



BRIEFING PAPER

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Coronavirus: Britons travelling abroad

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Summary

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has advised against all non-essential global travel and has urged Britons travelling abroad to return to the UK as soon as possible. MPs have questioned the speed of the FCO's response, reported difficulties in accessing help and called upon the Government to provide more support to British nationals seeking to return home. The Government has set aside £75 million to enable special charter flights to priority countries to bring back UK residents.

Here we look at what the FCO has done to help British travellers return home and reaction from MPs and the media. The paper provides information on how to access FCO travel advice.

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1. FCO actions

The FCO is, at the time of writing, advising all Britons who are travelling abroad to return to the UK as soon as possible and advises against all non-essential travel anywhere in the world. The FCO has repatriated some Britons, from cruise ships and a select number of countries. On 30 March the Government announced it has set aside £75 million to enable special charter flights to priority countries to bring back UK residents. The Foreign Secretary estimates there are [hundreds of thousands of British nationals abroad](#).¹

Advice against non-essential travel

On 17 March 2020 the [FCO advised against global travel](#).² Dominic Raab, the Foreign Secretary, in a statement in the House said, "UK travellers abroad now face wide-spread

¹ This excludes expats. [HC Deb 24 March 2020 c225](#)

² ["Travel advice against all non-essential travel: Foreign Secretary's statement"](#), FCO, 17 March 2020

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international border restrictions, and lockdowns in various countries... with immediate effect, I have taken the decision to advise British nationals against non-essential travel globally, for an initial period of 30 days".³

The FCO [advised against all but essential travel to Wuhan city](#) in China, where the coronavirus originated, on 23 January 2020.

Advice for travelling Britons to return to the UK

On 23 March 2020 the FCO [advised all British travellers to return to the UK now](#). The advice had changed [because of the rate of new border restrictions](#). Dominic Raab urged British people who live in the UK but are travelling abroad to return to the UK as soon as possible.

Keeping routes open

On 24 March, Dominic Raab told the House that the FCO was working with airlines and governments to enable commercial flights to continue and to overcome domestically imposed restrictions to enable Britons to leave and, if necessary, transit countries. He added that the Department of Transport was working with airlines to ensure that travellers could rebook or find alternative routes home.⁴

In his comments Raab said the he had:

- agreed special arrangements with **Peru** for flights to return British nationals for to return Peruvian nationals in the UK, and is working on how to get UK nationals travelling in more remote parts of the country to the capital, Lima. One thousand UK nationals have registered with the embassy.
- spoken to the Singaporean Foreign Minister to agree to work with the UK to enable UK nationals to transit via **Singapore**
- confirmed the High Commissions in **New Zealand** and **Australia** are working with airlines, airports and the respective governments to keep flight routes open and reopen some that have closed.
- discussed with the **Spanish** Government options for keeping hotels open in Spain and for flights to come in and bring Britons back to the UK
- planned discussions on keeping international transit hubs open with G7 Foreign Ministers

He added "For those trying to get home in other countries, we are providing as much practical advice as is physically possible".⁵

G7 statements

The [G7 leaders statement](#), following their summit on 16 March 2020, did not specifically address international travel and repatriating nationals. Foreign Ministers, meeting on 25 March, agreed keeping global travel routes open was one of five critical areas identified as the priority for international action.⁶

³ [HC Deb 17 March 2020 c799](#)

⁴ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 c222](#)

⁵ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 c222-224](#)

⁶ "[International co-operation only way to get travellers home and beat coronavirus, says the Foreign Secretary](#)", FCO, 25 March 2020

Repatriation

As of 24 March the FCO has organised the [repatriation of more than 1,000 British nationals](#), and 254 non-British nationals, from 26 countries.⁷ This includes a number of countries. The FCO chartered four British Airways planes to help British nationals return from **Peru** between 26 March and 31 March.

