



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

JULY
2014

Answers to Written Parliamentary Questions

Andy Hall

14 July 2014 Mr Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps HM Embassy in Bangkok is taking to retrieve the passport of Andy Hall.

Mr Swire: If Mr Hall needs to use his passport to travel overseas it is possible for him/his lawyer to apply to the court for "international bail" which, if agreed, would enable Mr Hall's lawyer to retrieve his passport for him to use, subject to any conditions that the court might set.

If Mr Hall does not wish to apply for international bail and wishes to apply for a replacement passport instead, we must first of all make a formal request to the court for the return of his original passport. If we do not receive Mr Hall's passport, or a response from the authorities, within 10 days, we would discuss with Mr Hall his options for obtaining a replacement passport. However, an approach by the embassy to the court in this way might result in Mr Hall's bail being revoked. If Mr Hall asked us to do this, we would request that he sign a pro-forma acknowledging that the consequences of applying for a new passport have been explained to him. We have also asked Mr Hall to bear in mind that the courts may have placed some sort of immigration stop/block against his name/passport number (or might do so upon receipt of a letter from the embassy asking for the return of his passport), and so even if Mr Hall did get his current passport back, or obtain a new passport, he may not be able to leave Thailand on it. Mr Hall has also been advised to consult his lawyer about these issues.

28 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether representatives from the British Embassy in Bangkok will attend court hearings and other key meetings in the case of British citizen Andy Hall; and, if not, why not.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con): Consular officials at our Embassies do not normally attend court hearings. They do so in exceptional circumstances, for instance at key points in murder/ manslaughter cases to support families, and on a case-by-case basis in cases where the death penalty could be imposed, or we have serious fair trial concerns. When officials do attend their role is to provide welfare support. We cannot interfere in the judicial process of another country and we cannot act as legal representatives for British nationals. Our staff are not legally trained and they therefore cannot comment on proceedings or provide interpretation.

A political officer from our Embassy in Thailand attended Mr Hall's hearing on 2 July to observe proceedings. Mr Hall has also met officials at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London to discuss forced labour concerns in Thailand. Consular officials will continue to support him as appropriate, and a decision on whether we will attend future hearings or other key meetings will be made when required. The Embassy has no role in accompanying Mr Hall to meetings related to his legal dispute.

30 July Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government why no official from the British Embassy in Bangkok attended Andy Hall's meeting with officials at the Prakanong Prosecutor's Office on 18 June.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con): Consular officials at our Embassies do not attend court hearings unless there are exceptional circumstances. While a British Embassy representative, in his capacity as a political analyst, did observe Mr Hall's hearing on 2 July, the Embassy has no role in accompanying Mr Hall to meetings related to his legal dispute.

We cannot interfere in the judicial process of another country and we cannot act as legal representatives for British nationals. Our staff are not legally trained and they therefore cannot comment on proceedings or provide interpretation. Consular officials will continue to support Mr Hall as appropriate, and a decision on whether we will attend future hearings or other key meetings will be made when required.

Census

8 July 2014 Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he considers that the recent census in Burma meets international standards.

Mr Swire: Reports from independent international observers of the census suggest that, with the exception of Rakhine State and parts of Kachin State, the enumeration process appears to have largely been carried out effectively. Regarding the process in Rakhine and Kachin, I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Naomi Long) on 26 June, Official Report, column 255W. We continue to monitor the process closely.

8 July 2014 Gavin Shuker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether it is her policy to continue funding the official census in Burma.

Mr Duncan: Of the £10 million committed to the census, £9 million has already been disbursed. The remaining £1 million is for data analysis, thematic reports and the dissemination of information.

21 July 2014 Yasmin Qureshi: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will raise with the Government of Burma reported threats that ethnic Rohingya identifying themselves as such in the census could face arrest.

Mr Swire: We have not received reports of anyone facing arrest for identifying themselves as Rohingya in Burma's census; the enumeration period is now over. However, we were deeply disappointed that during the census the Burmese Government went against its long-standing assurance that all individuals would have the right to self-identify their ethnic origin.

We have been clear that this decision is in contravention of international norms and standards on census conduct. I discussed our concerns on the census with the senior Burmese Minister responsible, Immigration Minister U Khin Yi, in March, and summoned the Burmese ambassador in April.

The UK, UN and other donors have been in dialogue with the Burmese Government and community groups throughout the preparation, enumeration and now the data analysis and dissemination stages of the census. We have been absolutely clear that we want to see as peaceful, credible and complete a process as possible, with the anticipated risks carefully managed.

Hate Speech

8 July 2014 Gavin Shuker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what checks and monitoring her Department has put in place to ensure that its funding for education in Burma is not being channelled through Buddhist monasteries where hate speech and anti-Muslim or anti-Christian sentiment are promoted.

Mr Duncan: Monastic schools are supported by the Monastic Education Development Group (MEDG), an implementing partner of the DFID-funded Myanmar Education Consortium. The MEDG has checks in place to safeguard against involvement in political issues. Where infringements are identified and remedial action is not taken, no further support is awarded from MEDG.

Rohingya

7 July 2014 Jonathan Ashworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received of the imprisonment of ethnic Rohingya people for getting married.

Mr Swire: We have not received any specific reports of Rohingya people being imprisoned for getting married. However, we remain deeply concerned about the situation of the Rohingya, including in relation to discriminatory marriage practices reported in Rakhine State.

The British Government is one of the most vocal and active members of the international community in supporting those calling for human rights and democracy in Burma. We will continue to urge the Burmese Government to take action to protect the lives and rights of Rohingya, and to address the underlying causes of ethnic and religious discrimination and violence.

