us keep giving extra tools to BII and UK Export Finance to unlock the power of private sector investment. That is where our trade envoys are doing such a great job, bringing in opportunities for trade and investment from British companies as well.

COP announced a huge increase in public sector support for those who struggle most with climate change, which is a real and present danger across many African countries. That also has the potential to unlock trillions of dollars of private sector investment. It is about making sure that we are using all that together to help us through this period and to plan ahead to when, I hope, if we achieve those forecasts, we will be back at 0.7%, and 0.7% of what will be an even higher base because our GDP will have recovered and be stronger than it was before.

Q123 **Lord Teverson:** Good morning, Minister. As a former MEP, can I congratulate you on the excellent work you did in the European Parliament? It was very much noticed.

I want to continue the theme of climate change. If anything, Africa is the victim of climate change, in that it contributes little to the carbon footprint of the planet but is absolutely vulnerable to the effects of climate change globally on its agricultural systems and particularly its

inability to pay for big infrastructure projects for adaptation.

Following on from some of the things you have said already, what are the Government's priorities for Africa and climate change policies? How did you assess COP 26, which I think you mentioned? Interestingly, we still hold the presidency for COP 26 until we have the new presidency later this year in Egypt, in north Africa, for COP 27. What do you feel should happen there?

Let us start there, but I would like to concentrate in particular on the adaptation side, which is perhaps more important than mitigation in the African context.

Vicky Ford MP: Big picture, delivering a cleaner, greener planet is one of our priorities. It is easy to say that, but what does it mean? It means delivering on specific priority areas. That includes conserving and restoring nature, forest and land. Let us not forget that the Congo basin and its peatlands are the second largest rainforest on the planet. It includes reducing the impacts of climate shocks on the most vulnerable, for example by providing access to water and promoting sustainable agriculture and food production. It also includes accelerating the transition, as you have mentioned, to more climate-resistant, low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economies. Those are the priority areas, and they inform the initiatives that we support.

On adaptation, look at the landmark deal that we put together for South Africa. The country signed a ground-breaking political declaration with us, France, Germany, the US and the EU. That will support its just energy transition from coal. It is the first of its kind worldwide. Depending on the measure that you take, South Africa, because its electricity generation is so coal dependent, can be measured as having between the 12th and the 14th most carbon-generating electricity production in the world. It is a massive landmark deal. The partners expect to provide at least \$8.5 billion of finance to support an investment plan, which will be prepared in the next 12 months.

As I mentioned, we also pulled together the \$1.5 billion package for the protection of the Congo basin, which absorbs enough carbon to be a significant contributor to the goal of limiting global temperature rise to 0.5 degrees. It is really important.

The Glasgow climate pact responds directly to the requests of African countries. It calls for developed countries to at least double their provision of climate finance from 2019 levels by 2025. We are playing our part. We announced over £140 million of funding to support African countries to adapt, together with the room to run guarantee that we gave to the African Development Bank. That money is expected to unlock around £2 billion worth of financing for new projects across the continent. Half of those will go into adaptation. Working hand in hand with the African Development Bank on that was a new way of thinking. We have a really good relationship, looking at how we make something different happen here that will make a difference on the ground.

We also have the green recovery action plan, which has come out of the African Union, which we support. That is looking at five different areas: just transition, nature-based solutions, focus on biodiversity, resilient agriculture, and green and resilient cities.

You will have heard the COP president make a speech earlier this week about his priorities this year to make sure that what happened at Glasgow is not just words on a page. We need to see those words turned into action. That will be the FCDO's focus while we maintain the presidency, and not just for this year. It is crucial that we keep the lead this year while we have that presidency, but we need to maintain that in the years ahead. We will work tirelessly with our friends in Africa and across the world to build on that Glasgow climate pact. It is absolutely vital. It is also vital from an African perspective that, when everybody comes to Egypt, we encourage them again to meet their commitments and to deliver on the ground what they said on the page.

Lord Teverson: That is good to hear, particularly on the Congo basin, which I have to admit I was not aware of. My follow-up question was going to be about biodiversity and nature-based solutions, mentioning peatlands, as you did, which I am encouraged by.

Perhaps I can try out something else on you. One of the thoughts for the future has been particularly about the Sahel, given the amazing amount of solar energy that could come from that area with super-grids. Given the political vulnerability of that area to some degree, is that connection—bringing solar energy from the Sahel region into Europe and the UK through super-grids—a political possibility, or is that not on the radar at all?

