



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

JAN
2012

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Burma

17 Jan 2012 Simon Kirby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the state of bilateral relations with Burma; and if he will make a statement. [89822]

Mr Hague: When I visited Burma earlier this month the President and I agreed that we were entering a new chapter in our relationship. Last week's historic ceasefire, and release of a significant number of political prisoners are extremely promising. As I made clear, progress on these and the other issues I set out could result in a fundamental shift in our bilateral relations.

Mark Pritchard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of his recent visit to Burma; and if he will make a statement. [88953]

Mr Jeremy Browne: I refer my hon. Friend to the written ministerial statement made by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), to the House on 16 January 2011, Official Report, columns 28-29WS.

This visit was an opportunity for the UK to recognise the efforts made by the Government to implement reforms in Burma. The Foreign Secretary met the President, Foreign Minister and Speaker of the Lower House and set out very clearly the further steps we need to see before a more fundamental shift in our relationship could take place. These include:

the release of all political prisoners;
free and fair by-elections; and
humanitarian access to conflict areas alongside a clear process of reconciliation.

He also met Aung San Suu Kyi and opposition groups, as well as representatives from the ethnic minority communities, and assured them of the UK's continued support for their efforts to promote democracy and respect for human rights in Burma.

We are all pleased to hear that a significant number of political prisoners in Burma were released last week, including 88 Generation and ethnic leaders. I warmly welcome these releases, as well as the historic ceasefire agreement with the Karen, as further demonstrations of the Burmese Government's commitment to reform. I hope that these positive steps will contribute to greater democratic participation in the upcoming parliamentary by-elections.

The British Government will continue to follow developments in Burma closely. We will continue to support progress, while making clear, both directly and through the UN, our human rights concerns, especially in the areas affected by ethnic conflict.

Burma: Political Prisoners

17 Jan 2012 Mr Gregory Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he raised the issue of the release of prisoners during his recent visit to Burma. [89447]

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Mr Jeremy Browne: I refer the hon. Member to the written ministerial statement made by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), to the House on 16 January 2012, Official Report, columns 28-29WS.

During his recent visit to Burma the Secretary of State met the President, Foreign Minister and Speaker of the Lower House and set out very clearly that the release of all political prisoners was one of the central conditions which we would expect the Burmese Government to fulfil before a more fundamental shift in our relationship could take place. He also discussed the issue of political prisoners with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

We are all pleased to hear that a significant number of political prisoners in Burma were released last week, including 88 Generation and ethnic leaders. I warmly welcome these releases as a further demonstration of the Burmese Government's commitment to reform. I hope that this positive step will contribute to greater democratic participation in the upcoming parliamentary by-elections.

Burma: Politics and Government

20 Jan 2012 Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received on the progress of negotiations between the Burmese government and the Karen National Union; and if he will make a statement. [90592]

Mr Lidington: The Karen National Union signed an initial agreement with a state level peace delegation from the Burmese Government on 13 January. It is the first step towards a formal, long term ceasefire and political process. Further talks are set to take place in the coming weeks.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), welcomed this important and historic step in his written ministerial statement of the 16 January 2012, Official Report, column 28-29W.

Burma: Political Prisoners

23 Jan 2012 Dr Huppert: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received on the health of monk U Sandawbartha, known as U Gambira, recently released from prison in Burma. [91363]

Alistair Burt: We understand from contacts that the health of monk U Sandawbartha, known as U Gambira, has improved. Our embassy in Rangoon is in close contact with many Burmese civil society and democratic activists, including individuals recently released from prison.

HOUSE OF LORDS

Embassy in Burma

26 Jan 2012 Lord Kilclooney: To ask Her Majesty's Government what proposals there are to open an embassy in Burma. [HL14833]

Lord Howell of Guildford: There is a fully operational British Embassy in Burma, located in Rangoon. Our current ambassador, Andrew Heyn, leads the embassy's efforts to pursue our objectives in Burma, to present British policies to our key interlocutors in Burma and to provide analysis and advice to Ministers covering Burma. The ambassador is also responsible for press and cultural relations and for visa and consular services.

