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Thank you for your letter of 17 July to my predecessor Baroness Chapman, marking one year since the publication of the Government's response to the IDC report on humanitarian access and adherence to IHL.

I look forward to working with the International Development Committee and value its important role of scrutinising FCDO's work on aid policy and the expenditure of Official Development Assistance across Government.

Your inquiry last year represented a timely examination of the very concerning global trends of threats to humanitarian access and IHL. Sadly, in the twelve months since the inquiry concluded, these trends have continued. I am very clear that this is unacceptable, and that the UK will continue to play a leading role in championing humanitarian access, protection of civilians, including humanitarian personnel, and respect for IHL.

I am pleased to report that over the past year, the Government has taken forward significant practical action in this space. This includes supporting the launch and ongoing implementation of the Australian-led Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel; active engagement across all workstreams of the International Committee of the Red Cross's Global Initiative on IHL; strengthened humanitarian diplomacy capability across the FCDO; sustained work with partners to address barriers to humanitarian access in priority crises; inclusion of protection as a central humanitarian theme at the Global Partnerships Conference co-hosted by the UK and the Republic of South Africa in May 2026, work to design a new programme to support humanitarian diplomacy for access and protection; practical work with humanitarian partners to address evolving risks, including a UK-supported roadmap to mitigate risks associated with the increased use of drones in conflict, and work to develop a framework for engagement with non-state armed groups on the protection of humanitarian personnel.

The UK is also working to address humanitarian access barriers in specific crises, we would be happy to offer the Committee, or its advisers, a private briefing if helpful.

Your letter raises five specific questions which I will address in turn. I am grateful to the Committee for continuing to raise the profile of these critical issues.

1. In light of the rapid development and use of new battlefield technologies in Ukraine, what progress has the Government made, since the Committee's report, in reaching agreements that would regulate the use of autonomous weapon systems and artificial intelligence on the battlefield in line with IHL? (Recommendation 1, para 10)?

The UK continues to promote safe, legal and ethical development and use of AI in the military domain. The rapid adoption of AI across the military domain offers significant opportunities to improve decision-making, operational effectiveness and security, however it also introduces new risks, including miscalculation, unintended escalation, system vulnerabilities and challenges around accountability and transparency. The UK supports international discussions through forums such as Responsible AI in the Military Domain (REAIM) and endorsed the REAIM Pathways to Action in 2026. Mitigating AI risks requires cooperation, shared understanding and practical measures that promote responsible development and use of military AI. Through engagement with allies, partners, industry and academia, the UK seeks to strengthen international understanding of the opportunities and risks associated with military AI and support the application of international law. The UK encourages the development of practical safeguards and responsible AI behaviours and helps build consensus on approaches that enhance security while reducing risks associated with the widespread adoption of AI-enabled military capabilities.

In addition, the UK continues to work to fulfil the current mandate of the Group of Government Experts (GGE) on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) "to formulate, by consensus, a set of elements of an instrument, without prejudging its nature, and other possible measures to address emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS)", including during its 2026 sessions. The UK has continued to demonstrate leadership within the GGE through working proactively with states and civil society ahead of the 2026 CCW Review Conference.

2. Could you provide us with an update to the development of the humanitarian diplomacy training module focussed on access and protection and detail any roll out that has taken place to date? (Recommendation 3, para 24)?

The FCDO has developed a new internal Humanitarian Diplomacy training course focused on access and protection, in partnership with the British Red Cross. The course is designed to strengthen practical diplomatic capability across the FCDO network, particularly for colleagues engaging on humanitarian and conflict issues with Governments, international organisations, humanitarian actors and other non-state groups. It draws on real-life scenarios and FCDO experience and covers the role of diplomatic action in opening space for principled humanitarian action, improving humanitarian access, and reducing risks for affected people and humanitarian partners.

The course is now available to all FCDO staff through the International Academy learning platform. It comprises three modules: an introduction to humanitarian diplomacy; practical approaches to humanitarian diplomacy for access and protection; and case studies. We

formally launched the course in March 2026 through a high-level event with Martin Griffiths, Namira Negm, Chaloka Beyani and Chris Thornton, which brought together senior FCDO colleagues, partners, and external experts, both to build awareness and drive uptake across the organisation. The FCDO will continue to promote the training through internal networks and relevant learning opportunities.

We are also working with the British Red Cross to adapt the training for use by international partners, removing UK-sensitive material so it can support shared understanding and more coordinated diplomatic action on humanitarian access and protection. Alongside this investment in capability, the UK continues sustained diplomatic engagement with partners to address specific barriers in priority crises, and the FCDO is developing a new programme to fund targeted interventions that support humanitarian diplomacy for access and protection.

3. What progress has been made to the commitment in the report to introducing a “tailored humanitarian exemption or ‘carve-out’ across the UK’s autonomous sanctions”? (Recommendation 4, para 29)?

The FCDO is continuing its work to design a cross-cutting humanitarian exemption or ‘carve out’ in the UK’s autonomous sanctions. This is intended to mirror the adoption in 2023 of the UN humanitarian exemption in the UK’s sanctions (UN and mixed UN/UK regimes) which target ISIL, Al Qaida and other UN-designated entities. An exemption in the UK’s autonomous sanctions regimes will help to increase our effectiveness in targeting sanctions, in the delivery of UK aid, and in our efforts to counter terrorism and promote global human rights. We will continue to take forward the commitment to an exemption including engagement in the design process with other government departments, international aid organisations, and NGOs and banks in the UK Tri-Sector Group.

4. What progress has been made in exploring the possibility of including “a dedicated budget line for programme-specific security risk management costs into FCDO’s standard templates for ODA-funded humanitarian programmes, as well as issuing guidance to staff reviewing humanitarian budgets to ensure security funding requirements are appropriately addressed”? (Recommendation 22, para 88)

Since the Government response, FCDO has progressed work to introduce a dedicated security-cost budget line within its Accountable Grant budget template. This is being taken forward as part of a broader review of the template, so that all changes can be introduced coherently at the same time. Once implemented, the change will enable humanitarian partners to identify and justify programme-specific security risk management costs more clearly during programme design and implementation, including for local and national partners operating in high-risk environments.

5. What changes have been made to “internal guidance that emphasises the importance of direct contact with all partners to discuss security risks as well as other risks, where this is feasible and would not put local partners at additional risk”? (Recommendation 23, para 94)

Since the Government response, the FCDO has updated guidance linked to the Programme Operating Framework on working with civil society partners to give greater prominence to the risks faced by humanitarian partners, particularly local and national organisations. The revised guidance reinforces the importance of understanding partners' operating environments and engaging them directly on risks that may affect programme delivery, including security risks.

More broadly, FCDO continues to emphasise the importance of direct engagement with delivery partners, including local and national actors, through existing programme and risk management processes. Risk assessments should be undertaken collaboratively across the delivery chain, drawing on frontline perspectives to identify and address security and other risks. Guidance on locally led partnerships also emphasises the importance of creating opportunities for local delivery partners to provide meaningful input on programme objectives, delivery approaches and risk management where feasible and without placing partners at additional risk.

Thank you again for the Committee's continued engagement on these issues. The Government remains committed to using its diplomatic, legal, policy and development tools to support humanitarian access and the safe delivery of aid, protect civilians including humanitarian personnel, and promote compliance with international humanitarian law.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty McNeill', is centered on the page.

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