Vicky Ford MP: Connectivity and political stability are also issues, as well as levels of sun. It was interesting in Sudan. I was talking about the challenges that it has with sand blowing on solar. I am not sure whether it is true, but they told me that they have invented solar panels with sort of windscreen wipers to help to remove the sand. When I was in Kenya, I saw the machinery that they were using to keep the panels clean. I was at east Africa's largest solar plant, financed by BII and connected to the grid just last week.

Connectivity is an issue. I was discussing that in Uganda, where they have two hydro plants. The plants are working fine, but the connectivity is more of an issue. You have to look at them both together. It is not just building the plant; it is how you connect it and make sure it is safe and secure.

Q124 **Baroness Rawlings:** Thank you very much, Minister, for coming today. In our report on sub-Saharan Africa, we called for a reduction in the cost of remitting money to Africa. In their response, the Government have told us that they are working to address the market constraints responsible for high remittance prices, including working with the World Bank and through actions such as digitisation, transparency and improving data quality. Could you update us on the progress of these

efforts?

Vicky Ford MP: It is such an interesting question and such an important issue. I will give a little bit of background. Back in 2020, we worked with the Swiss to launch the call to action to highlight and address the forecast decline in remittances, which was being caused by the pandemic. Since that call to action, remittance flows have held up better than we expected. There was a 1.6% decline in 2020, but a growth of 7.6% last year. Over 40 countries joined the call to action and that improved access to remittances and financial services, in recognition of their importance. They are an economic lifeline to vulnerable households in many developing countries.

Last year, we commissioned research in Ghana and Nigeria to understand what actions we can take to lower the cost of remittances that flow from the UK to those countries. The recommendations from that report were used to inform FCDO policy in those countries.

There is real transformation happening in fintech here. The UK funded financial sector deepening in Africa, and supported innovation and the digital transformation of fintech. That covers not only remittances but payments and SME finance. That is helping to drive economic development and protect the vulnerable. Last week, in Kenya, I saw how mobile money, M-Pesa, has unlocked huge parts of the economy and helped SMEs, individual traders and many people who never had access to bank accounts, or who do not have access to bank accounts, to use mobile money.

We published a cross-government action plan on remittances in 2021. The Treasury is working on the implementation of that with the Financial Stability Board and the Committee on Payments and Market Infrastructures road map, which is trying to enhance cross-border payments. There is also work with expert bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force—FATF—the IMF, the World Bank and the Bank of England.

The work done by the World Bank on the switch to digital channels during Covid suggests that companies with higher uses of digital financial services experienced bigger drops in the remittance cost and smaller declines in the service availability. Last year, the average cost of sending £130 to Africa using cash was 9.5%. If you did it through digital channels, it was 6.8%, so it was significantly cheaper to send your money digitally than by doing a traditional cash direct transfer.

We are investing in MFS Africa, for example, which is Africa's largest mobile money hub. That has helped to reduce the cost of remittances from 6% in 2018 to 4.25% in 2021. Over £1 billion was transferred for 7 million clients during that period. That pathway towards digital financial services and leveraging the opportunities of fintech is a key priority of the financial market development work.

All this needs to be done hand in hand with anti-money laundering and counterterrorism work. FATF's review of the unintended consequences of anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing standards is also important, especially when we look at tackling financial exclusion.

Baroness Rawlings: Thank you very much, Minister, for that very interesting answer. With your long experience of raising finance for key infrastructure projects in Africa, what are your views on the private remittances from the UK to Africa, which we were told when we took evidence for our report were far larger than anything that comes from DfID? What are your views on that? Was there any evidence of fraud going through? How much do the Government watch these movements?

Vicky Ford MP: Private remittances can be an absolute lifeline and are really important. One thing, as I said in my first response, is how we reduce the cost of remitting that money back, which is partly through helping the digital providers or making sure that technology and innovation can help to remove barriers so that the money can flow swiftly.

Every time you see innovations in a sector, there are people who will try to work their way around them. Making sure that we continue to tackle money laundering, fraud and corruption is a key part of what we must do, especially as we are home to one of the largest financial services centres in the world. We can never stop innovating, keeping up and making sure that what we do to tackle fraud and money laundering is fit for purpose in a digital world that is constantly evolving. That is why we continue to work with FATF and others on those initiatives.

Q125 **Baroness Sugg:** We have touched on this in answers to your previous questions. Last year's *Human Rights and Democracy Report*, which is published annually, highlighted several African countries where the UK is particularly concerned about human rights issues. Could you say anything further about what the FCDO has done to address those human rights issues in those countries since the report was published?