10 July 2014 Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation of displaced Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

Mr Duncan: FCO and DFID staff monitor the humanitarian situation in Rakhine State closely and visit frequently. While there have been improvements to humanitarian operations following the severe disruptions caused by attacks on UN and international NGO premises in March, many vulnerable communities, including the Rohingya, remain under-served. The UK is providing bilateral humanitarian support in Rakhine to all communities affected by the humanitarian situation there, as well as support through core contributions to multilateral agencies.

14 July 2014 Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to his Burmese counterpart on ensuring the safety of foreign aid workers delivering essential assistance to displaced Rohingya Muslims in that country.

Mr Swire: We have made clear to the Burmese Government that intimidation and threats towards humanitarian staff are unacceptable, and that it is the Government's responsibility to ensure there is a secure environment for them to operate. The Burmese Government must support humanitarian actors in their access and delivery of aid, freely and quickly, wherever it is needed most.

I personally summoned the Burmese ambassador on 7 April and called on the Burmese Government (urgently) to restore humanitarian access to all communities in need and to ensure the security of humanitarian aid workers and all communities in Rakhine state. I last raised this issue with Deputy Foreign Minister U Thant Kyaw on 13 June.

14 July 2014 Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to ensure that displaced Rohingya Muslims have access to basic medicine and healthcare provision.

Mr Duncan: DFID, along with other aid agencies on the ground in Rakhine, are working to ensure a co-ordinated response. Our bilateral humanitarian support in Rakhine includes assistance for water, sanitation, and nutrition. Support is provided to both communities. We have not provided bilateral support for medicine and healthcare provision, but ECHO and UN agencies to whom we provide core funding, are. In addition to the delivery of aid, DFID and the FCO continue to advocate at all levels of Government for establishment of conditions which allow for unhindered humanitarian access.

Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the British Embassy in Bangkok has raised with the government of Thailand the prosecution of journalists from Phuketwan for reporting on abuses against the ethnic Rohingya from Burma.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con): Our Ambassador to Thailand has raised our concerns about these charges with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Thai Navy on several occasions over the last few months.

These discussions built on our wider dialogue with Thailand about the plight of Rohingya, which has been led by the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire).

The UK is a staunch defender of the freedom of the media, and it is the responsibility of States to adhere to international protocols governing the treatment of refugees. Protection and assistance should be provided to those who seek shelter within their borders. We will continue to follow this case closely.

21 July 2014 Yasmin Qureshi: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what reports she has received of an increase in death rates in camps for the Rohingya following the expulsion of MSF and other agencies from Rakhine State, Burma.

Lynne Featherstone: There have been a number of deaths in Rohingya camps since March. We have not received any reports of an increase in the rate during this period but the situation remains of urgent concern. The Ministry of Health and NGOs have been providing some primary health care in the IDP camps, but there continue to be barriers to access, particularly to hospital level care for Rohingya, and this remains a key concern for us. We continue to advocate with all levels of Government on this issue.

Inter-faith Marriage Bill

3 July 2014 Fiona Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the potential consequences of the proposed religious conversion bill in Burma and the situation for religious minorities in that country.

Mr Swire: We have voiced our strong concerns over proposed legislation on inter-faith marriage and religious conversion to members of the Burmese Government and parliamentarians. If enacted, these laws would harm religious tolerance and respect for diversity in Burma, and contravene international standards and treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which Burma is a signatory. During my visit to Burma in January, I delivered a speech which called for greater religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, and we continue to make clear that respect for freedom of religion and belief must be guaranteed.

Sexual Violence in Conflict

7 July 2014 Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which community-based women's organisations in Burma receive funding from her Department to assist victims of sexual violence by the Burmese army.

Mr Duncan: DFID is providing £500,000 through the United Nation's Population Fund (UNFPA) to strengthen the network and capacity of agencies working on gender-based violence in Rakhine and Kachin those areas.

8 July 2014 Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what commitments the government of Burma has made to implement the declaration on preventing sexual violence in conflict.

Mr Swire: The Burmese Government's endorsement of the Declaration of Commitment and attendance at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in June 2014, is an important signal of commitment to tackling this serious issue. However, we are absolutely clear that this is just one step towards that goal. We are already lobbying the Burmese Government to follow up with concrete action to address sexual violence, including strengthening legislation and improving access to justice for survivors. I urged the Burmese Government to follow the endorsement with a quick and credible action plan that involved the military when I met Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister U Thant Kyaw on 13 June.

14 July 2014 Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the prevalence of sexual violence in conflict in Burma.

Mr Swire: The nature of sexual violence in conflict in Burma means there are no accurate country-wide

figures available. However, a report by the Women's League of Burma in January 2014 documented over 100 cases of sexual violence in conflict since 2010. While there are signs that incidents of sexual violence have decreased since the Burmese Government signed ceasefire agreements with a number of non-state armed groups, it remains a serious problem.

21 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether any discussions were held at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict concerning the situation in Burma.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con): During the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict I chaired a roundtable on the role of faith leaders and communities in tackling sexual violence. Participants included two religious leaders from Burma. The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), met Deputy Foreign Minister U Thant Kyaw separately during the Global Summit. They discussed a series of bilateral issues and Mr Swire raised a range of human rights concerns. Mr Swire welcomed the Burmese government's attendance at the Summit and urged them to follow-up quickly with a credible action plan to tackle sexual violence that involved the military. Mr Swire also hosted an event for Burmese civil society, in which he welcomed the attendance of Burmese civil society and religious leaders at the Global Summit.

21 July 2014 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of reports of sexual violence in conflict in Burma.

Baroness Warsi: We remain deeply concerned by reports of sexual violence and other human rights violations in Burma. While there are signs that incidents of sexual violence have decreased since the Burmese government signed ceasefire agreements with a number of non-state armed groups, it remains a serious problem. The UK remain one of the most vocal and active members of the international community in supporting those calling for the respect of human rights in Burma. We raise our strong concerns with senior members of the Burmese government and military regularly. We have made clear to the Burmese government that allegations of human rights abuses must be dealt with through clear, independent and transparent investigative and prosecutorial processes which meet international standards.

Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict

14 July 2014 Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had regarding Burma at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Mr Swire: I met Deputy Foreign Minister U Thant Kyaw during the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict on 13 June 2014. We discussed a series of bilateral issues and I raised a range of human rights concerns. I welcomed the Burmese Government's attendance at the summit and urged them to follow-up quickly with a credible action plan that involved the military. I also raised our deep concern about the situation in Rakhine and the plight of the Rohingya. I highlighted our concern over political prisoners in Burma and encouraged the Burmese Government to reform the constitution.

PSVI

14 July 2014 Fiona O'Donnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) whether experts from the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative have been sent to Burma to investigate the attempted rape of an ethnic Chin woman by a soldier from the Burmese Army;

(2) what work has been done by experts from the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative on the reported use of sexual violence by the military in Burma.

Mr Swire: We have not deployed a Team of Experts (ToE) to Burma to date, but are currently considering ways in which a ToE or other international or local actors might best assist in the delivery of PSVI objectives in Burma. We continue to lobby the Burmese Government on the prevention of sexual violence in conflict, and to support projects in Burma to that end. Most recently in June, I discussed this issue with Deputy Foreign Minister U Thant Kyaw at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Chin

3 July 2014 Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make an assessment of the implications for his policy towards Burma of the recently published brief by the Chin Human Rights Organisation entitled The state of freedom of religion or belief for Chin in Burma, 2013.

Mr Swire: We are aware of the Chin Human Rights Organisation and their report on freedom of religion and belief in Chin State. We are currently implementing some of the recommendations that the report makes to the international community, including regularly raising the importance of Freedom of Religion and Belief in discussions with the Burmese Government.

During my visit to Burma in January, I raised the full range of our human rights concerns with senior members of the Burmese Government and called for religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue in a speech in Rangoon. Freedom of Religion and Belief was also discussed during the first EU/Burma Human Rights Dialogue in May 2014.

Our ambassador and embassy officials meet regularly with representatives of all faith communities, both in Rangoon and in the wider country, including in Chin State. The UK has provided funding for interfaith dialogue to help build trust between communities—for example a project promoting peace building among youths from different faith groups.

7 July 2014 Gavin Shuker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of recent trends in the level of use of forced labour in Chin state, Burma.

Mr Swire: The Burmese Government has taken welcome steps towards the elimination of forced labour, as noted in the Resolution adopted at the UN Human Rights Council in March this year. However, we recognise that forced labour continues to be a problem in Chin State and elsewhere in Burma. We urge the Government to continue its co-operation with the UN and International Labour Organisation to ensure this practice is eliminated once and for all.

8 July 2014 David Burrowes: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of reports of a food crisis in Chin State, Burma; and what food support her Department is providing in that region.

Mr Duncan: DFID has contributed to a food security programme in Chin State through the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund which is helping increase agricultural production through activities such as better quality seeds, and also helping farmers get their produce to markets.

Aid

14 July 2014 Mr Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether her Department is providing additional funding to The Border Consortium to help reverse recent ration cuts for refugees from Burma in camps in Thailand which they supply.

Mr Duncan: DFID is funding The Border Consortium through a three year programme which started in November 2012. The UK is one of the largest donors to The Border Consortium.

14 July 2014 Mr Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which companies and organisations are subcontracted or given grants by the World Bank to carry out projects in Burma funded by British aid.

Mr Duncan: DFID does not track all companies and organisations subcontracted or given grants by multilateral partners, such as the World Bank. DFID's Development Tracker, on the gov.uk website, and the World Bank's website contain many details about procurement and the flow of funds for individual projects. We also publish, on the gov.uk website, our Statement of Priorities and Expectations for Suppliers which sets expectations for the use of subcontracted organisations.

14 July 2014 Fiona O'Donnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what financial

support for the Backpack Health Worker Team programme in Burma her Department will provide in the next two years.

Mr Duncan: DFID has not made plans to fund the Backpack Health Worker Team through our bilateral programme in Burma after our current funding commitments with them conclude. DFID continues to support the 3MDG Trust Fund in Burma which supports many local NGOs across Burma in health activities.

Healthcare

7 July 2014 Paul Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to achieve universal healthcare in Burma.

Mr Duncan: Along with other donors, DFID funds the Three Millennium Development Goal Fund. This fund is delivering improved reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health services across seven states and regions, as well as funding gaps in the national programmes to control HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria. The fund also invests in improved health systems, including the supply of drugs and commodities, human resources, and health information systems.

8 July 2014 Gavin Shuker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what role private health insurance plays in her Department's plans to promote healthcare in Burma.

Mr Duncan: DFID does not have any programmes which work on private health insurance in Burma. DFID's key support is through the Three Millennium Development Goal fund, which works to strengthen public health care systems as well as to contract some private services where they can fill gaps in public provision.

Myanmar Education Consortium

8 July 2014 Gavin Shuker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the (a) gender, (b) ethnicity and (c) religion are of the 160,000 children proposed to be helped by the Myanmar Education Consortium.

Mr Duncan: Both boys and girls are being helped by the Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC). The MEC is working across Burma and expects to reach all the major ethnic groups of Burma and the three major religions: Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim.

8 July 2014 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government how Chin and Karenni children are likely to be reached by the Myanmar Education Consortium in Myanmar.

