

Yemen Safe Passage Group

www.yemensafepassage.org

Britain can lead an international response to create secure airbridges into Yemen to help contain the COVID-19 pandemic there

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
10 Downing Street, SW1 2AA

1 June 2020

Dear Prime Minister

The catastrophe in Yemen is set to escalate with the unchecked spread of COVID-19 in a country which is wholly unable to fight the virus without external support.

Fighting continues in the north, with daily Saudi airstrikes against Houthi positions seeking to take further territory to the east. In the south, government forces are fighting the Southern Transitional Council. Five years of war, disease, malnutrition and impoverishment have left the population acutely vulnerable. The UK is to be commended for continuing to support the UN in working for a ceasefire whose need has never been greater, but sustainable practical solutions are now urgently required to address the spread of COVID-19.

Despite recent breakthroughs – two flights flew medical supplies into Sanaa in the final days of May - the situation remains highly insecure. More sustainable arrangements are needed to deliver health supplies (oxygen equipment and testing as well as PPE) at scale to Sana'a, Aden and Seyoun. The British government could lead at the Security Council in negotiating a secure political framework for emergency medical aid. In the absence of a permanent ceasefire, the parties to the conflict will need to enable unhindered access for planes carrying humanitarian cargo to the airports they control. A neutral air hub as a point of departure for such flights, may well prove vital to the long-term stability of key routes.

The acuteness of the COVID-19 crisis must allow humanitarian principles at last to override the political obstacles that have long hampered the provision of such aid to a desperately beleaguered population. Opening air routes for COVID-focussed aid, to both the north and south of the country, will assist this considerably. We ask you to show personal leadership to secure the longer-term sustainability of the airbridge arrangements into Yemen and have copied it to those ministries that would be involved.

Yours sincerely

Lord Mark Malloch-Brown KCMG, PC, former UN Deputy Secretary-General

Rt Hon David Miliband, PC, former Foreign Secretary, President of the International Rescue Committee

Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP, former Secretary of State for International Development

Rt Hon Sir Stephen O'Brien KBE, former UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and
Emergency Relief Coordinator, former Undersecretary of State for International Development

Sir John Sawers GCMG, former British Permanent Representative to the UN

Sir Alan Duncan KCMG, Former Envoy to Yemen and former Minister in FCO and DFID

Rt Hon Sir Desmond Swayne TD MP, former Minister of State for International Development

Rt Hon Alistair Burt, former Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa at FCO and DFID

Rt Hon Timothy Loughton, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Yemen

Rt Hon Alison Thewliss MP, Secretary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Yemen

James Firebrace, Coordinator Yemen Safe Passage Group, Acting Chair British Yemeni Society

Copied to:

Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP, Foreign Secretary

Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, Secretary of State for International Development

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence

Sir Mark Lowcock KCB, Head of UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, former Permanent Secretary for International Development

Supplementary Notes

A. Notes on Yemen's COVID Crisis

Yemen has long been described as the worst humanitarian emergency in the world, but COVID-19 looks set to cause further serious deterioration. The country has extremely limited capacity to contain the virus and to treat its victims. The continuation of the war and the restrictions on aid means that this crisis cannot be addressed with any degree of effectiveness. UN-OCHA now report that the health service has effectively all but collapsed. The WHO earlier estimated 40,000 to 65,000 deaths, but the true tally is likely to be considerably higher without significant external support.

Reports from Sana'a and elsewhere indicate that thousands of cases are going untreated and unrecorded. Aden's cemeteries are reported to be 'overflowing with graves'. The population has been weakened by malnutrition and by epidemics of cholera, dengue fever and diphtheria. An estimated 50% of health facilities have been destroyed or are unable to function. Damage to infrastructure and to the economy have led to acute water shortages. Serious floods have affected key cities compounding public health challenges.

Yemen is very poorly placed to combat COVID-19. Coping mechanisms have already been stretched to the limit and remittances are threatened by anti-COVID measures within the GCC. Frequent handwashing is difficult with water scarce and expensive. Social distancing is highly problematic and almost impossible for over a million now living in IDP camps. Mosques and markets remain largely open. The best equipped hospital in the country has only 16 dedicated COVID beds, and the only dedicated COVID-19 response facility in Aden is turning away patients who arrive too late for treatment. There is an acute shortage of PPE and many doctors are now refusing to handle cases without some protection.

B. Political Notes on the Airbridges

The situation confronting flights into the key airports of Sana'a, Aden and Seyoun is rather different, but in all cases the airbridges must be recognised by both the parties controlling airspace along the route and on the ground in the vicinity of the airports. The Internationally Recognised Government of Yemen (GoY) needs to be on board as, whatever the realities on the ground, Yemen's airspace is legally theirs.

In the case of Sana'a, the key parties are the Saudis who control the airspace and the Houthis who control the ground. In the case of Aden, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) currently control around the airport, while the airspace is under Coalition control, effectively the Saudis, who also station troops within the airport perimeter. Seyoun airport is controlled by the GoY and is key for supplying the east.

Looking ahead, serious clashes directly affecting the airports or military escalation affecting the cooperation needed cannot be ruled out. The UN was only able to restart limited passenger flights into Aden for its personnel in May, and emergency flights into Sana'a (only two to date) were only allowed in the last ten days. These arrangements need to be extended to emergency cargo flights.

C. Points of Departure for the Airbridges

In the absence of a national ceasefire, the point of departure for emergency flights should ideally be a dedicated and neutral air hub. At present the UN has now started using Addis Ababa for bringing personnel into Yemen. Dubai was used for the UNICEF flight into Sana'a on 30th May and hopefully this route, passing through Saudi airspace to reach Yemen, will be able to continue. A European hub for ECHO operations is under discussion.

Looking forward, Akrotiri airbase in Cyprus is well placed for flights from Europe. Djibouti may also prove an attractive option as the verification of air cargoes, should this be required, could be carried out by the UN Verification and Inspection Mission (UNVIM) which is already established there for marine cargoes into Yemen's western ports.