

# Press release

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17 October 2011

## Alan Duncan – First British Minister in Tajikistan

Alan Duncan became the first UK Government Minister to visit the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan, as he went on a field visit to see trade and development, on the 20th anniversary of the birth of the country.

He met President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon with whom he raised concerns about the recent conviction of a local BBC journalist, although he welcomed his release under amnesty.

He then went to see projects on the Afghanistan border, meeting women entrepreneurs engaged in cross-border trade and a UK-supported cotton production centre.

Central Asia has great strategic importance for the UK. The visit comes shortly after the announcement that the UK will open an embassy in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. The British Embassy in Dushanbe, Tajikistan opened in 2002.

Tajikistan is a developing country. Less than half the population (47 percent) now live below the poverty line compared to 83 percent in 1999. It still has the worst child malnutrition rates in Central Asia, however. The UK Department for International Development has confirmed that following the reviews in 2010, it will maintain an aid programme in the region.

It will focus on promoting agriculture-led growth and trade, especially in poor, rural areas and boosting the agri-business sector.

UK Minister for International Development, Alan Duncan, said:

"Tajikistan is rightly enjoying its 20th anniversary celebrations. The legacy of the Soviet era has left many problems, however. Child malnutrition rates are still high; it is a drug trafficking route from Afghanistan; and many men still leave the country in search of jobs, leaving women to work the land in harsh, often exploitative, conditions.

"I was concerned to hear that the BBC's Urunboy Usmonov was convicted for connections with the proscribed group Hizb ut-Tahir. I'm glad that amnesty was offered and he walked free. The BBC and Mr Usmonov still protest his innocence, however, and I have raised

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issues about the trial. A free media is the cornerstone of a modern democratic state. There are a worrying number of cases being brought against journalists in Tajikistan.

"The future could be bright for Tajikistan. There are decision makers here we can work with. If they can attract international investors to their agricultural businesses, and encourage a better environment for entrepreneurs, Tajikistan could be a Central Asian success story."

Tajikistan facts:

- Tajikistan became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991
- Annual Gross National Income is £500 per capita
- The population has increased 40 percent to 7.6m since independence, with half the population now under 21
- The country is slightly larger than England, 93 percent is mountainous
- Tajikistan's Nurek Dam is the world's highest, at 300m above sea level
- The capital Dushanbe is home to the world's tallest flag-pole (165m).

PICTURES OF THE VISIT WILL BE AVAILABLE FROM DFID PRESS OFFICE

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