Baroness Northover: A local partner of the Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC), Kayan New Generation Youth, is working with Karenni communities in four states: Kayah, Kayin, Naypyidaw and Shan (south). The MEC is not currently supporting partners in Chin State. However, it is supporting a local organisation, Linguistic Society, working in Rakhine, which is developing early childhood care and development material in one of the ethnic languages used in Southern Chin and adjoining Myebone township in Rakhine.

Political Prisoners

3 July 2014 Paul Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, whether HM Ambassador to Burma has met the families of political prisoners in Burma; and if he will make a statement.

Hugo Swire: Our Ambassador has met the families of several political prisoners. The Ambassador and other Embassy officials also regularly meet former political prisoners themselves. They remain in close contact with the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) and other civil society networks in support of their work, reviewing the cases of political prisoners and advocating for the release of those that have been unjustly convicted.

We welcome the release of thousands of political prisoners under the current Burmese government. However, we remain very concerned by the continued arrests, detentions and sentencing of political activists. During my visit in January, I urged continued dialogue between the government, political parties, ethnic armed groups and civil society to resolve remaining cases as a matter of urgency.

17 July 2014 Mr Gregory Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will raise with the Burmese authorities the arrest and sentencing to 10 years hard labour of journalists in that country.

Mr Swire: We welcome the overall widening of media freedom under this Burmese Government. However, we are deeply concerned by the intimidation, detention and sentencing of several reporters in Burma in recent months, which contrary to the longer positive trend is further restricting Burma's media environment. Our ambassador has raised our concerns about the detention of journalists with Deputy Minister of Information Ye Htut, and the cases of the five journalists sentenced to 10 years hard labour were also discussed during the first EU-Burma Human Rights Dialogue in May. We will continue to raise the issue of media freedom in discussions with the Burmese Government and in international fora.

Zaw Pe

7 July 2014 Mr Burrowes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has raised the jailing of journalist Zaw Pe with the Government of Burma.

Mr Swire: Our ambassador has discussed the case of Zaw Pe, and those of other arrested journalists, with the Burmese Deputy Minister of Information Ye Htut, raising our concerns and encouraging the Government to ensure a safe environment for journalists to conduct their work. The cases of Zaw Pe and many other individuals were also raised during the first EU-Burma Human Rights Dialogue in May.

Free Media

7 July 2014 Paul Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what projects her Department is supporting in promoting free media in Burma.

Mr Duncan: DFID provides a global grant to BBC Media Action which includes work in Burma. In Burma, this has supported capacity-building with the state broadcaster, training of local journalists, and the launch of new programmes featuring opposition voices and the views of ordinary people.

7 July 2014 Paul Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what projects his Department is supporting to promote free media in Burma.

Mr Swire: On 7 May, the British ambassador hosted a reception for members of the Burmese media to mark World Press Freedom Day. He welcomed widening freedom for media to operate in the country in the past few years, but expressed our serious concerns over the detention of several journalists in recent months.

The UK also funds several projects to support the development and professionalisation of the media in Burma. For example, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is funding a project that promotes responsible media coverage of religious freedom and conflict. Through the Department for International Development we provide a global grant to BBC Media Action that supports work in Burma, such as training for local journalists and the launch of new programmes featuring opposition voices and the views of ordinary Burmese people. Through the British Council, we have funded workshops for photographers and filmmakers, and supported weekly radio broadcasts reaching millions of listeners across the country. Through the EU, the UK also funds two projects providing training and capacity building for members of the Burmese media, especially those reporting on the peace process and democratic reforms. Supported activities include roundtable discussions between media, government and civil society; training of young journalists; courses in investigative reporting; and training for civil society organisations.

17 July 2014 Mr Gregory Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received of recent changes in the Burmese authorities' attitude to freedom of

expression.

Mr Swire: We welcome the overall widening of media freedom under this Burmese Government. However, we are deeply concerned by the intimidation, detention and sentencing of several reporters in Burma in recent months, which contrary to the longer positive trend is further restricting Burma's media environment.

Our ambassador has raised our concerns about the detention of journalists with Deputy Minister of Information Ye Htut, and the cases of the five journalists sentenced to 10 years hard labour were also discussed during the first EU-Burma Human Rights Dialogue in May. We will continue to raise the issue of media freedom in discussions with the Burmese Government and in international fora.

National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

1 July 2014 Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs with reference to his Department's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2014-2017, in what way, as part of the implementation of that plan, women's participation at grassroots level will be measured.

Mark Simmonds: The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), along with the Secretaries of State for International Development and Defence, launched the 2014-2017 National Action Plan (NAP) at the Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit earlier this month.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, working with Department for International Development and Ministry of Defence, is committed to ensure that the promotion of women's participation in conflict resolution is an integral part of our overseas conflict policy and forms one of the main focuses of the NAP. The NAP outlines several ways we will do this, for example providing financial and capacity building support to civil society organisations promoting women and girls' participation in peacebuilding.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has also funded and helped to facilitate workshops in two of the NAP's focus countries (Afghanistan and Burma) with another being held in a third (Somalia) in the next few months. The workshops have been well attended by civil society groups that, in many cases, represent the views of women from the grassroots level.

Measuring participation of women from grassroots level is challenging; there is a lack of baseline and country-level data on women in peace and security issues. With this in mind, the UK has allocated specific funding to the external and independent monitoring and evaluation of this NAP.

1 July 2014 Ian Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the predicted cost of the implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security is in each of the next three years.

Mark Simmonds: The National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security was launched at the Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit and builds on lessons to date, and address some of the challenges in the previous NAP. The NAP's Implementation Plan will be launched later this year. In line with our UN commitments on women, peace and security we will continue to address violence against women and support women's role in building peace and promote their participation, with a particular focus on Afghanistan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Somalia and Syria.

