

27 February 2020

Mr Tom Tugendhat
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

Secretary of State

Dear Tom,

Thank you for your letter of 19 February regarding the steps the FCO are taking with partners and allies around the Covid-19 outbreak.

The outbreak represents an unprecedented global health challenge. The UK is working closely with international partners to support and coordinate global efforts to combat the outbreak, channelling our efforts to support the responses by China, the World Health Organisation and the wider international community.

Our initial focus has been helping those Britons who have found themselves at the greatest risk of exposure to the virus. Our crisis response team in the FCO has been working around the clock with our teams in China and at Embassies throughout the world to get people home and into the care they need.

The FCO repatriated 213 British nationals and their dependants from Wuhan, and worked closely with European partners to facilitate the evacuation of 136 EU nationals and dependants. I am very grateful to the support of France and New Zealand who provided seats on their planes for Britons seeking to leave Wuhan.

You will have seen that we also repatriated 32 British and European citizens from Japan who had been aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship. As of 27 February, 25 British Nationals from the Diamond Princess remain in Japan. Our Consular staff remain in regular contact with them and their families. Our priority has consistently been the health and safety of British nationals.

The UK is supporting health system preparedness for Covid-19, including through £5m to the World Health Organisation, provision of surge staff to WHO Regional Offices, deployment of Public Health Rapid Support Team and Emergency Medical Teams. The UK Government is also providing £20m for new vaccines and £20m for wider research on Covid-19.

Our flights sent to Wuhan to evacuate British nationals carried quantities of Personal Protective Equipment and medical supplies for use by the Chinese government in responding to Covid-19 cases in Wuhan.

To further galvanise the international response, the FCO's network of overseas Posts have been instructed to lobby their host governments to support the WHO-led response effort - firstly, by ensuring host governments are sharing data on all Covid-19 cases in a timely fashion and in the right format, and secondly, by encouraging them to contribute financially to the WHO's global appeal.

At a multilateral level we are making use of opportunities provided by the G7 and G20 to reinforce these messages. UK Ministers and officials participate in regular discussions with their G7 counterparts to ensure understanding and consistency with different countries' approaches to managing the outbreak.

The G20 discussed the economic impact of the COVID-19 against the backdrop of more cases in Italy and South Korea over the weekend. There were calls for increased monitoring and co-ordinated action, while the IMF and others noted that accurate forecasting of the impact was not possible at this stage. We have also agreed mechanisms to share relevant data within the Five Eyes community and close partners.

On phyto-sanitary checks at the border, Defra, alongside colleagues in the Food Standards Agency and Animal and Plant Health Agency has been carrying out risk assessments on the potential pathways of entry of SARS-CoV2, the causative agent of COVID-19, through the imports of live animals, products of animal origin and products of non-food origin. The conclusion is that the legal import of such goods is a very low risk pathway, with some uncertainty around the unlikely contamination during production, and low likelihood of virus survival over a long journey time.

The regions currently affected in Asia are already considered high risk countries for passenger luggage / illegal meat entering the UK, of concern because of the high prevalence of diseases such as African swine fever and highly pathogenic avian influenza as well as multiple plant pathogens and invasive species. Border Force is aware of this region of concern and will prioritise passengers for luggage checks, where possible. As a base to work collaboratively with our international partners, we have set up a joint international taskforce in Whitehall with representation from FCO, DFID, DHSC and other government departments. Our experience so far has demonstrated the value of working flexibly across departmental boundaries.

FCO Travel Advice for British nationals has been updated repeatedly to reflect the fast-moving nature of the outbreak. Our advice is based on objective assessments of the risks to British nationals and we have been guided throughout by UK medical advice. We have regular dialogue with international partners on our respective travel advice, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and US as well as with EU Member States.

The UK government is not currently placing any restrictions on Chinese travellers to the UK other than those relating to individuals travelling from Hubei province or showing symptoms of COVID-19. This decision was taken on the basis of scientific advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). Furthermore, there are no restrictions relating to air or sea freight originating from China.