Vicky Ford MP: That is a brilliant question. A really important part of our work is support for human rights. It is fundamental to our belief in freedom. We have a record of speaking up for human rights defenders and tackling issues, from the rights of women and girls to the abolition of the death penalty. I have met some amazing human rights activists in some of the countries I have visited.

Eight different countries were mentioned in the 2020 report: the DRC, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Zimbabwe, CAR and Eritrea. In all those countries, we are already working hard to support the protection of human rights. We are also using new tools to bring focus to the challenges that face the most vulnerable groups. In some countries it is harder than in others.

Also, there is some stuff that we are doing globally. For example, in June this year we will host the Safe To Be Me global equality conference on

LGBT rights, which aims to be a catalyst for change, creating a platform to share best practice in tackling violence and discrimination and to show leadership. There are countries, such as Angola, Botswana and South Africa, that are fantastic in these areas, so it is also demonstrating leadership.

We have been engaging intensively over the first half of this year, and we will continue to do so, with African partners in the run-up to the international conference on freedom of religion and belief. We are on track to deliver—by July, when it comes up for its review—all the 22 recommendations from the Bishop of Truro's report on how to support members of religious and non-religious communities.

We are using new regulations under our independent sanctions policy to carefully target individuals and entities involved in real human rights violations and abuses, without causing significant impact on ordinary people and the economy—we really try to limit the impact of the sanctions on the people of the country. Three individuals designated under the global human rights regime are from the Gambia, including the former President, because of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings of protestors and minority groups.

We have sanctions regimes against individuals and entities in 10 African countries—Burundi, CAR, DRC, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Zimbabwe—including in relation to human rights violations and abuses. In DRC, the UK has ensured that the protection of civilians remains central to the MONUSCO mandate. We have strengthened the mission's mandate on women's peace and security. We have continued to support the UN joint human rights office. Through the PSVI, we have funded community dialogues on tackling the stigmatisation of survivors of sexual violence, which is such a terrible issue.

In Mali, the human rights situation has deteriorated at an alarming rate. There are continued cycles of violence and impunity, and an increasing threat to civilians. That is why our deployment to the MINUSMA mission is contributing to long-term stability and has supported investigations by the mission into human rights issues. We are also providing strengthening to try to ensure better compliance on international humanitarian law and supporting the participation of women in peacebuilding processes.

In Somalia, where we are pressing for elections, we have also launched a security and justice programme, expanding access to justice for women, girls and minorities.

In South Sudan, we are urging the Government to uphold their commitments to human rights as part of implementing the 2018 peace agreement. We are providing practical support to survivors of gender-based violence.

In Sudan, unfortunately the situation has deteriorated substantially since the coup in October, including increased violence against protestors. We led the efforts at the Human Rights Council to secure a resolution. We designated an expert on human rights to monitor and report on the situation, as well as pressing for an end to the political crisis and for accountability for those abuses.

In Zimbabwe, we balance tough multilateral and bilateral engagement on human rights and corruption with a really strong commitment to stand by Zimbabwe's most vulnerable people. We continually urge the Government to deliver the economic and political reforms necessary and to uphold human rights. These were things that the President promised at the beginning of his presidency. Indeed, those are the issues I pressed him on when I met him at COP.

In CAR, we are working with international partners and we voted in support of the UN Security Council resolution, which renewed the peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA, for another 12 months. For the first time, that resolution holds the Government of CAR, as well as armed groups, responsible for the escalating of human rights violations.

In Eritrea, which is very challenging, we raise our concerns bilaterally and in Geneva. We are pressing for Eritrea to enable the special rapporteur to fulfil their mandate and to allow them to visit Eritrea, as well as asking it to release all those who have been arbitrarily detained and to reform its national service. This is important, because Eritrea is about to be a member of the Human Rights Council. Yes, it is a challenging country, but if it is going to be on that body, we expect it to uphold the principles of that body.

There is a lot of detail, but it goes back to what I said in the beginning: they are different in different areas.

Baroness Sugg: Thank you for that comprehensive answer.

The Chair: Lord Alton, Lord Teverson and Lord Anderson have already asked questions and wish to ask further supplementaries. I ask them please to put those questions in writing. Minister, I hope you will accept them and that you might find time to answer them after this session.

