

Member Meeting with Minister for Scotland, Iain Stewart MP

26/05/2021

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Responses to Q&A Questions

HMG has massively reduced its ODA budget, including for Malawi. Given the importance of partnership, to what extent is FCDO aligning its country strategy with partners in Scotland, including the Scottish Government? What are the UK's priorities in Malawi?

- The UK's priorities in Malawi are aligned behind HMG's overarching objectives for its partnerships in Africa. They are also aligned behind the Government of Malawi's own vision as articulated in "Malawi 2063", which sets out a roadmap towards Malawi becoming a prosperous and self-reliant country by 2063. The British High Commission's priorities are: helping Malawi to build a resilient and productive economy; helping Malawi to become a more open society and to tackle anti-corruption; supporting Malawi on human development for the poorest (primarily health and education); and helping Malawi to contribute to a cleaner and greener planet. These align strongly with partners in Scotland and the Scottish Government, whose strategic focus is to assist the most vulnerable communities in improving their health and education systems, as well as achieving long-term sustainable economic development. We have regular dialogue with both the Scottish Government and the Scotland Malawi Partnership.

What will the relationship be between the UK Government's Edinburgh office and the FCDO in East Kilbride?

- The UK Government in Scotland works collaboratively across a number of sites, and will continue to do so whilst seeking opportunities to enhance our overall representation in Scotland. A number of UK Government departments work from Queen Elizabeth House (including my own, the Scotland Office), whilst the FCDO Headquarters at Abercrombie House in East Kilbride continue to be a base for staff from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Malawi's population is forecast to rise from 19 million in 2019 to 29 million (UNDP). Much agriculture is ruined, a single rainy season, and like many countries, much food is lost between harvest and consumers' plates. Will the Minister please enquire to what extent the challenge of Malawi's food security is in the sights of the D part of FCDO?

- Tackling food insecurity is a major focus of our current assistance. We are using our expertise and influence to shift the prevailing approach away from treating symptoms through food handouts and ineffective agricultural subsidies, towards prevention and mitigation, with scalable social protection as the core national tool for addressing vulnerability. Our aim is to combine programming focused on targeted cash transfers and preparedness, alongside greater diplomatic and technical assistance to Government and key partners - in particular coordinating and leveraging the efforts of multilaterals like the World Bank and the UN.

Could the UK Government support efforts to get direct flights from the UK to Malawi? Malawi has terrific tourist attractions (including the Lake and the Nyika and Mulanje plateaus) but is not included in travel agents' African packages. Travel to Malawi is both slower and more expensive than to Zambia or Tanzania. This issue is particularly acute in the context of the Build Back Better agenda which generally seeks to reduce air travel. If Malawi's lack of direct flights is set in concrete as part of this initiative then long-term damage to the tourist industry will follow.

- On this question, I have consulted with the Department for Transport. DfT Officials indicate that the last formal discussions between the UK and Malawi on Air Services Agreement took place in 1990, and the agreement is restricted with London listed as the only UK point which may be operated from, and only at two frequencies per week. DfT suggested that the lack of recent discussions between the UK and Malawi on this reflects a lack of commercial interest in operating direct services.
- The DfT noted that its default position is to have very liberal Air Service Agreements with no restrictions on frequencies or points that airlines can operate between, and that would be its position with Malawi if they were to enter into negotiations on updating the ASA. It would then be for airlines to make their own commercial decisions on whether to take up the opportunities available. However, negotiating with Malawi is not something they could prioritise at this time unless there was real interest from an airline in commencing direct services. They also noted that currently, no Malawian airlines have UK third country operator safety approval from the CAA and would need to get that before operating to the UK; the security standards at their airports would also need to be audited and any deficiencies dealt with before services to the UK could begin.
- On this question therefore, it appears that were there sufficient commercial interest from airlines in establishing direct flight routes, there would be the potential for the UK and Malawi to review the Air Services Agreement. However as noted, this would be contingent on genuine commercial appetite.