Commons Statement on EU Council

31 Jan 2012

Foreign Policy

The Prime Minister:

We also made an important statement on developments in Iran, Burma and Syria. Britain has played a leading role in getting Europe to act together on each of those issues. On Iran, last week all EU countries agreed an unprecedented oil embargo, which shows our determination to keep up the pressure on the

regime to turn away from any plans to develop nuclear weapons.

In Burma, for years Aung Sang Suu Kyi has been an inspiration to her people and to the world. Britain has supported her at every stage and has been at the forefront of EU sanctions. Now there are signs of a new moment of opportunity for democracy, and we should be prepared to relax those sanctions, but only in stages and only in response to reforms. When I spoke to Aung Sang Suu Kyi on Saturday, she emphasised the importance of credible and free by-elections in April. I can assure the House we will be watching that very closely.

ANSWERS TO SPOKEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

HOUSE OF COMMONS

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Burma

17 Jan 2012 Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): What assessment he has made of political progress in Burma; and if he will make a statement. [89816]

17 Jan 2012 Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): What assessment he has made of his recent visit to Burma; and if he will make a statement. [89818]

Mr William Hague: I draw the House's attention to the written statement on my visit to Burma, which was published yesterday. Last week, the Burmese Government and the Karen National Union signed a historic ceasefire. The following day, there was a significant release of political prisoners, which will contribute to greater democratic participation in the parliamentary by-elections. If that momentum can be maintained, we are clearly moving into a new phase in our relations with Burma.

Mr Gyimah: As my right hon. Friend says, the release of 651 political prisoners by the Myanmar Government is a major political statement and certainly one that is to be commended. What confidence does he have that all political prisoners will be released in time for the elections in April this year?

Mr Hague: The importance of the timing of last week's announcement is that yesterday—16 January—was the date for any candidates to register to participate in the 1 April elections in Burma. The release of so many prisoners is therefore an important move ahead of those elections.

My hon. Friend is quite right to ask about other political prisoners. Our assessment is that of the 651 prisoners released on Friday, between 270 and 283 could be considered political prisoners. That means that political prisoners remain, although it must be said that there are definitional disputes over what a political prisoner is between the Burma Government and opposition groups. However, we of course look for the release of all political prisoners in Burma while welcoming that move as a major step forward.

Dr Huppert: All Members of the House support the release of the political prisoners and share the concern that there are still so many. However, I understand that the released prisoners have not been pardoned, but simply had their sentences suspended. What assurances has the Foreign Secretary had that they will be pardoned and kept out of prison rather than being re-arrested shortly?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend is quite right about the details, although that seems to be the effective way for the President of Burma to secure the release of the prisoners—the laws allowed him to act decisively to release a large number of prisoners. Of course, let me make it absolutely clear that the improvement in relations between Burma, our country and many other countries would come to a very rapid halt and go into reverse were those prisoners to be taken back into custody, but the President of Burma said to me when I was there 10 days ago that Burma's progress to democracy is irreversible, and all the Ministers I met said that all political prisoners would be released.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): Although I welcome the changes and developments with the Karen people, they are far from the only ethnic minority within Burma with which there have been a lot

of tensions and difficulties, as the Foreign Secretary will know. Despite progress in some areas, there has been an increase in attacks on other peoples. What discussions did he have on other ethnic minorities and what pressure is he putting on Burma to ensure that every ethnic grouping is included in the democracy that we hope is developing there?

Mr Hague: The hon. Lady is quite right: although what has happened in relation to the Karen people is important, other ethnic conflicts continue. I held a meeting with ethnic representatives from around Burma in Rangoon on my visit there and raised this wider matter with the Government at all the meetings I had with them. I also announced an additional £2 million of humanitarian assistance for displaced people in Kachin state, where fighting continues. It is important for the Government of Burma to understand that resolving the conflicts more widely around the borders and ethnic areas remains important.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Opposition join the Foreign Secretary in welcoming the release of political prisoners in Burma although, as he has acknowledged, many hundreds of men and women remain in prison there for their political beliefs. Will he tell the House what he did to push the Burmese regime to allow greater access for the world's media, particularly in the run-up to the elections in April, now that restrictions have started to be lifted?

