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Statement to Parliament by the Chief Minister, Hon Fabian Picardo MP

Mr Speaker,

The House will want to know that today Simon Fraser, Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, summoned the Spanish Ambassador to the United Kingdom, H.E. Federico Trillo, in order to underline the British Government's concerns regarding recent incursions into British Gibraltar Territorial Waters.

A statement has been made by the Foreign Office in London setting out what the Ambassador was told, in no uncertain terms, by the Permanent Under Secretary.

The statement reflects a quote from the Rt Hon David Lidington MP, the Minister for Europe, who states that:

"The UK has repeatedly made diplomatic protests to Spain over attempts by Spanish state authorities to exercise jurisdiction in British Gibraltar Territorial Waters. Yet on 13 November there were two further serious incursions. A large Spanish naval ship conducted a prominent patrol through British Gibraltar Territorial Waters lasting several hours. Later on the same day a Spanish customs vessel sought to apprehend a Gibraltarian civilian boat in British Gibraltar Territorial Waters, forcing the Royal Gibraltar Police to intervene in order to safeguard the welfare of the four occupants.

I condemn these provocative incursions and urge the Spanish government to ensure that they are not repeated.

We believe that it is in the interests of Spain, as well as Gibraltar and Britain, to avoid any incident that may damage the prospects of developing a harmonious and collaborative relationship between Gibraltar and Spain.

It is also in all parties' interests to avoid incidents which could put at risk the safety of those operating in British Gibraltar Territorial Waters.

We remain confident of UK sovereignty over British Gibraltar Territorial Waters and fully committed to protecting the interests of the people of Gibraltar and their wish to remain under British sovereignty."

Mr Speaker, Her Majesty's Government of Gibraltar considers that calling in Mr Trillo reflects the seriousness of these attempts by agents of the Spanish State to exercise jurisdiction in what are indisputably British Gibraltar Territorial Waters.

It is appropriate that the diplomatic response to these belligerent acts should have been upscaled as it has.

It is equally important for Gibraltar, as much as it is for the credibility of British diplomacy, that these diplomatic steps should be backed up by actions designed to assert the indisputable British sovereignty of the waters in question.

There will therefore be unanimity across the floor of this House in the call for the Ministry of Defence to be able to deploy in Gibraltar as soon as possible the assets necessary to ensure the defence of these waters against the armed vessels and agents of the Spanish state.

Throughout the past days - as previously when two Gibraltarian fishermen in British waters were illegally detained and transferred to a Spanish port - the Deputy Chief Minister and I have been in contact with the Minister for Europe and His Excellency the Governor and members of the Foreign Office staff in Gibraltar and London.

It is important that the House and the public should know that all have been hugely supportive of Gibraltar - not just in their attitude, but in their actions - leading to the public call of the Spanish Ambassador today.

It is just as important that their support for Gibraltar now be followed up by those with whom responsibility lies for the deployment of the assets necessary to ensure the perimeter of our Nation is safe and secure and not susceptible to the illegal activities we have recently been witnesses to.

Insofar as those state agents of the Kingdom of Spain are attempting to take executive action in our waters, the fact is that they are not only in breach of international laws but also of Gibraltar laws.

The House knows and will welcome that one of the larger vessels being acquired for the Royal Gibraltar Police will soon be arriving at our shores.

Our police will therefore finally have the resources to be able to deal with such acts of criminality as well as any other.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I want to add that I am sure that the whole House will want to thank the officers of the Royal Gibraltar Police for the work they do in these very difficult circumstances.

The House will also want to recognise the work being done by members of the Gibraltar Defence Police and the naval ratings aboard the Royal Naval patrol boats presently stationed in Gibraltar - as well as the individuals up at Windmill Hill and the Port Department that help us reflect that these actions are occurring within what are the co-ordinates of British Gibraltar Territorial Waters.

The time to back up their work with the necessary assets is now. Gibraltar has taken the steps necessary. Others must also do likewise.