UK businesses based in China and in the UK are facing difficulties due to the movement restrictions in place in China, the change in FCO travel advice to advise against non-essential travel, and reductions in air and sea freight services. The Department for International Trade is supporting UK companies in China to resume business, and are working with the China-Britain Business Council, Confederation of British Industry and British Chambers of Commerce in China to gather feedback on the impact of COVID-19. They have set up a dedicated unit in London to provide policy recommendations to the Cabinet Office on practical measures to alleviate the commercial impact of the virus.

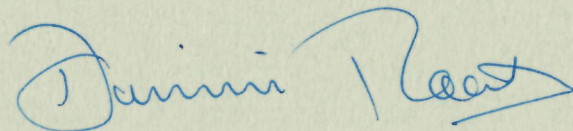
The FCO's Economics Unit is undertaking an assessment of the economic impact to China and the overall global economy, based on different scenarios around the containment of the virus and subsequent constraints on economic activity. This includes analysing the transmission channels through which economic developments in China will affect other countries and examines which other countries and/or regions may be most affected. Our estimates of the impacts on annual Chinese growth this year are in line with external estimates which range from 5.4-5.8% Year on Year, at present the impact to the global economy will be limited but this could increase if there is a large scale outbreak in another major economy.

We have remained in close contact with the Chinese government since the outbreak began. I spoke to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and there has been regular engagement with the Chinese Embassy in London and through our Embassy in Beijing. The Chinese government's advice to its own citizens has developed over the course of the outbreak. FCO Travel Advice aims to make UK nationals aware of Chinese national and local guidance and travel restrictions.

The outbreak has not changed our ambitions for the UK-China relationship. When the Prime Minister spoke to President Xi Jinping on 18 February they agreed on the importance of the UK-China relationship and resolved to work together across a range of issues including strengthening the economic partnership, to benefit the people of both China and the UK.

Looking ahead, the overriding international objective is to prevent the further spread of Covid-19, and stop it turning into a global pandemic. We will continue to work closely with other countries to use forums such as the G7 presidency to focus international efforts in support of the WHO-led response.

Yan Shuchun,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dominic Raab', with a stylized flourish at the end.

RT HON DOMINIC RAAB MP



Foreign Affairs Committee

Committee Office House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

Tel 020 7219 6106 | Email FAC@parliament.uk

Website www.parliament.uk

Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
Foreign Secretary
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
London
SW1A 2AH

19 February 2020

Dear Dominic

I am writing to seek information on the effectiveness of steps the FCO has taken to maintain good relations with partners and allies during the coronavirus outbreak.

I understand that the FCO has worked with international partners to secure the return of UK nationals at risk from the virus and am pleased that the Government has provided additional funding for research into vaccines and the virus. Could you please set out how you have cooperated with partners around the world to speed up the global response? Does it offer lessons for the future?

Given the different approaches to phytosanitary checks at the border, what cooperation has the UK put in place to ensure that travel to the Europe, North America and other countries is not impeded? Has the FCO co-ordinated its approach with that of our close allies to ensure that different approaches will not lead to others determining travel from the UK to be unsafe?

More broadly, what steps have been taken in concert with our allies in Europe and North America to align advice and maintain trading relationships with China on their current footing, including any co-ordination on restrictions introduced? Do you envisage any longer-term impact on our relations with China as a result of the coronavirus outbreak?

It would also be helpful to know what communication the Government had with the Chinese authorities and what advice they have given to their own citizens about travel around the country. Has the FCO made any assessment of the economic impact and consequent geopolitical impact of the coronavirus outbreak? Given China's dependence on export and international trade, has this changed the Government's assessment of Chinese economic growth in the coming year?

Given the fast-moving nature of the situation, it would be helpful to have a reply by 3 March, which I would intend to publish.

Yours ever,

TOM TUGENDHAT MP
Chair-Elect