Mr Hague: I made the point to Government Ministers there that part of the essential opening up to the rest of the world is access for media representatives. Indeed, on my visit I was able to facilitate that access for the first time and to ensure that BBC correspondents could go to places or get invited to press conferences to which they would not previously have been invited. Each international visit helps to prise open to a greater extent the media's access to Burma. We will continue with those efforts.

Simon Kirby (Brighton, Kemptown) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary join me in extending continued support to the pro-democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi?

Mr Hague: I certainly will. I spent the best part of 24 hours with Aung San Suu Kyi during my visit to Rangoon. She is an inspirational figure, a great leader and a great hope for the future of her country.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations can play an important role in encouraging the Burmese to maintain the progress that he described earlier?

Mr Hague: Yes. That is particularly true given that Burma will have the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014. One of the points that we made to other ASEAN nations at the United Nations General Assembly last year, before Burma's appointment, was that the country must be pushed in the right direction—the direction in which it is now moving—if it expected to have the chairmanship, and those nations seem to be working well together.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE - Ministerial Visits (Burma)

Written Statements

16 Jan 2012 Mr William Hague: I would like to update the House on my visit to Burma on 5-6 January. This was an historic visit; the first by a British Foreign Secretary since 1955. It was an opportunity to show that we recognise the efforts of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the Government to drive forward important reforms. I also wanted to set out clearly to the Government the changes that we would want to see before we could support lifting EU sanctions.

I met the President, the Foreign Minister and the Speaker of the Lower House. I welcomed progress made so far, including the dialogue between the Government and Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the changes in the law that allowed her party to register for the forthcoming by-elections, the initial releases of political prisoners, and the moves towards greater media freedom. I informed them of the allocation from the Department for International Development of £10 million of existing aid for microfinance for the Burmese people, and announced an additional £2 million of humanitarian aid to benefit people in Kachin State, the site of some of the worst ethnic conflict.

I set out clearly with all my interlocutors the steps which would be needed before a more fundamental shift in our relationship could take place. These are: the release of all political prisoners in time for the by-elections on 1 April; the free and fair conduct of those by-elections; and humanitarian access to conflict areas, particularly in Kachin State, alongside a clear process of reconciliation. I made it clear that if these three conditions were met the UK would support the easing of the EU sanctions.

I was assured by the President that the reforms would continue, that further political prisoner releases would go ahead, and that by-elections would be free and fair. He was confident that the Burmese Government would soon achieve ceasefires nationwide, and acknowledged the need for humanitarian assistance in conflict areas.

I raised with the Foreign Minister the discrimination suffered by the Rohingya community, who have been denied citizenship and access to basic services and rights. We will continue to press the Burmese Government on this issue.

I held two meetings with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and assured her of the UK's continued support for her efforts to promote reform and democracy in Burma. She repeated her core priorities: the release of all political prisoners and an improvement in the rule of law; and the need for the by-elections to be free and fair as well as progress on the complex ethnic situation.

I met representatives from other opposition groups, including the 88 Generation leaders and former political prisoners. I also met a range of representatives from ethnic communities, including the Kachin, Rohingya, Shan, Rakhine, Chin, Mon, Karen and Karenni to hear more about their concerns and aspirations. We will continue to stay close to these and other ethnic groups to ensure we remain seized of the issues they face.

I am delighted to say that following my visit, there have been significant further developments on some of the issues I raised with the Government.

On 12 January, the Government and the Karen National Union signed a ceasefire after 63 years of conflict. There is still a long way to go to rebuild fully trust between the parties, but this is an important step in the right direction.

I also warmly welcome the release of a significant number of political prisoners on 13 January. Exact numbers are still being verified but those released include Generation 88 and ethnic leaders. This is another positive step on the road to reform in Burma.

The British Government will continue to follow developments in Burma closely. We will support progress, while remaining vigilant on human rights issues, especially in areas affected by ethnic conflict.

Written Ministerial Statements

30 January 2012

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Foreign Affairs Council

Burma

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): EU Ministers agreed conclusions recognising the recent progress in Burma and suspending visa bans against the President, members of the Cabinet and speakers of the Houses of Parliament.