The Foreign Secretary discussed the FCO's capacity to repatriate people from abroad in his 17 March 2020 statement:

We have taken action where necessary, but no one should be under any illusions: it is costly and complicated to co-ordinate, so Government-supported repatriations have been undertaken only in exceptional circumstances.

Dominic Raab went on to say, "the primary responsibility for managing outbreaks of covid-19 and quarantine measures must rest with the country in which the outbreak has occurred".⁸

At their summit on 26 March 2020, the G20 leaders agreed to provide assistance where necessary to repatriate citizens:

We task our top relevant officials to coordinate closely in support of the global efforts to counter the pandemic's impacts, including through proportionate border management measures in accordance with national regulations and to provide assistance where necessary to repatriate citizens.⁹

Special charter flights

On 30 March 2020 the Foreign Secretary announced the Government will [provide up to £75 million](#) to enable special charter flights to priority countries to bring back UK residents. Dominic Raab also announced a [new partnership with the airline industry](#) to help Britons return to the UK via commercial flights. He said "where commercial routes remain an option, airlines will be responsible for getting passengers home". This means offering alternative flights at little to no cost and allowing passengers to change tickets between carriers. He urged travellers to book tickets as soon as possible.

The Foreign Secretary explained the Government will provide financial support for special charter flights where commercial flights are no longer running. These will be promoted through the government's travel advice and by the British Embassy or High Commission in the relevant country. Travellers will need to book and pay for a seat directly through a dedicated travel management company.

The Foreign Secretary did not identify the priority countries but said the FCO will be prioritising the most vulnerable. The FCO separately explained how it would prioritise special charter flights:

Special charter flights for countries with no commercial routes will be prioritised according to the number of stranded British travellers and their vulnerability, including an assessment of the local health provision. In some places, access for flights to land and the ability to move around within the country to assemble for return flights will also be decisive factors.¹⁰

The FCO said charter flights were already up and running to **Ghana** and **Tunisia** and intends to add more from countries such as India and **India** and **South Africa**. The [FCO](#)

⁷ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 c225](#)

⁸ [HC Deb 17 March 2020 c800](#)

⁹ [Extraordinary G20 Leaders' Summit Statement on Covid-19](#), 26 March 2020

¹⁰ ["New government partnership with airlines to fly back more tourists stranded abroad"](#), FCO, 30 March 2020

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[Travel twitter feed](#) advertises when flights are available: 1 April it the FCO tweeted a [special flight will operate from Algiers](#) on 2 April.

The focus is on [returning British travellers overseas](#) and not British overseas residents.

Role of FCO and DfT

In a [joint letter](#) to airlines, dated 27 March 2020, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Transport (DfT) explained the division of work between the two government departments: the Fco will lead the programme of special flights while the DfT and Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) will provide “senior strategic engagement and operational support”. DfT and CAA personnel will be embedded within a central planning and delivery unit led by the FCO.

The letter explicitly addressed reports that [passengers are being charged excessive prices](#), by stating:

it is essential that airlines meet this need and offer their passengers the service they deserve, including alternatives where routes are cancelled to allow them to change tickets – including between carriers – as quickly and cheaply as possible.¹¹

The CAA has compiled information for passengers and the aviation industry on its [CAA covid-19 webpage](#).

Financial support for individuals abroad

The Foreign Secretary, responding to the urgent question on 24 March, expressed sympathy for those who are running out of money while abroad but said “[given the scale, the Foreign Office cannot provide a direct subsidy or grant](#)” to individuals. He said in extremis, the FCO is willing to offer temporary loans to facilitate people getting back home. This is in line with existing FCO policy on [emergency loans for repatriation](#). The Foreign Office reaffirmed its offer of an emergency loan as a last resort when it announced the special charter flights on 30 March 2020.

Cruise ships

Initial repatriation efforts focused on the Diamond Princess cruise ship in February 2020. The [first Briton to die from coronavirus](#), in late February 2020, was on that ship. A number of Britons had been placed in isolation on cruise ships to try and contain the virus. More recently, as more travel restrictions have been applied, the focus has been on enabling cruise ships to dock and safely disembark passengers.