Q126 **Baroness Fall:** Thank you, Minister. My second question is about our defence agreements with two African countries, Nigeria and, most recently, Kenya. I am curious as to your assessment of how they are going. What are the achievements and failures of those agreements, in particular in Nigeria, where we have been in the agreement for much longer?

Vicky Ford MP: The situation in Nigeria is really challenging. Nigeria is a very important relationship for the UK. We signed that security and defence partnership back in 2018, but, like many of you, we have been very concerned about the rising insecurity and the evolution of many different threats faced in Nigeria.

Our partnership covers tackling terrorism, serious organised crime, cybercrime and piracy. We provided a package of support for the development of the Nigerian armed forces and training for military personnel to help them build capacity in order to respond, for example, to the terrorist conflict in north-east Nigeria. We provided mentoring and capacity support to help improve the security services kidnap response and supported the development of passing the new Police Act, which creates a framework for the modernisation of the police, especially on improving standards to safeguard the fundamental rights of citizens.

Our security and defence dialogue is due to take place next week, and we look towards refreshing that partnership. I cannot prejudge the detailed outcomes of the dialogue, but we will be reaffirming our commitment to work together and to agree future co-operation that helps to respond to those threats, including serious organised crime, terrorism and increasing insecurity across Nigeria. In fact, I had a lengthy discussion with the Foreign Minister in Glasgow, where we also talked about security issues. I hope to be out in Nigeria soon to continue those discussions.

In Kenya, the agreement does not cover the wider Kenyan security sector, but it supports delivery of our four objectives, which are enhancing the capacity of the Kenya Defence Forces in their fight against terrorism, enhancing the capability of Kenya as a significant troop-contributing country to the AU mission in Somalia—the AMISOM mission—creating the conditions for a stable and secure Kenya, and securing access to Kenya for UK military training.

There is no specific UK programme of security sector reforms with the Kenyan MoD, but we have delivered activity to help improve human rights compliance and compliance with international standards on conduct. For example, over 40 Kenyan students have attended military education and training in the UK each year, 17 of whom are at the Royal College of Defence Studies, alongside the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and other flagship courses. We have also helped them to be a more effective contributor to peace support operations. Our training is focused on helping the 1,500 troops that Kenya sends every year to deployments such as AMISOM and MINUSCA.

Last week, I opened the technical review of the cross-government UK-Kenya security compact, which includes commitments on counterterror, defence, international co-operation, community security, law enforcement and criminal justice, cybersecurity, as well as bilateral, multilateral and regional co-operation. There is a huge breadth of issues.

I have also had discussions with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and hear from them. Kenya is an important partner in east Africa and an important voice for regional stability. It is really important to have been able to meet with her and to listen to their concerns about sources of instability and how we approach that together. For example, I discussed with her the route to finding the successor mission to AMISOM in Somalia. These are the sorts of issues that we discuss with our friends and partners in

Kenya and Nigeria. They are really important discussions for UK security as well as the security of those countries and the region.

Q127 Lord Stirrup: Good morning, Minister. When the Government recently announced the commitment of Royal Navy assets to counter migration flows in the channel, I was reminded that the commitment of naval assets for the same purposes in the Mediterranean, under Operation Sophia, actually increased migration flows rather than reduced them. It was concluded that the only effective way of tackling the problem was to try to deal with the migration routes on land, with the conditions in the source countries, and of course with the people-smuggling organisations themselves.

Do the Government have a coherent strategy for rising to this challenge in Africa as a whole, rather than dealing with it in bits and pieces? If they do, to what extent is that strategy co-ordinated with important partner nations—those within Africa themselves of course, but also, for example, France and, indeed, the EU more widely?

Vicky Ford MP: Thank you for your question. Migration is a permanent feature of the global economy. There are an estimated 281 million international migrants. Legal migration is really important. It delivers significant social and economic benefits. The FCDO will always support efforts to make sure that global migration is safe, orderly and regular, in line with the global compact for migration and the UN sustainable development goals.

We are also committed to engaging with international partners on a whole-route approach to addressing challenges of illegal migration. That means co-ordinated interventions to address root causes, to tackle trafficking, to increase awareness of the risk of undertaking perilous journeys, and to strengthen borders and returns processes.

Particularly in east Africa at the moment we have seen flows of migration as a result of people's really troubling reasons for leaving their countries. The violence, unrest and war in northern Ethiopia have led to people fleeing their homeland. Drought and famine, sometimes caused by climate change, might also lead to people fleeing those areas. Where you have instability, people will often move. That will sometimes lead to additional insecurity and instability, sadly. Some of the issues in Nigeria have been described to me; where land has become less fertile, for example, people are moving on to lands in order to be able to feed themselves.

