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COMMENT

The expulsion of Ugandan Asians was a shameful chapter. But now we should focus on closer relations

My administration welcomed back the Indian community. There are opportunities today to build on that, especially through the Commonwealth

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6 August 2022 • 6:00am



This has been a sobering week to reflect on the historic ties that bind Britain and Uganda. Exactly 50 years ago, Ugandan dictator Idi Amin gave the nation's entire Indian community an ultimatum: leave the country or face the consequences.

Some 50,000 Ugandan Indians who had known nowhere but Uganda as their homeland were made to abandon their country to begin lives anew elsewhere. Some fled to neighbouring Kenya, others to Canada. Most left for the UK. The businesses, possessions and lands they left behind were confiscated.

We must never forget this forced expulsion and shameful chapter of Uganda's past: a warning from history to the world of what can transpire when there are no checks or democratic balances on the whims of those who hold positions of power.

Years later, after Amin and his followers had been overthrown in a civil war, my administration welcomed back the Indian community. We should consider what we nearly lost, and what together our two countries can now gain.

The first Indians settled in Uganda in 1895, when the Imperial British East Africa Company extracted the first 350 men primarily from the Punjab region of India, bringing them to work on the first Uganda Railway. Over the course of six years, some 32,000 labourers were brought from India to lay the train tracks.

Together with Gujarati traders, Uganda's Indian community, known then, and today, as "Ugandan Asians", was born. At the time, the British perhaps could not foresee how these labourers and traders would extend their influence beyond the construction of a railway. But an industrious people, the first Ugandan Asians became prosperous, helping build our nation's economy.

70 years later, after independence had been won, the then President Idi Amin started fanning the flames of anti-Indian sentiment in Uganda. It is said a number had grown to believe life was better under Britain, a country Amin first admired but in office had grown to hate. A fearful, unstable, and paranoid man, some say Amin decided to expel all Ugandan Asians after he heard voices instructing him in

a dream. What is certain is that after a first attempt was made by Ugandan rebels and Tanzanian forces to overthrow him, he began to purge all those in Ugandan society he deemed a threat. What followed was one of the most vicious reigns of terror in African history with over 300,000 Indigenous Ugandans killed and disappeared.

After the war in which Amin was defeated, Uganda's economy and international reputation was in tatters. Integral to rectifying this was bringing our Indian community home.

Today their numbers are not what they were but continue to grow. Some, like former high court justice Anup Sing Choudry, have served at the highest levels of our judiciary system. Others, like swimmer Supra Singhal, have represented us at the Olympics. Uganda's strong reputation for academia is upheld by the likes of Professor Mahmood Mamdani. Others and their descendants have stayed in the countries such as Britain that welcomed them. From Home Secretary Priti Patel to the Liberal Democrats' Lord Verjee, to Asif Din who played cricket for Warwickshire, scoring a hundred and winning the man-of-the-match award in the 1993 Natwest Trophy final, widely regarded as the best domestic final. There are many contributing to political, business, and cultural life.

Trade between our two nations remains strong, with total UK exports to Uganda amounting to £180 million in the four quarters of 2021, a 4 per cent increase on the previous four quarters. With the 12th Uganda-UK trade summit fast approaching in September, we want to go further still.

Through the Commonwealth we have a unique means of doing so. No club in the world is like it, with 56 nations united by language, shared values and similar legal systems, rendering it 21 per cent cheaper to do business across member countries. This "Commonwealth Advantage" as it is known means our shared and truly singular global network has the potential to boost not just trade, but also security, education, and diplomatic influence for its members well beyond their locality.

Already the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth's largest economy is set to be

the first non-African country to sign an agreement with the African Continental Free Trade Area, a new pan-African trade bloc offering access for the first time to our continent's combined \$3 trillion market. We urge others, especially India and Canada amongst Commonwealth members as those with such deep Ugandan Asian heritage, to follow suit.

The Ugandan railway built by the forebears of today's Indian community is, like the empire that created it, no more. Still, today some balk at using the Commonwealth to its full potential because it was born from colonialism. But the past is gone. What remains is our shared inheritance, and it is for all the Commonwealth's members to rebuild, reshape, and take ownership of our historic club. We should use it trade closer and better, and make it what it should be: the vehicle for our shared futures.

Yoweri K. Museveni is the President of Uganda

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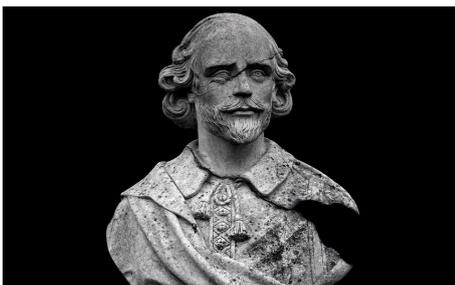
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