During a [debate in the House on 24 March](#) several cruise ships were discussed. The Foreign Secretary reported the FCO had successfully returned 669 British nationals from the Braemar cruise ship which managed to dock in Cuba, close to 3,000 British nationals on the Azura which docked in Bridgetown, Barbados, and 355 from the Norwegian Spirit. Mr Raab added “[we have a specific eye and focus on making sure that Brits on board those cruise ships get back safe and sound](#)”.

2. Response from MPs

MPs concerns

¹¹ “[Getting British nationals home: Government-assisted returns by air](#)”, FCO and DfT, 27 March 2020 (letter published on [gov.uk](#) on 30 March 2020)

MPs, many of whom have constituents who are travelling abroad and struggling to return to the UK, have reported concerns from constituents who have not been able to contact embassies.¹² MPs have questioned the FCO's speed of response and repatriation efforts, often citing individual constituent cases. MPs have also praised FCO staff. This section reflects some of the discussions in the House with a particular focus on communications with embassies and repatriation.

MPs questioned the Foreign Secretary at length on [17 March 2020](#) (during [oral questions to the Foreign Office](#) and in response to an [oral statement](#)) and on 24 March 2020 in [response to an urgent question](#) tabled by Caroline Nokes.¹³

In her urgent question, Caroline Nokes reported constituents were in a dire situation: they were unable to get through to consular services on the phone and faced an increasing inability to find accommodation or airline routes open. She said Britons are being urged by the FCO to return to the UK where commercial flights are available. But, she said, these aren't available because they are "either banned entirely, are trying to transit via countries where no layovers are permitted, or are priced at tens of thousands of pounds and via airports that are expected to close imminently". She urged the Foreign Secretary to speed up the process, saying "[the vision of British citizens sleeping rough on the streets of Caracas is not a good one](#)".

Barry Gardiner echoed Ms Nokes' comments, saying:

It is a crisis affecting British nationals in every continent, many of them accompanied by young children, many of them with worsening health conditions, and many of them running out of money and in danger of losing their accommodation.¹⁴

Mr Gardiner urged the Foreign Secretary to commit to finding British travellers a flight home and to [guarantee continued accommodation](#) in the meantime. The Foreign Secretary said he [could not give cast-iron guarantees](#), given the hundreds of thousands of people involved and the national restrictions that are being imposed, at pace and sometimes without notice.

Gavin Newlands was among several MPs who voiced concerns about constituents with health problems who are running low on medicines or who are running out of funds. Mr Newlands said some constituents have been "[particularly scathing about the lack of consular support available](#)". Ben Bradshaw similarly said "[the reality on the ground does not correspond to the picture being painted](#)" by constituents stuck abroad. David Linden said "[the current communication flow has not been acceptable](#)".

Chris Elmore raised media reports of 150 nationals stuck in Bali. Dominic Raab said he was very concerned about the situation in Bali but added there are [an estimated 6,000 British nationals in Bali](#) (approximately 2,000 of whom are long-term residents).

Several MPs asked about efforts to commission repatriation flights. Emily Thornberry, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, raised such concerns following the Foreign Secretary's statement on 17 March. She asked about existing plans for evacuation and repatriation in the event of an outbreak such as this. She asked the Foreign Secretary "[why has official travel advice from the FCO been so slow to match what is happening on the ground?](#)" and "will the Foreign Secretary determine why the levels of consular support have been so out of step with the levels of global demand?".¹⁵

¹² References to embassies in this brief includes high commissions and consulates.