The aims of the NAP and Implementation Plan are to ensure a more coherent and effective approach to the work on Women, Peace and Security. They provide the frameworks for activities which are funded through existing departmental budgets. Those budgets include: the Conflict Pool (the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund from 2015-16), the Human Rights and Democracy Fund, the Arab Partnership Fund and Official Development Assistance—all of which help to fund the work on women, peace and security across the world.

UNHCR

10 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government what if at all is the funding shortfall for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Burma; and what additional funding the

Department for International Development is providing to fill any funding gap.

Baroness Northover (LD): DFID officials are in regular contact with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Burma. We have not been made aware of any critical funding shortfall for UNHCR, and have not been approached to fill any funding gap. DFID already provides a significant amount of humanitarian funding, including to UNHCR, for work with internally displaced people in Burma.

International Inquiry into War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity

10 July 2014 Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to support an independent, international inquiry, with Burmese participation, into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma.

Mr Swire: We have made clear to the Burmese Government our strong concerns over the human rights situation in the country, particularly in Rakhine state and the ethnic border regions. Our priority is to seek an end to all human rights violations. We have been firm that as part of this process the culture of impunity must be properly tackled, which we believe is best achieved through a clear, independent and transparent investigative and prosecutorial process that meets international standards.

14 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they intend to discuss with the Burmese authorities the creation of an independent inquiry, with Burmese and international participation, into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in that country.

Baroness Warsi: We have made clear to the Burmese government our strong concerns over the human rights situation in the country, particularly in Rakhine state and the ethnic border regions. Our priority is to seek an end to all human rights violations. We have been firm that as part of this process the culture of impunity must be properly tackled, which we believe is best achieved through a clear, independent and transparent investigative and prosecutorial process that meets international standards.

Human Rights Violations

14 July 2014 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to address accountability for torture, sexual violence and other human rights violations in Burma.

Baroness Warsi: We are deeply concerned by reports of the use of torture, sexual violence and other human rights violations in Burma. We remain one of the most vocal and active members of the international community in supporting those calling for the respect of human rights in Burma. We raise our strong concerns with senior members of the Burmese government and military regularly. We have made clear to the Burmese government that allegations of human rights abuses must be dealt with through clear, independent and transparent investigative and prosecutorial processes which meets international standards.

Torture

10 July 2014 Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what steps he is taking to urge the Government of Burma to end torture, investigate reports of continuing use of torture, and bring the perpetrators to justice; (2) what recent reports he has received of the widespread use of torture in the conflict zones of Burma and alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in that country;

Mr Swire: We are concerned by reports of the use of torture in conflict zones in Burma. We remain one of the most vocal and active members of the international community in supporting those calling for human rights in Burma. We regularly raise our strong concerns regarding any violations of human rights with senior members of the Burmese Government and military, among others. We strongly support work being led by international partners, including the UN, to help Burma better understand the UN Convention Against Torture, and the steps that need to be taken as part of ratification.

It is the policy of the British Government that any judgment on whether war crimes have occurred is a matter for international judicial decision, rather than for governments or non-judicial bodies. Our approach is to seek an end to all violations, and to prevent their further escalation, irrespective of whether these violations fit the definition of specific international crimes.

14 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of reports of the use of torture in the conflict zones of Burma; and whether they consider that any such actions should be categorised as a war crime or a crime against humanity.

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to urge the government of Burma to end torture in that country, to investigate reports of continuing use of torture, and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi): We are concerned by reports of the use of torture in conflict zones in Burma. We remain one of the most vocal and active members of the international community in supporting those calling for human rights in Burma. We regularly raise our strong concerns regarding any violations of human rights with senior members of the Burmese government and military, amongst others.

We strongly support work being led by international partners, including the UN, to help Burma better understand the UN Convention Against Torture, and the steps that need to be taken as part of ratification. It is the policy of the Government that any judgment on whether war crimes have occurred is a matter for international judicial decision, rather than for governments or non-judicial bodies. Our approach is to seek an end to all violations, and to prevent their further escalation, irrespective of whether these violations fit the definition of specific international crimes.

Unlawful Arrest and Torture

21 July 2014 Baroness Goudie: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of reports that Burmese army officers from 88 Division have arrested and tortured the following villagers: Ta Agok, Kun Aik Hsay, Aung Than, Aiklon Kyan Aye, Aik Nyan Kar, Aik Ngay, Aik Naing Aung, Aik Yaing Ton; and whether they have plans to raise the matter with the government of Burma.

Baroness Warsi: We are concerned by reports of ongoing conflict and allegations of human rights violations in northern Shan State between the Burmese army and armed ethnic groups. We continue to closely monitor the situation and to raise our concerns about human rights abuses in conflict areas with the Burmese government and military.

The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my rt Hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), met members of the Shan community during his visit to Burma in January. Diplomats in Rangoon, including the British Ambassador, are in regular contact with ethnic representatives, including those based in Thailand. We have consistently called for a nationwide ceasefire, which will move to political dialogue.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

14 July 2014 Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to urge the Government of Burma to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and what assessment he has made of the policy of the Government of Burma on this matter.

Mr Swire: We have had a number of discussions with the Burmese Government on the importance of Burma ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

At the request of the Burmese Government the British embassy in Rangoon recently funded an experts' visit to Burma for the purpose of identifying steps that would need to be taken and issues that would need to be considered in reaching the decision to ratify the ICCPR. We hope this will lay the foundations for further action in the coming months.

21 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to

persuade the government of Burma to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and what is their assessment of Burma's position in respect of the Covenant.

Baroness Warsi: We have had a number of discussions with the Burmese government on the importance of Burma ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). At the request of the Burmese government, our Embassy in Rangoon recently funded an experts' visit to Burma for the purpose of identifying steps that would need to be taken and issues that would need to be considered in reaching the decision to ratify the ICCPR. We hope this will lay the foundations for further action in the coming months.

