

## Labour Campaign for Human Rights: UK Aid and Coronavirus Briefing

### What is the issue?

- The government [plans](#) to merge the Department for International Development (DfID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Integrating both departments will affect DfID's clear purpose and transparency, and force its development goals and projects to compete with UK foreign policy and business interests.
- The merger will undermine the UK's efforts to support countries fighting COVID-19, which is plunging millions into poverty, and [undoing decades of progress](#) on living standards, health and education.
- Countries in the global south are particularly vulnerable to a COVID-19 outbreak:
  - [Estimates](#) show there are only 2,000 working ventilators across 43 African countries, and a ratio of five ICU beds per one million people.
  - [900 million to one billion people](#) live in informal settlements, often with water and hygiene facilities shared by multiple households.
- Countries affected by conflict or with large refugee populations are also particularly vulnerable:
  - [Eight-nine million](#) people live in refugee camps globally, in very high population densities and with unreliable access to water and emergency healthcare.
  - Yemen is one of the least prepared countries in the world to deal with COVID-19. At least [70%](#) of the population lack access to food, safe water and adequate healthcare and nearly one million suspected cholera cases have been registered since 2018.

### What should the government be doing about it?

- **The government must immediately halt the planned merger** and protect the independence of DfID with its strong focus on alleviating global poverty. This would ensure that the UK's efforts to support countries fighting COVID-19 is not bound up with UK trade interests.
- **The government must take a lead role in coordinating the international aid response** to support the fight against COVID-19 in the global south, in particular in countries affected by conflict and mass refugee migration – such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and Bangladesh.
- **The government must implement a long-term strategy to ensure partner countries are better prepared** for global health emergencies and pandemics, in particular major zoonotic disease outbreaks.

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- **The government must stop facilitating wars or conflicts that destabilise countries.** For example, by suspending arms sales or military support to ‘human rights priority’ countries, like Saudi Arabia. The UK bears significant [responsibility](#) for the current humanitarian [crisis](#) in Yemen, as a result of the continued arms sales and military support that it has provided to Saudi Arabia since the start of the war in 2015.
- **The government must ensure an inter-departmental response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen,** which recognises the absurdity of the fact that significant amounts of aid from DfID is being used to clean up the mess that arms sales and military support overseen by the MoD and the Foreign Office are creating. DfID [aid commitments](#) in 2018 made the UK the fifth largest donor of humanitarian aid to Yemen.

### **What Labour should be pushing the government to do:**

- Challenge the merger of the FCO and DfID, and commit to maintaining an independent development body. Highlight the dangers of merging development aims with foreign policy and business interests.
- Call on MPs to press colleagues in the MoD and Foreign Office to withdraw all military support for Saudi Arabia until a permanent ceasefire in Yemen has been achieved.
- Use the UK government’s diplomatic power to ensure the current temporary Coronavirus ceasefire in Yemen is respected.
- Share support on Social Media - e.g. *“Coronavirus is a global health emergency - we need a strong and independent DfID now more than ever. The FCO merger will undermine UK efforts to support countries fighting COVID-19”*.

### **Further reading:**

- [LCHR](#): Coronavirus is a global health emergency: we need DfID now more than ever
- [LabourList](#): Why the DfID and FCO merger is a mistake
- [The Guardian](#): DfID merger will be bad for poor countries and for the UK
- [Devex](#): DfID merger causes serious transparency challenges for UK aid
- [The Telegraph](#): The developing world thought it had escaped the coronavirus - the worst may be yet to come
- [The New Scientist](#): Coronavirus will play out very differently in the world’s poorest nations
- [John Hopkins University](#): The Potential Impact of COVID-19 in Refugee Camps in Bangladesh and Beyond
- [Al Jazeera](#): Yemen Coronavirus cases expected to surge as aid dries up
- [LCHR](#): In Conversation with Gulf House