Drawing from his recent visit, the Foreign Secretary highlighted the changes in Burma as justifying these first steps towards enhancing the EU's engagement with the country. He stressed that the EU should only make any further responses following progress against our benchmarks: the release of remaining political prisoners, free and fair by-elections on 1 April, and credible steps towards resolving ethnic conflict.

HOUSE OF LORDS

EU: Foreign Affairs Council and General Affairs Council Written Statement – Burma

18 January 2012 Lord Howell of Guildford: Ministers will discuss recent developments in Burma, including the release last week of a significant number of political prisoners, and how the EU can best support the Burmese Government in continuing on their path of reform. We expect conclusions to be adopted welcoming the recent positive developments; and making clear that the EU will respond substantively if further progress is made in key areas, including free and fair by-elections on 1 April, and further steps towards resolving the ethnic conflict.

On 13 December the Foreign Secretary said:

“I am delighted to hear that a significant number of political prisoners in Burma have today been released, including 88 Generation and ethnic leaders”.

“The release of all political prisoners is a long-standing demand of the international community and I warmly welcome these releases as a further demonstration of the Burmese Government’s commitment to reform”.

“This is exactly the kind of measure I called for in all my meetings with Burmese Government leaders last week. So is this week’s much needed ceasefire in the conflict with the Karen people. I hope these positive steps will contribute to greater democratic participation in the upcoming parliamentary by-elections”.

Speaking on 12 January, the Foreign Secretary welcomed the ceasefire between the Burmese Government and Karen National Union:

“I welcome the reports that the Burmese Government and Karen National Union have signed a ceasefire after 63 years of fighting. This is good news for the people of Burma. It has been a longstanding goal of the international community to see a ceasefire, and indeed it was one of the key issues on which I urged the Burmese Government to make progress during my visit last week when I also met with Karen representatives. There is still a long way to go fully to rebuild trust between the parties after so many years of conflict, but this is an important step in the right direction”.

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

EDM 112

HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

That this House sends its best wishes to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who will spend her 65th birthday in detention on 19 June 2010; calls for the immediate release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners in Burma; rejects the elections planned by Burma’s generals later this year which, due to election laws and ongoing repression in Burma, cannot be free and fair; condemns Burma’s new constitution which is designed to maintain dictatorship in civilian guise and does not grant rights or protection to Burma’s ethnic minorities; notes that all diplomatic efforts to reform the dictatorship’s sham roadmap to democracy have failed; recalls that the United Nations Security Council, General Assembly, Secretary General and Human Rights Council have all stated that the solution to the problems in Burma lies in dialogue between the dictatorship, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, and ethnic representatives; and calls on the Government to support a United Nations-led effort to pressure the dictatorship to enter into such dialogue.

Total number of signatures: 146

EDM 787

AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND ELECTIONS IN BURMA

That this House acknowledges reports that Burmese political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi may be released on the completion of her current term of arrest on 13 November 2010; is concerned that, as this date falls six days after scheduled elections in Burma on 7 November, Ms Suu Kyi may not be permitted to utilise her vote; is further concerned that her National League for Democracy party will play no part in the election, having boycotted it on the grounds of Ms Suu Kyi’s and others’ continued political imprisonment, her exclusion from political office and party membership and the Burmese junta’s new election laws, which ban groups including civil servants and Buddhist monks from joining a political party; firmly believes that Aung San Suu Kyi should be released unconditionally as a matter of urgency; and calls on the Government to condemn strongly the Burmese junta’s recent election laws as obstacles to the free and fair conduct on

democracy.

Total number of signatures: 41

EDM 788

BBC WORLD SERVICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

That this House considers the BBC World Service to be not only a world-class broadcasting network, but also a lifeline for political prisoners and other suppressed persons; strongly believes that any move to cut this service, for example in Burma, will remove vital access to current and impartial information from those such as Aung San Suu Kyi who have no alternative source of unbiased news; further believes that such cancellation would constitute a failure of the Government to promote or support human rights on the international stage; and urges the Government to strongly oppose any reduction in this important service.

Total number of signatures: 57

EDM 989

ELECTIONS IN BURMA AND ADVANCE VOTING

That this House notes with concern reports of widespread manipulation of advance votes during the recent Burmese elections, boycotted by the National League for Democracy; believes that this is yet another blow to the prospects for democracy in Burma; dismisses this election as no more than a sham to reinforce the ruling regime's power; and urges the Government to make further representations for the immediate and unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi and more than 2,200 other prisoners of conscience currently detained in Burma.

