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CHIEF MINISTER MEETS WITH FOREIGN SECRETARY AND DEFENCE SECRETARY

The Chief Minister has held a meeting with the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon Philip Hammond in advance of the traditional Gibraltar Reception at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham.

Mr Picardo spent over half an hour with Mr Hammond discussing topical Gibraltar issues of mutual interest. Mr Picardo said: "I enjoyed seeing Philip Hammond again, having worked well with him when he was Defence Secretary. He is clearly going to be very much a 'pro-Gibraltar' Foreign Secretary, as his excellent speech at the Party Conference Reception shows."

In Mr Hammond's speech to the Reception, he said, 'I am delighted to speak at what for years has been one of the great events at our Party conference: the Gibraltar reception.

"Relations between Britain and Gibraltar have never been closer, and I think it's fair to say that relations between the British Government and the Government of Gibraltar have seldom been better.

"Last year was the three hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of Utrecht – of Gibraltar being officially British. And now we are looking forward to another three hundred years of British Gibraltar.

"I want to pay particular tribute to Gibraltar's extraordinary economic success. Gibraltar has transformed itself from a military garrison to a dynamic commercial society. I know that the border makes it difficult for business. But even so, the economy of Gibraltar as a whole continues to thrive. From financial services to bunkering, there's a big sign hanging on the Rock that says 'Gibraltar is open for business.' We are working hard with the Government of Gibraltar to make sure that message is heard loud and clear across the world.

I want to see a Gibraltar with an even more vibrant and diversified economy that is fully equipped to compete in the 21st Century."

Regarding the frontier, Mr Hammond said, "It's now nearly a year since Spain began this particularly harsh regime of checks. Spain's border checks are disproportionate, politically motivated, and therefore, under EU law, illegal. The fact is that Gibraltar, like Spain, is part of the EU and Gibraltarians have the same rights as anyone else in an EU country to move and travel. We've been making this point to the European Commission up to the highest level. We got the Commission to send a monitoring mission to the border last year. They saw what was going on and found that Spain's border checks were 'unjustified'. They made specific recommendations on what both Spain and Gibraltar should do. I congratulate you, Chief Minister, and the Government of Gibraltar for taking decisive steps to deal with the Commission's recommendations to Gibraltar, including legislation on tobacco.

"The Commission is now following up on Spain's obligations. They've said that 'delays of several hours to cross the border are disproportionate' and expressed 'serious concern' over Spanish failure to implement its recommendations after the second visit. This could be, if Spain fails to act, the first step to legal action.

"Spain at last started works to improve the border crossing last week and we'll follow progress on that very closely so that it doesn't turn into an excuse for further delays. And you have my commitment that we'll keep up the pressure on Spain and continue making clear to the Commission the importance of the issue to the British Government.

"This is a Government and this is a Party that cherishes Gibraltar and will work with the Government of Gibraltar. A Government that stands up for Gibraltar. We're proud to be British - and we're proud that Gibraltar is British."

Early, on Monday morning, Mr Picardo met with the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, to enable the Chief Minister and Defence Secretary to discuss issues related to the future of the MoD's operations in Gibraltar.

The Chief Minister said: "It was a pleasure to meet Michael Fallon for the first time in his role as Defence Secretary. He reminded me that he had visited Gibraltar some years ago for National Day. I therefore have no doubt that he will be a staunch friend of Gibraltar and - like most Defence Secretaries - will fully understand the value of Gibraltar to the United Kingdom, in particular in these turbulent times around the shores of the Mediterranean. I also took the opportunity to reaffirm Gibraltar's commitment to the defence establishment of the United Kingdom."

Mr Picardo has now travelled on to London for meetings with senior officials in the Foreign Office. He will return to Gibraltar on Tuesday morning. In his absence, the Deputy Chief Minister, the Hon Dr Joseph Garcia, is the Acting Chief Minister.