



PRESS RELEASE

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REPATRIATION OPERATION BRINGS BRITISH CITIZENS BACK FROM MOROCCO

In a long-planned operation, twenty-three British nationals have been repatriated from Morocco back to their homes in Gibraltar after being brought across the Strait in the RGP launch *Sir Adrian Johns* and the Port Authority launch, *Admiral Rooke 11*. A further three UK citizens are also being brought to Gibraltar so that they can travel onwards to their homes in UK and Spain.

The 26 individuals in total had been unable to leave Morocco after its borders were suddenly closed on 12 March. This caught out several young people who were visiting families in Morocco for Easter and, indeed, it also separated families, some of whom had travelled across the Strait whilst others had remained in Gibraltar. Today, the 23 were allowed to travel because each had a welfare issue of some sort or another. None of them are elderly and none have any known health problems. A further 38 British nationals are still in Morocco, waiting for the country's very strict lockdown measures to be relaxed. Some of those who remain in the country had originally planned to fly to Gibraltar on the scheduled service from Casablanca or Tangier but, again, these flights were cancelled at the outset of the Covid-19 crisis.

Lengthy negotiations with the Moroccan Interior Ministry were conducted by the British Embassy in Rabat, the Convent in Gibraltar and by the Civil Contingencies team at No6. These negotiations were compounded by the fact that, under Moroccan law, citizens are classed as Moroccan nationals if they have a Moroccan father – even if they themselves have never lived in the country. So, although many of the 23 have lived all their lives in Gibraltar, they are still classed as being persons of Dual Nationality and, as such, when in Morocco they are currently not allowed to travel further than their nearest supermarket, let alone to leave the country. In order to bring them back to Gibraltar, the FCO and Government of Gibraltar have been required to prove that each of the 23 has some welfare concerns.

On Friday morning, the two launches left Gibraltar at 10am for the crossing to the port of Tangier Med. Just after midday, their RGP and Port Authority crews, in masks and gloves, welcomed their passengers on board the vessels. The Gibraltar crews were not allowed to step ashore on to the quay but, as they helped passengers to board, they checked each of the documentation and issued hand sanitiser fluid, masks and gloves. As space on the launches was limited, each passenger was limited to carrying just one bag.

Following a very choppy crossing, the two launches berthed at Waterport Wharf where Customs officers were waiting to check everyone's documents. The next stage required each passenger to report to Infection Control where their temperature was checked and where they were swabbed. All 23 passengers are now required to self-isolate for fourteen days but, happily, they are doing so back home on the Rock.

No6 Civil Contingencies officer, Tito Danino, explained that the planning for the operation had begun as soon as borders around the world began to close back in March. He said, 'We have had Gibraltarians stranded all around the world and we have managed to assist most of them to return home.'



'The largest stranded group was in Morocco and in the first few days we managed to get some across from Ceuta. Over 50 remained in Morocco under very strict lockdown restrictions, which were not allowing any internal travel.

'It has been a challenge to obtain all the necessary contact details, numbers and locations of all these people who were in various locations around Morocco. We have been supporting their welfare needs and even sent over required medications to some. Ali Doui from the Moroccan Community association has been instrumental in helping out with this. After weeks of negotiations between Civil Contingencies, the FCO rep at the Convent and the British embassy in Rabat, we have been granted permission to repatriate these 24 residents.

I must thank officials from the Convent for their continuous support and assistance in making this happen, the Embassy in Rabat for obtaining the final permissions and organising a complete travel plan from four different cities in Morocco and the Gibraltar Port Authority and Royal Gibraltar Police for volunteering their services to sail across the Strait. I must also mention Borders and Coastguards Agency and HM Customs for arranging for the necessary immigration and other checks to be carried out.'

The Commissioner of Police, Ian McGrail stressed that the request for assistance is another of a variety of strands which the RGP has been called upon to provide in the midst of the COVID pandemic. He said, 'It is evident that the RGP's role in the community extends beyond that of purely law enforcement. Being able to support Government's intent to safeguard the interests of British Citizens abroad who have been unable to return home, falls very much in line with our overarching community engagement efforts.'

At the Gibraltar Port Authority, Captain of the Port Manolo Tirado said, 'Right at the outset, we offered our launch, the *Admiral Rooke*, to Government in order to travel to Tangier and to assist in the repatriation of these British citizens. I am delighted to have been able to assist in this operation with my crew''.

A Convent spokesman added, 'Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the Convent has been working very closely with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, other Gibraltarian agencies and with our global network of British diplomatic and consular missions to help repatriate Gibraltarians who were stranded in many parts of the world when scheduled airlines stopped flying. In most cases, this involved making sure they could access charter flights or other arrangements put in place to help British citizens return to the UK from where they could travel on to Gibraltar. The repatriation of Gibraltarians and other Gibraltarian residents from Morocco today has been the most complex challenge so far. As many of the group were dual nationals, they were subject to stringent restrictions on their movements in Morocco and today's successful trip has required many days of very close coordination with our colleagues in the British Embassy in Rabat. The Embassy team secured diplomatic clearance for the RGP and GPA boats to dock in the Tangier Med port and were able to obtain exceptional permission for the group to travel to the port from different parts of Morocco on transport arranged for them by the Embassy. We are very glad that we were able to help reunite families and loved ones in Gibraltar today.'

Minister for Civil Contingencies, Samantha Sacramento feels that this is yet another achievement for Gibraltar and shows how the Office of Civil Contingencies has left no stone unturned during this time. 'The scope of the work that is undertaken at the Strategic Coordination Centre to ensure our safety at this time is extremely broad.

'The Office has been negotiating with various entities over many weeks to make today's repatriation a success and I must particularly single out Ernest Danino as he has been instrumental in this process and to whom I am grateful. My thanks also to the Royal Gibraltar Police and the Port Authority and to each officer also from Customs and the Borders and Coastguard Agency who made this trip today.'