Total number of signatures: 26

EDM 1014

RELEASE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI

That this House welcomes the unconditional release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from her house arrest in Rangoon on 13 November 2010; supports her calls for a peaceful revolution and for dialogue with the ruling regime in order to work towards change in Burma; urges continued international attention to the political system in Burma; and further supports Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's belief that nothing can be achieved without the participation of the people.

Total number of signatures: 47

EDM 1649

BURMA AND THE EU

That this House notes that despite holding an election in November 2010, Burma has failed to meet the requests of the EU Common Position, last renewed on 26 April 2010, which called on Burma to take steps to bring about a peaceful transition to a democratic, civilian and inclusive system of government, to release political prisoners, to provide for free and fair elections, to engage with the international community and to respect international human rights and humanitarian law; further notes with concern that these requests have not been met; further notes that the November 2010 elections were widely dismissed as neither free nor fair, and that although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been released more than 2,000 political prisoners remain in detention; and calls on the Government to make representations in support of a UN Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma, ahead of the EU Council Position renewal in April 2011.

Total number of signatures: 37

EDM 1659

BURMA EARTHQUAKE

That this House notes with grave concern reports of an earthquake of magnitude 6.8 in north east Burma near to the Thai border; sends its sincere condolences to those affected by the fatalities, casualties and destruction of homes and infrastructure; acknowledges the logistical and political challenges of providing assistance in this situation; and calls on the Government to take all possible steps to offer emergency aid and assistance to the people of Burma.

Total number of signatures: 29

EDM 1739

AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND THE BRIGHTON FESTIVAL

That this House welcomes Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as guest director of the 2011 Brighton Festival; notes

that although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will not attend the festival she plays a significant role in inspiring the programme through her plea to 'use your liberty to promote ours'; congratulates the Festival organisers for their choice of guest director and planning of a wide-ranging and vibrant programme; looks forward to a dynamic celebration of arts, culture and freedom over the three weeks of the Festival; and urges the Government to maintain pressure on the Burmese regime to free the more than 2,000 political prisoners still in detention and to move towards free and fair democracy in Burma.

Total number of signatures: 13

EDM 1966

BIRTHDAY OF DAW AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

That this House recognises Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's 66th birthday and Burma Women's Day, celebrated on 19 June 2011; welcomes Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Reith lectures on the theme of securing freedom, to be broadcast on 28 June and 5 July 2011 on BBC Radio 4; is concerned that despite the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest on 13 November 2010 the human rights situation in Burma has not improved; notes that more than 2,000 political prisoners remain in detention; is gravely concerned by the Burma Campaign UK reports that the breaking of the ceasefire between the Burmese regime and the Shan State Army has resulted in violence including against civilians in the area; and urges the Government to call for a nationwide ceasefire, to support humanitarian efforts to provide assistance in these areas and to call for the release of political prisoners in Burma.

Total number of signatures: 41

EDM 2101

AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND THE MARTYR'S DAY MARCH

That this House notes that the winner of the Burmese general election and pro-democracy and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been invited to march in the city of Yangon on Martyr's Day, 19 July, to mark the tragic assassination of her father, General Aung San, and eight other independence leaders in 1947; seeks the reassurances of the Burmese government that it will protect the security of both Aung San Suu Kyi and those supporters who are expected to join her; further notes with concern that, despite the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2010, the reported human rights situation in Burma has not improved; calls on the Burmese authorities to permit free speech and peaceful protest; and further calls on the Government to make representations to the Burmese government to ensure these protestors are not exposed to danger.

Total number of signatures: 32

EDM 2241

RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BURMA

That this House warmly welcomes the release of political prisoners in Burma, particularly that of Zarganar, the comedian and film maker, who was originally sentenced to 58 years' imprisonment for alleged public order offences; and calls on the Burmese authorities to follow up this gesture with the further release of all prisoners of conscience and the introduction of genuine democratic reforms.

Total number of signatures: 43

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**for Human Rights, Democracy
& Development in Burma**