



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

A summary of Burma-related issues in the British Parliament and Europe

JAN
2009

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

12 Jan 2009 Mr. Jim Cunningham: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment the Government have made of the political situation in Myanmar. [243683]*

Bill Rammell: *The military regime in Burma is determined to maintain its hold on power regardless of the cost and suffering of its people. The junta's 'Roadmap to disciplined democracy', including a new constitution and elections planned for 2010, is designed to entrench military rule behind a facade of civilian government. The process excludes the opposition and meaningful participation by the ethnic groups. Fundamental rights are consistently ignored. Since early November, over 200 pro-democracy activists have been given sentences of up to 65 years in prison. These severe sentences are clearly designed to silence all dissent ahead of the 2010 elections. There are now over 2,200 political prisoners in detention, including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and other pro-democracy leaders. Ethnic minority groups have been methodically marginalised. Against this backdrop, we will continue to do all we can to generate international pressure for a peaceful transition to democracy and respect for human rights in Burma. In particular, we will continue to give our full support to the UN Secretary General and his efforts to break the current deadlock.*

21 Jan 2009 Mr. Gregory Campbell: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the government of Burma on the rights of people belonging to opposition groups in that country. [249690]*

Bill Rammell: *In regular contacts between our embassy in Rangoon and the Burmese military government, we continue to stress the need for all political actors, including Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy and other democratic groups, to be allowed to play their full part in shaping the country's future. Most recently, our ambassador expressed the UK's deep concern to the Burmese Foreign Minister about the severe prison sentences handed down to democratic and human rights activists in late 2008.*

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has repeatedly reaffirmed the UK's commitment to democracy in Burma. In May 2008 under UK chairmanship, the UN Security Council reaffirmed its demand for the regime to start an inclusive political process. We still hold to this demand, and continue to support the UN Secretary-General's efforts to break the political deadlock. We continue to lobby countries in the region to bring pressure on the Burmese regime to reform.

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

26 Jan 2009 Mr. Gregory Campbell: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has held discussions with the government of Thailand regarding the treatment of Burmese boat people near the Andaman Islands. [250202]*

Bill Rammell [holding answer 22 January 2009]: *We are deeply concerned by allegations that refugees from Burma were abandoned at sea by the Thai navy. We have raised the issue with the Thai authorities and welcome Prime Minister Abhisit's assurances of an investigation into the matter. Working with EU partners, and in close consultation with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, we will continue to press the Thai authorities to establish the facts and take appropriate action.*

27 Jan 2009 Lord Avebury: *To ask Her Majesty's Government what funding they have provided to (a) the*

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and (b) the Government of Bangladesh, for the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar; and whether the British High Commission in Dhaka will visit the camps in which the refugees live and report on the conditions. [HL900]

Lord Tunncliffe: *The UK Government do not presently provide direct financial assistance to the Rohingya refugees. The British high commissioner visited the Rohingya refugee camps on 30 October 2008. He has asked the British Council to carry out a scoping study for the provision of English language training in the camps. British high commission officials will again visit the camps before the end of the current financial year.*

Practical help for the Rohingya refugees is provided by UK-supported development partners such as the European Union and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They support the operation of the official camps and the daily care and protection of the families living there. A number of smaller national non-governmental organisations also operate in the camps. The UK is a major contributor globally to the UN agencies. In Bangladesh, in addition to the UNHCR's management of the camps, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Food Programme, the World Health Organisation and United Nations Population Fund have all provided various forms of assistance to the Rohingya refugees, some directly to the camp residents and some to Rohingya communities around the camps.

28 Jan 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funding his Department have allocated to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium for 2009-10.*

Mr. Michael Foster: *In December 2008, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) submitted, through Christian Aid, a funding proposal to the Department for International Development (DFID) covering three years from April 2009 to March 2012. DFID is considering this proposal in consultation with Christian Aid, other donors to TBBC and TBBC itself.*

29 Jan 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of British aid to Burma is delivered via cross-border mechanisms. [250796]*

Mr. Michael Foster: *Approximately £569,000, 4.6 per cent. of DFID's £12.5 million regular programme for Burma in 2008-09 (excluding £45 million emergency relief following Cyclone Nargis) is being delivered via cross-border mechanisms. This figure breaks down as follows:*

£193,000 of DFID's £1 million funding to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) in 2008-09 has been allocated to cross-border humanitarian activities. Since DFID's contribution to TBBC was not earmarked to specific activities, this proportion reflects TBBC's own priorities.

DFID is contributing about £300,000 in 2008-09 to cross-border health assistance to Kachin and Shan States from China.

Around £76,000 of £220,000 provided to three Burmese non-governmental organisations based in Thailand is being used for humanitarian work inside Burma. The remainder of this funding is used to assist Burmese refugees and migrants in Thailand.

HUMAN RIGHTS

29 Jan 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government has taken in (a) the UN Security Council, (b) the UN Human Rights Council, (c) the UN General Assembly and (d) other United Nations bodies on the sentencing of pro-democracy activists in Burma in November 2008. [251192]*

Bill Rammell: *The UK has consistently supported firm action in all relevant UN bodies on human rights abuses perpetrated by the Burmese regime. We played an important role in securing a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly on 21 November 2008. The resolution called on the Burmese authorities to desist from further politically motivated arrests and release, without delay or conditions, of all political prisoners, including the 88 Generation group leaders and others detained as the result of the autumn 2007 protests.*

On 5 December 2008, the UK Permanent Representative to the UN underlined the UK's deep concern at the harsh sentencing of opposition activists at a meeting of the Group of Friends, chaired by the UN Secretary General. The UK will continue to work with partners in New York to keep Burma on the Security Council agenda. The UN Human Rights Council has not been in session since this latest round of sentencing began, but the UK will raise the issue as a priority at the Council's 10(th) session in March.

POLITICAL PRISONERS

29 Jan 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received on the access of Red Cross officials to political prisoners in Burma following the partial lifting of restrictions by the government of Burma; and if he will make a statement. [250944]*

Bill Rammell: *We have received no reports that the International Committee of the Red Cross has been permitted to visit any political prisoners since 2005, despite our consistent calls for this much needed access through the Security Council, UN human rights bodies, the EU and directly to the Burmese authorities.*

Over 200 opposition activists have been given severe sentences since November 2008, some with prison terms of up to 105 years, and placed in prisons in remote parts of the country away from the support of their families. This brings the total number of political prisoners in Burma to over 2,200.

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

EDM 343: UNITED NATIONS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BURMA

17.12.2008

*Signed by 54 members
(Battle, John)*

That this House condemns the arrest of over a thousand further political prisoners since the democracy uprising in September 2007, bringing the total to more than 2,100; further condemns the sentencing of hundreds of these activists to long jail terms; notes that many of the prisoners have been moved to jails hundreds of miles from where their families live; further notes that the United Nations Security Council, United Nations General Assembly, European Union and ASEAN have all called for the release of political prisoners in Burma and that these calls have been ignored; further notes that 37 visits by United Nations envoys have failed to secure a single reform; calls on the United Nations Secretary General to travel to Burma to negotiate the release of all political prisoners; further calls on the United Nations Security Council to pass a resolution giving full support to the Secretary General's efforts; and further calls on the British Government to continue to work for a Resolution by the Security Council.

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**CAMPAIGNING
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
AND DEMOCRACY IN BURMA**