Freedom of Religion and Belief

22 July 2014 Mr Dodds: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to encourage freedom of religion in Burma and other South-East Asian countries.

Mr Swire: I made very clear during my visit to Burma in January that respect for freedom of religion and belief must be guaranteed. Our ambassador and officials regularly discuss the importance of freedom of religion, which is guaranteed in the constitution, with the Burmese Government, and also regularly meet representatives of all faith communities. The UK is also providing funding to train journalists on responsible coverage of religious freedom and conflict, and supporting a project to enhance the capacity of civil society groups to advocate freedom of religion. We have previously provided funding for interfaith dialogue and peace building among young people.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials across South-East Asia regularly discuss these issues with local governments and faith communities, and Ministers also raise specific issues and concerns as they arise. Recently, for example, I raised our concerns about the introduction of a sharia criminal code in Brunei with Deputy Foreign Minister Pehin Lim; our ambassador in Jakarta has discussed the protection of religious minority groups in Indonesia; and my noble Friend, the right hon. Baroness Warsi, has stressed the importance of tolerance and mutual respect with senior ministers in Malaysia. We will also continue to support projects across South-East Asia designed to bolster and protect freedom of religion and belief.

Military Training

10 July 2014 Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to incorporate discussion of torture, sexual violence and other war crimes, crimes against humanity and other human rights violations in the military training provided to the Burma Army by the UK.

Mr Francois: UK provision of Defence training to the Burma army is limited to non combat related academic courses. English Language training is delivered in country by the British Council and a course entitled "Managing Defence in the Wider Security Context" (MDWSC) has also been provided. The MDWSC covers the UK model of democratic accountability, the importance of good governance in Defence and the significance of professionalism in a nation's armed forces. In the case of Burma, this includes the conduct and accountability of service personnel and human rights issues.

21 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps are being taken to incorporate discussion of torture, sexual violence and other war crimes and crimes against humanity and other human rights violations in the military training provided to the Burmese army by the United Kingdom.

Baroness Warsi: Our defence engagement with Burma is focussed on the core principles of democratic accountability, international law and human rights. UK provision of defence training to the Burma Army is limited to non-combat related academic courses. This has included a course entitled "Managing Defence in the Wider Security Context" (MDWSC). The MDWSC covers the UK model of democratic accountability, the importance of good governance in defence and the significance of professionalism in a nation's Armed Forces, including observation of human rights obligations.

Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government when details of the training course provided by the United Kingdom to the Burmese army will be released to Burma Campaign UK following Burma Campaign UK's successful appeal under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to obtain such information.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence (Lord Astor of Hever) (Con):

The information requested was released on 22 May 2014 within the statutory 20 working day timescale prescribed for information requests under the Freedom of Information Act. It has not been subject to an appeal.

Ceasefire

17 July 2014 Sir Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Burmese government on a ceasefire in conflict zones and the withdrawal of military forces.

Mr Swire: We are supporting the continued peace talks between the Burmese Government and ethnic armed groups and the agreement to work towards a nationwide ceasefire and political dialogue. However, we remain concerned by continued fighting in Kachin State and Northern Shan State, and reports of human rights violations.

I discussed the peace process with the Burmese Government and the military Commander in Chief during my visit to Burma in January 2014, and in Kachin with the army's Northern Commander and ethnic and religious leaders. Our ambassador in Rangoon regularly raises both our concerns and our support for a sustainable peace through ceasefire and political dialogue with Burmese Government Ministers, officials and ethnic leaders.

Child soldiers

21 July 2014 Baroness Goudie: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the government of Burma's record of compliance with the agreement of the United Nations to end the use and recruitment of child soldiers.

Baroness Warsi: We welcome the Burmese government's extension of the UN Action Plan to end the recruitment of child soldiers and the progress that has been made, which has seen the release of over 600 child soldiers and a nationwide public awareness campaign.

But we are clear that more needs to be done. Access to military units and non-state armed groups continues to be restricted, release of child soldiers has been limited, and while recruitment of children has slowed, it has not ceased entirely. We call on the Burmese government to address these issues, and to agree to an extension of the Action Plan to ensure this practice is eradicated. We will continue to raise this issue with the Burmese government at every appropriate opportunity.

Answers to Oral Parliamentary Questions

Freedom of Religion and Belief

22 July 2014 Graeme Morrice (Livingston) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his overseas counterparts on upholding freedom of religion and belief.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his overseas counterparts on upholding freedom of religion and belief.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): We remain deeply concerned about a disturbing and unwelcome trend of persecution on the basis of religion or belief. Regrettably, this is not confined to a single region nor to a single faith, but we counteract it wherever we can. This has included recent work from Sudan to Nigeria, from Iraq to Burma, and from Pakistan to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Graeme Morrice: I thank the Minister for that answer, but in Egypt Coptic and Orthodox churches are being attacked, in Mosul in Iraq Christians have been driven out by ISIS, Muslims in Burma are facing violence from mobs and Christians in Pakistan face persecution from the state. Is it not time that the international community, led by this UK Government, took more action on this growing crisis?

Mr Swire: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight these terrible things. Some hon. Members will have seen the reports in The Times this morning about ISIS in Iraq, and they are truly troubling. We continue to work through the United Nations to ensure that states implement Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, which focuses on combating religious intolerance, protecting the human rights of minorities and promoting pluralism in society. The hon. Gentleman will have to agree, however, that ensuring freedom of religion and freedom of speech in some of these countries, which face the most horrific internal disruptions, is extremely difficult.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Minister update the House on the violence in Mandalay in Burma earlier this month, and on the fact that the religious affairs Minister is now in custody?

