

*Opening Statement**Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Niall Burgess**Special Committee on Covid – 19 Response**02 June 2020*

Mr Chairman, Committee Members,

I welcome this opportunity to meet you today and to outline the contribution of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to the Covid 19 response. It has been said that there are decades when little happens; and there are weeks when decades happen. Over recent weeks, we have faced unprecedented challenges that have necessitated a coordinated response of extraordinary scale, involving all divisions within the Department.

This response has extended from consular support to assistance in the wider procurement efforts, the secondment of a significant number of staff to other essential services, the mitigation of some of the global impacts of the pandemic, the maintenance of a global mission network and, of course, the maintenance of other ongoing essential work. With your permission, Chairman, I would like to touch briefly on some of these.

But first let me address the actual and likely impact of travel restrictions on those wishing to enter the State. As this Department's particular responsibility rests with the protection and care of Irish citizens overseas, I will focus my comments to the challenges faced by Irish citizens seeking to return to the state and the Department's response to this.

Our Consular Directorate, in close cooperation with our network of Embassies and Consulates overseas, has been assisting citizens affected by COVID19 since the virus first emerged in China in January. The global implications were unknown at that stage but our consular response evolved rapidly to match the evolution of the pandemic and the challenges it posed.

By mid-February, the pandemic was spreading rapidly around the world and, as a result, countries were imposing internal and international restrictions on travel, shutting down public spaces, suspending flights and closing airspace, with an increasing number of our citizens facing the prospect of being stranded abroad. In response, we activated a dedicated helpline to provide direct support and advice. Drawing on staff redeployed from across the Department, and from the Passport Service, the Crisis Centre scaled up quickly to operate on a 24/7 basis receiving up to 2,000 calls per day. By the end of May, the Crisis Centre had handled over 20,000 contacts from Irish citizens at home and abroad. I believe the Helpline delivered a reliable, efficient and empathetic service to our citizens in a time of heightened uncertainty and allowed us to identify those citizens most in need of urgent assistance and ensure that they receive the required support.

The first repatriations we assisted with were from Wuhan, China in late January, followed by assistance to citizens stranded on cruise ships in Japan and Cambodia. These operations could not have taken place without effective cooperation with EU and international partners in the region. Indeed, throughout the crisis, we have worked very closely with the UK, EU and other like-minded partners, in our consular response.

To date, we have advised and assisted well over 6,000 citizens in returning home from 129 countries. This has included providing information about available routes and connections, and ensuring seats on commercial flights wherever possible, or by negotiating places on flights chartered by the UK, EU and other like-minded partners. The challenges to these efforts - including the closure of borders, airports and airspace, and the suspension of many services - have been significant and the scale of these repatriation efforts unprecedented in recent times.

In a few exceptional cases – where there were significant groups of Irish citizens, with no alternative options to leave, and in circumstances that made them particularly vulnerable - we chartered planes ourselves, bringing back 132 of our citizens from Peru, 68 from India and 95 from Nigeria. These were extremely complicated operations, which involved extensive outreach to citizens, discussions with local, regional and national authorities, negotiations with airlines and other transport companies, and getting citizens from one part of the country to the other despite severe travel restrictions in place. These flights, which were arranged in close cooperation with partners, also facilitated the travel of citizens from other EU and EEA Member States, and were supported through the EU “Union Civil Protection Mechanism.” This is the first time that Ireland has arranged flights using this mechanism.

In all operations, we prioritised public health considerations, liaising closely with the Departments of Health and Transport, the HSE and Dublin Airport Authority.

At this point, I would like to pay tribute to our many international partners, who have provided crucial assistance to our citizens on the ground, to Aer Lingus, Ryanair and Avalon who worked closely with us throughout and to the various charitable bodies at home who have helped a number of citizens who have returned in particularly vulnerable circumstances.

Our Consular Directorate has also been working closely with our Embassies and Consulates on complicated and often very distressing issues such as hospitalisations and deaths overseas, repatriation of remains, and the treatment of prisoners in the context of COVID19.

This crisis has underlined the value of our Travel Advice. This advice, which helps people to make informed decisions when planning a trip overseas and offers an objective assessment of the potential risks, is provided for over 200 countries and is available on our website and

TravelWise App. Almost 1,400 updates to our travel advice were made in the first four months of 2020 alone, a 10-fold increase on the same period last year.

Although great progress has been achieved in responding to the many consular challenges posed by COVID19, this operation is far from over. At present, we are aware of some 1,000 citizens dispersed across many countries, some in remote locations, with an interest in returning home and we are working with them to provide advice and help them with access to essential local services. The potential future challenges which our citizens' face will depend to a large extent on the evolution of the pandemic over the coming months.