¹³ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 c222-240](#)

¹⁴ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 c224](#)

¹⁵ [HC Deb 17 March 2020 c801](#)

A number of MPs also [praised Foreign Office staff](#) during the 24 March debate. Alicia Kearns, who discussed the pressure of having previously worked in the Foreign Office, said:

It is important that we put on record the enormous thanks of everyone in this House to the FCO staff who are working in the crisis centre and across the country, and who have brought thousands of Brits back to the UK in the last few weeks.¹⁶

Access to embassies

Several MPs, including Caroline Nokes in her urgent question of 24 March, reported constituents unable to get through to embassies and/or the FCO, with emails acknowledged but not replied to and embassy doors shut to travellers. Emily Thornberry had previously raised such concerns in response to the Foreign Secretary's statement on 17 March.

The Foreign Secretary said "[we have FCO staff in all our 280 posts in 168 countries and 10 overseas territories, and they are working round the clock to respond to this global pandemic](#)". He explained individuals calling embassies will be automatically put through to the global consular contact centres based in Malaga and Ottawa and the FCO has doubled and redoubled capacity to deal with the surge in demand. He added embassy staff are continuing to work from home and only a [very small number of posts had been closed down](#): Mr Raab added they have reprioritised the work of the FCO and its missions over the last two weeks so that all but the most essential alternative business is focused on the consular effort.

3. Information for Briton's travelling abroad

This section collates information available from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) on Gov.uk.

The [Gov.uk: Coronavirus](#) webpage highlights travel information for Britons relating to the coronavirus pandemic. Currently it includes:

- [Information for British citizens travelling abroad](#): this includes information for those abroad and want to return to the UK, if you're concerned about friends or family overseas, and advice if your travel is essential
- [Foreign travel advice for each country](#): this provides tailored advice for 225 countries or territories. The FCO reviews and updates these regularly. Individuals can subscribe to email alerts for when a country page is updated.
- [Guidance for visa applicants in the UK and abroad](#)

Some media websites are collating information on travel restrictions worldwide. The Guardian, for example, is regularly its [Coronavirus travel updates: which countries have restrictions and FCO warnings in place?](#) Readers should be mindful restrictions are constantly changing and anyone needing information on a specific country should consult the relevant government's information websites as well as the UK FCO sites listed in this briefing paper.

¹⁶ [HC Deb 24 March 2020 c230](#)

Social media updates

The FCO's travel feed on twitter provides general and country-specific updates on travel information/restrictions relating to the coronavirus pandemic: [@FCOtravel](#)

British embassies, high commissions and consulates are providing regular updates for British travellers on their social media twitter and facebook pages. These can be found via [Gov.uk: Find a British embassy, high commission or consulate](#). This also provides embassy addresses and contact numbers. An additional resource for finding FCO social media output is: [Gov.uk: list of worldwide Foreign Office social media accounts](#).

The [FCO youtube page](#) also contains excerpts from the Foreign Secretary's updates to the House on travel restrictions.

Information about special return flights will be advertised by the relevant embassy social media feeds and travel advice pages.

Travel Insurance

The FCO advises individuals who are abroad and want to return to the UK to check their travel insurance. Library insight [Coronavirus and insurance](#) provides some general information on insurance. The [Association of British Insurers](#) has a dedicated webpage on [travel insurance](#) as part of its Coronavirus information hub.

Further reading

Media have reported individual cases of Briton's travelling abroad and unable to return home. Some examples:

- "[How can we get home? Brits stranded abroad despair at official advice](#)", The Guardian, 25 March 2020
- "[Coronavirus: Thousands of Britons stranded abroad as travel ban kicks in](#)", Sky News, 18 March 2020
- "[Chaos for UK tourists abroad as they face battle to return to Britain amid coronavirus lockdown](#)", Daily Mail, 19 March 2020

The FCO provides a range of other guidance and information for travellers, unrelated to Coronavirus. These can be found under [British Nationals Overseas](#) and include guidance such as:

- [Support for British nationals abroad: a guide](#). This contains general information on issues such as who the FCO can help, what kind of help the FCO can and cannot provide.
- [Financial assistance abroad](#). Guidance on what to do and contact details if individuals need financial help abroad

A full list of FCO social media sites is contained in [Gov.uk: social media use](#).

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