One key thing that we must do, as a lead player in overseas development aid, is to help to address the root causes of that instability. One reason why I went to Ethiopia last week was absolutely to try to grasp that potential for peace talks. If we do not get peace talks, we will see more instability, we will see more migration. That will have an impact on neighbouring countries. That then often flows back towards us. We are addressing those root causes, making sure that we continue to deliver the humanitarian aid as much as possible where it is needed, and using

that aid not to make people reliant on it, but to help them to become more resilient and stable.

Regarding small boat crossings, you will hear from the Home Secretary, who is the lead on this. These crossings are really dangerous. They are facilitated by criminals. It is heart-wrenching to hear the stories of the people who have travelled to France, tried to get on those boats and then died in the channel, especially when you learn that some of those people could have come to the UK through legal routes.

We have to stop it. We have invested in a joint UK-France action plan to prevent the route. We are committed to working closely with international partners to fix this broken asylum system. We have to disrupt the illegal migration and human trafficking networks. Do not necessarily always believe everything that you read in the newspapers. We are doing a huge amount, but some of the reports are not accurate.

Q128 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Minister, I admire your responsibilities, but I also admire your stamina. Thank you very much for your presentation today. You have twice mentioned the deployment of British forces to Mali. I guess you know that they were originally to be confined to reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, although in October they came under fire from terrorists, returned that fire and killed two of the terrorists.

If the French are reducing their commitment, is there any question of these British forces being asked to assume a different role? They were not rostered for that when they were originally deployed. It is well known that the United Nations mission there is the most dangerous peacekeeping mission which the United Nations is currently fulfilling.

Vicky Ford MP: The lead on this is the Defence Secretary. We have agreed an extension for a limited period. I was really impressed, when I was at the UN back in the autumn, to hear what amazing leadership roles our British service men and women have been taking, helping to support the many thousands of others who are taking part in that mission. "Leadership" may be the wrong word. They are not necessarily leading the men, but leading by example. They are hugely respected.

We are watching this situation really closely, especially because of the Wagner situation. There are obviously discussions with the French about this, because they are a major contributor. As an Essex MP, I have been very impressed by the Royal Anglians. They have just returned and I am looking forward to hearing their stories first hand soon. Debbie, do you want to come in with any more detail?

Debbie Palmer: On Mali, the roles that our troops play are very firmly agreed in a whole set of deployment undertakings. We have particular roles that our troops are trained and equipped for as a long-range reconnaissance group. They are playing a really important role. We have been able to provide them with really strong medevac abilities, so they can do long-range surveillance as well as deterring criminal and terrorist activities and recording the concerns of local communities. They bring a

unique capability to MINUSMA that none of the other troops are providing at the moment. It is locked in. It would not change suddenly.

The French are certainly reconfiguring their support to the region and, as you intimated, they are pulling out of parts of central Mali, but that is because they are reconfiguring into bases in the south, into Niger and into other parts of the region, to ensure that they have maximum capability on the ground as well. Yes, there is a configuration. There is a slight reduction in the French troops on the ground, but they are simply bringing them back to the baseline they had a year or two ago, before they put a big and temporary surge in. At the moment, we are confident that the French commitment remains absolutely solid. We are convinced that we are still making a really big and important contribution to that peacekeeping mission and will continue to do so.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Are we still providing helicopter support?

Debbie Palmer: Yes, we are. We provide four helicopters into the Sahel, which provide a range of functions, including, as I said, underwriting some of the medevac capabilities.

The Chair: Minister, can I thank you and your officials for today, but particularly, Minister, for your sterling performance over nearly two hours? Thank you for the extended period that you have given us. Lord Campbell referred to your responsibilities. I did not mention at the beginning, but in addition to being Minister for Africa you are Minister for the Caribbean and Latin America, so it is an extraordinary range of responsibilities. Thank you for the work that you have done with us today. We wish you well.

Vicky Ford MP: I have to run to PMQs, but I would like to say one thing, because I know that one of your members wanted to talk about equalities assessments. We treat this very seriously. We have processes in place, through the spending review and the business planning, to make sure that we meet our legal obligations. The Foreign Secretary recently wrote to Sarah Champion, the chair of the International Development Committee, on the equalities assessment on this. I would be very happy to share with you that letter to the International Development Committee, so that you can share it with your members.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Minister.