In the meantime, we have also established a dedicated Covid-19 Response Fund for Irish Communities Abroad designed to protect the elderly, to provide mental health supports and to meet the needs of those made newly vulnerable by the pandemic. This has supported, for example, the Sláinte 2020 project in New York which brings together five long-established and trusted community organisations in helping those most in need at the moment.

As regards outward travel, since mid-March the Government has advised against all non-essential travel overseas, and the security status assigned to all countries was upgraded to reflect this advice. We continue to advise against all non-essential travel.

Cooperation with the Department of Health

As I am sharing time with colleagues from the Department of Health today, I should mention the close working relationship we have in addressing this crisis where the Department of Foreign Affairs has a role to play or skills that can be useful. In that context, for example, we have seconded several staff from the Passport Office to the HSE to assist with contact tracing.

In our response to COVID-19, we are keenly aware that we must consider the shared geography of the island of Ireland and the cross-border mobility of people through close and ongoing contact both North/South and East/West. The Government is therefore engaged in cooperation with the Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government with the intention of delivering an effective response to the threat of COVID-19 on behalf of all the people of the island.

At an initial meeting in Armagh on Saturday 14 March, senior representatives of the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, including the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, First Minister, deputy First Minister, Health Ministers North and South and their Chief Medical Officers reviewed the situation regarding COVID-19 and how best to tackle the outbreak.

Ministers have since met in various formats, and the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, have jointly chaired a number of conference calls with First Minister Arlene Foster, deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, Health Minister Robin Swann

and Minister for Health Simon Harris to discuss the ongoing response to COVID-19. In all such contacts, it has also been agreed that the protection of the lives and welfare of everyone on the island is paramount, and no effort will be spared in that regard.

The Tánaiste and Minister for Health and the two Departments work closely on this – the Tánaiste on overall coordination of North South and East West relations and the Minister for Health on the details of measures to deal with the public health emergency and their implementation.

The Irish Government's Roadmap to ease the Covid 19 restrictions, published on 1st May, acknowledges the need to continue to work intensively on our approach to travel restrictions and controls at ports and airports, and on the need for co-operation with Northern Ireland, the UK and our EU partners.

Mission Network

Throughout this crisis we have also been clear on the need to ensure that our global network of Embassies and Consulates remain operational to deliver essential services. All ninety Irish missions across our network have continued to work, notwithstanding significant challenges.

This has facilitated essential business including ongoing EU business and the management of Brexit. It has also facilitated extensive reporting on the progress and impact of the disease globally and on the measures taken by other governments to address both the pandemic and the challenges of economic recovery as an input to policy making at home.

It has also supported our efforts to source and ship critical medical supplies for the Covid-19 response. Our Embassies in Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul and Berlin and a small team in the Department here in Dublin have been working closely with the IDA, HSE, the Department of Health and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the effort to secure essential equipment, including ventilators, testing kits, and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Many have contributed to this work in an exemplary Team Ireland effort but I want to mention one in particular. Our Deputy Head of Mission in Beijing, Michael Hurley, anchored our efforts to secure PPE in China from the outset of this crisis. We lost Michael to a short illness last week. We brought him home this weekend and his funeral was held yesterday. We will never know how many people owe their health and possibly their lives to the efforts he anchored. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Ireland's Role in the Global Response

At a global level, Ireland has taken a leading, progressive, role in wider efforts to address the crisis. So far, Irish Aid has provided over €70 million to the international health response to

the virus. Irish funding has been prioritised to support international efforts to develop a vaccine against Covid-19 and, importantly, to ensure that once found, it will be distributed cheaply and fairly around the globe.

In addition, we are working closely with Irish NGOs, Trocaire, Concern, Goal and others perhaps less well-known but equally effective, to help ensure that those organisations are able to play their part in the global response.

In Irish Embassies in Africa and elsewhere, we are working closely with Health Ministries on their national responses to the virus. For example, in Liberia and Zambia, Ireland is leading the international donor response in the health sector. In Mozambique, we have been able to share lessons from how the HSE developed its Covid plans.

At the UN, we have stepped in strongly behind the WHO, where Mike Ryan is leading the global fight against the pandemic. We also occupy a leadership role in chairing the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund, leading the group of donors supporting the ICRC and the leadership troika supporting the Office of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator.

This is of course not just a health crisis. It is an economic and social crisis too. That's why we are working with the Asian Development Bank, for example, to repurpose an Irish Trust Fund to help Pacific small island states cope with the severe economic downturn they are experiencing. Looking ahead, we will need to continue to invest in helping others cope with this complex triple crisis.

Conclusion

Overall we can be proud of the efforts of our public servants to this crisis – addressing an issue where the stakes for this country have never been higher nor the challenges greater and doing so with imagination, resilience and determination. That applies not just to the work I have outlined above but also to the staff we have reallocated to other essential government services. I want to take this opportunity to note their professionalism and their dedication to public service.

Thank you Chairman.