



## Defence Committee

Chair, Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood MP

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Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP  
Secretary of State for Defence  
Ministry of Defence  
Whitehall  
London  
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14 April 2020

Dear Defence Secretary,

Thank you for your letter of 23 March, responding to mine of 17 March, in which you set out what the Department and the Armed Forces are doing to contribute to the country's response to coronavirus. The Committee of course supports your efforts and applauds what has been done and is still being done.

However, the Committee is concerned that in a fast-changing situation defence assets may not be being deployed fully. In particular we are worried by the difficulties faced in repatriation of British citizens, and I should be grateful if you could answer the following questions:

1. Does the RAF have any unused capability that could be used to repatriate British citizens?
2. What consideration have you given to using the Royal Navy in repatriations?
3. What can the RAF do to coordinate or facilitate repatriations by commercial carriers?
4. Has the RAF undertaken any aeromedical repatriation of sick British citizens from countries with poor healthcare?
5. What preparations has the Department made for the repatriation of resident British expatriates?

We are very conscious of the pressures on you and the Department, but it would be a help to have at least preliminary answers before our session with you, scheduled for 22 April.

PP Yours sincerely,  
Tobias Ellwood

## **MOD Covid Response - Repatriation of British Nationals**

### **1. Does the RAF have any unused capability that could be used to repatriate British citizens?**

In order to ensure maximum efficiency and value for money, the strategic air transport fleet is tasked to capacity, with very little spare in normal times. As part of the MOD's COVID response planning, we have explored what Defence activity could be suspended or reduced in order to generate capacity to support the wider Government effort to respond to the virus.

Defence has supported the FCO and HMG's ongoing efforts to repatriate British citizens since January, when the first repatriation flight from Wuhan took place. Defence has since received and supported requests from the FCO to assist with the repatriation of British citizens from a number of countries, including Japan, Senegal, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This has been through support to FCO-chartered flights, as well as the provision of spare capacity on RAF flights.

Defence has embedded military Liaison Officers within FCO, including an expert team of Air Planners who have assisted the FCO's operations to repatriate thousands of individuals. Our embedded team enables the Department to assess each request received and appropriately weigh them against other demands and offer support whenever possible.

### **2. What consideration have you given to using the Royal Navy in repatriations?**

The Royal Naval is actively supporting the repatriation effort through the provision of military planning expertise, while also continuing to deliver operations around the world. Requests for military assistance received from the FCO are assessed on a case-by-case basis and Defence assets are allocated in relation to availability and suitability for the task at hand.

### **3. What can the RAF do to coordinate or facilitate repatriations by commercial carriers?**

Defence airfields such as Brize Norton and Boscombe Down have been used to support several repatriations, including for symptomatic passengers when no commercial airports have been available or capable of doing so.

Additionally, four RAF Logistics Planners are providing support to the FCO on air repatriations, which includes work on commercial carriers. The planners have provided wide-ranging Logistics advice, including the selection of Airline operators to

maximise repatriation activity and in-country logistics support requirements to prepare and move British Nationals (BNs). Examples include the main effort to return BNs from India and Pakistan, and aircraft route planning out of Fiji and back to the UK.

**4. Has the RAF undertaken any aeromedical repatriation of sick British citizens from countries with poor healthcare?**

RAF aircraft have supported the urgent transportation of sick citizens. Examples include a Chinook Helicopter flight from Jersey and A400M flights from Shetland and Orkney.

The RAF Medical Service (Tactical Medical Wing) has supported FCO-led repatriation flights of BNs who were symptom-free from COVID on boarding but developed symptoms later. The MOD also provided logistical and medical expertise for the FCO's repatriation of symptomatic passengers from the Braemar cruise ship from Cuba. While this did not involve RAF aircraft, the MOD made available Boscombe Down airfield to receive the flight.

**5. What preparations has the Department made for the repatriation of resident British expatriates?**

The repatriation of BNs is an FCO lead, and they are responsible for the prioritisation, including whether resident expatriates are eligible for support.

Defence has embedded Military Planners and Liaison Officers to support the FCO team who lead on the HMG response to the repatriation of BNs overseas. Our staff provide them with additional air planning expertise and advice on the potential use of military assets for the repatriation of British nationals globally. Examples of locations where military assets have been used to transport vulnerable BNs have been the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senegal and Kenya.

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