Mr Swire: The hon. Lady probably knows better than almost anyone in the House that the situation in Burma remains extremely difficult. Given our meetings and exchanges across the Floor of the House, I think that she recognises the extraordinary work and support that we are putting in to ensure a transition from one form of government to a democracy in Burma, with all its religious and ethnic divides. We continue to lobby. I had the Burmese ambassador in recently to raise my concerns about the consensus but also about religious tolerance, with the Rohingya. If the hon. Lady wishes to come and see me, I am always happy to discuss the situation in Burma, as she knows. We are the first Government to have produced a cross-Burma strategy showing all the work that we are doing there.

Burma mentioned in House of Commons Backbench Business Debate on Protecting Children in Conflict

3 July 2014 Kerry McCarthy: (...) Burma, too, is an ongoing concern. We had an excellent debate in Westminster Hall a week or two ago about the continuing conflict, particularly as it affects ethnic minorities in Burma, especially in Rakhine state, but also in other areas where it remains a problem. Given the time available, and that fact that we documented it in some detail in that debate, I will move on. However, at the end of the sexual violence summit, the Minister said that addressing the problem of children in conflict was a personal priority for him. Will he therefore tell us whether the training offered by the UK to the Burmese military was conditional on ending the use of child soldiers? There is also the problem of the prevalence of sexual violence in the Burmese military and the immunity enjoyed by the army. Given that we are providing some support for the Burmese army, it is important that we flag up the use of child soldiers with Burma. (...)

The examples we have heard today demonstrate the multiple and severe ways in which children are affected by conflict, necessitating a multifaceted, variable and enduring response from the international community. The UN Children, Not Soldiers campaign launched this March works in Afghanistan, Chad, DRC, Burma, Sudan, South Sudan and Yemen to end and prevent the recruitment of child soldiers by Government security forces by 2016. I would be grateful if the Minister set out how the UK is supporting this, and what discussions there have been on deploying child protection experts. It is important, too, as I am sure that the Minister agrees, that the FCO provides robust protections for human rights defenders speaking up for children who are denied a voice. (...)

Mark Simmonds: (...) In Africa, as I mentioned, we have seen progress in Chad with a completion of its action plan, and a recommitment from South Sudan this month to the action plan it signed in 2012. We must be clear, however, that this issue does not affect only African countries. As we saw in the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict, which was released on Tuesday, grave violations have been committed against children in 23 countries, including Iraq, Syria and Burma, and all those countries have been rightly raised in this debate. (...)

I recognise the hon. Lady's points on Burma, but I want to ensure that the House understands that the Burmese Government are committed to end the practice that she mentioned, building on the progress since signing the action plan with the UN in June 2012. Some child soldiers have been released in Burma, but we are working closely with the Burmese authorities to ensure that releases continue. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140703/debtext/140703-0002.htm#14070342000001>

Burma Mentioned in House of Commons Modern Slavery Bill Debate

8 July 2014 Yvette Cooper: (...) In the past few months, all hon. Members will have been shocked by, for example, the details of the investigation by The Guardian into the fishing industry. There were stories of men trafficked from Burma and Cambodia, forced to work 20 hours a day for no pay fishing for prawns for shops in the US and Europe, and also for British supermarkets. One rescued worker, Vuthy, a former Cambodian monk, said:

“I thought I was going to die. They kept me chained up, they didn’t care about me or give me any food... They sold us like animals, but we are not animals—we are human beings.” (...)

Kerry McCarthy: (...) Since then, The Guardian has published its six-month investigation into the Thai fishing industry, which has been mentioned, with evidence that slaves have been forced to work for no pay and under threat of extreme violence, to produce goods sold in UK, US and European supermarkets. In 2012, the EU imported more than \$1 billion-worth of seafood from Thailand. The paper reports that the workers were bought and sold like animals and held against their will on fishing boats. They included migrant workers from Burma and Cambodia. Other reports, such as the Environmental Justice Foundation’s “Sold to the Sea” report, provide similar accounts. A report by Finnwatch into Thai factories made allegations of forced and child labour, illegally low wages, excessive working hours, abuse by managers and unsafe working hours. A British man, Andy Hall, is currently facing prosecution in Thailand for his efforts to expose those matters. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140708/debtext/140708-0002.htm#14070874000268>

Burma mentioned in Westminster Hall Debate on Global Health (Research and Development)

8 July 2014 Jeremy Lefroy: (...) The final reason I want to outline is one that was eloquently pointed out by the right hon. Member for Neath (Mr Hain), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs: resistance. We sometimes think that the problems are solved. They are not. I know far less about TB than the right hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend, but they pointed out the problems of increasing resistance to TB drugs. The same is being experienced with malaria, although the problem is perhaps not so advanced. Already the artemisinin combination therapies that have been a life saver for malaria around the world are facing resistance in places such as Myanmar. That is of course where resistance to chloroquine started, before it spread across Africa, resulting in the drug’s becoming almost useless. We must take the situation seriously, and I welcome DFID’s work in Myanmar to help to counter the spread of artemisinin resistance there. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140708/halltext/140708h0002.htm>

Burma mentioned in House of Lords Debate on BBC World Service and British Council

10 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: (...) During the past 10 years, as chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea and during visits to remote parts of Africa and Burma, my appreciation of the BBC World Service and the British Council has grown into deep admiration, not least for courageous BBC journalists, such as its chief international correspondent Lyse Doucet and the head of the BBC’s Burma service Tin Htar Swe, who were both recently honoured in the Birthday Honours List. (...)

In Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi says that World Service transmissions reach more than 80% of people. When I visited her in March last year, she told me that the World Service had been a game-changer. Of course, she also listened to the World Service during her many years of detention, describing it as a lifeline. Believing passionately in the power of ideas, she used her Nobel Peace Prize money to establish her own Democratic Voice of Burma radio service. (...)

Staying with North Korea for a moment, I particularly welcome the British Council’s English language work there, which I have seen first hand. I also welcome the work of the British Council in Burma. During my 2013 visit, I gave a lecture at the British Council library in Rangoon. I am told that the British Council receives more than 200,000 Burmese visitors to its sites in Rangoon and Mandalay each year. The libraries

in Burma have more than 10,000 members and there is a network of 19 remote learning centres across the country. The British Council's Facebook page has 340,000 "likes"—almost a quarter of the total internet users in the country. (...)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140710-0001.htm#14071063000823>

Lord Bach: (...)The council has been very quick to respond to changes taking place in the world. Just look at its current work in countries such as Burma—where it has worked closely and very successfully with the FA Premier League—Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and, as we have heard, Sudan. (...)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140710-0002.htm#14071063000792>

Burma Mentioned in House of Lords Question for Short Debate on Republic of Sudan: Human Rights

14 July 2014 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: (...) The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has reported that Sudan is among the least free and tolerant countries on earth, ranking it with Iran, North Korea, Burma and Saudi Arabia. Freedom House gives Sudan its worst ranking, as does Transparency International. None of this augurs well for a genuine national dialogue. For these reasons, the UK must surely not fund any part of the forthcoming 2015 election process due to take place in Sudan, because there is absolutely no basis for us to believe that those elections will be free, fair or credible. (...)

For full debate, see:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140714-0002.htm#14071451000231>

Rohingya mentioned in Backbench Business Debate on Refugee Camps

22 July 2014 Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): I endorse what the hon. Lady is saying. Bradford as a community accepted the Rohingya—I believe they were part of that gateway programme—which shows that, even in an area where there is tension from increased immigration, there is still a positive and welcoming response when people understand the circumstances of where these groups are coming from.

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140722/halltext/140722h0001.htm#14072250000001>

Burma mentioned in House of Lords Question for Short Debate – North Korea: Human Rights

23 July 2014 The Lord Bishop of Peterborough: (...) Thirdly, the people of North Korea must be helped to prepare for a better future. Some Christian and other agencies are already doing that on a small scale, at great risk to themselves. However, the world can and should do more. As has been noted already, the failure of the BBC to provide a Korean service to reach the north, and the failure of our Government to encourage and even fund the BBC to do that, is quite inexplicable. That sort of outreach helped prepare the people of eastern Europe, and most recently the people of Burma, to aspire to and then live in a freer society. The BBC has changed and is changing, but surely its responsibility to promote our democratic and free values—not least in places where they are under threat or do not exist—must remain. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140723-gc0001.htm#14072364000120>

Burma mentioned in House of Lords Debate on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

24 July 2014 Lord Alton of Liverpool: (...)Two recent cases underline the universal applicability of Article 18. A young Indonesian man, Alexander Aan, was jailed for more than two years simply for declaring his atheism on Facebook. Mubarak Bala, a Nigerian, was confined to a mental institution for the same reason. Ben Rogers of Christian Solidarity Worldwide visited Alexander Aan in prison in Indonesia and campaigned for his release. Such welcome advocacy by a group of one religious persuasion working for the freedom of another, whose beliefs are different—hearing different music, telling a different story—is echoed in a letter by world Buddhist leaders, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, calling for an end to violence against Muslims in Burma. The Dalai Lama is emphatic that:

“The violence in Buddhist majority countries targeting religious minorities is completely unacceptable. I urge Buddhists in these countries to imagine an image of the Buddha before them before they commit such a crime”. (...)

Meanwhile, in Burma, Muslims are facing growing religious intolerance. In March 2013, I visited a village just outside Naypyidaw. In the charred embers of a burnt-out madrassah, I took statements from the few Muslims who had not fled. I met Rohingya Muslims and heard from ethnic Kachin and Chin Christians facing terrible persecution. Proposed new legislation to restrict religious conversions and interreligious marriage will hardly help; practical initiatives countering hate speech and intolerance might. Could we not ask the UN Secretary-General to visit Burma, specifically to address rising religious intolerance, and encourage the establishment of an international and independent inquiry into the violence in Rakhine state, Kachin state and other parts of the country? (...)

Lord Anderson of Swansea: (...) Last month I organised a visit on the subject by a Council of Europe colleague and was happily amazed by the number of NGOs in London that are involved with this problem. The fact is that of the 131 countries of a broadly Christian culture, not one lacks religious toleration. Of the 49 countries of a Muslim culture, 17 tolerate no other religion. Pew Research shows that Christians are the most increasingly persecuted for their faith; Muslims are the second but that is mainly Muslim on Muslim save, for example, in Burma and Sri Lanka. (...)

Lord Cormack: (...) A civilised country must have as its hallmark that it allows its citizens to believe in peace and to worship in public without any threat. In the admirable report produced by my noble friend Lady Berridge and others, it is shameful to read that in 139 countries between 2006 and 2010 Christians were harassed. Although I am proud to be a Christian and we live in what is still essentially a Christian country, we should all be concerned, whether the persecution is of Muslims in Burma, Hindus in Pakistan, Falun Gong in China or Baha'i in Iran. (...)

Lord Singh of Wimbledon: My Lords, I, too, am grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Alton, for securing this important debate. We have heard moving accounts of Muslims in Burma and Tamils in Sri Lanka persecuted by militant Buddhists, with Christians persecuted and marginalised in much of the Middle East, Sudan and other parts of Africa. (...)

Viscount Bridgeman: (...) Around the world, sadly we see conflict situations where respect for freedom or belief has to be the crucial element in any sustainable peace. Reference has already been made to the current crisis in Iraq, the conflict in Rakhine State in Burma, and post-conflict situations such as Sri Lanka, to name only a few. (...)

Lord Wallace of Saltaire: I thank the noble Lord for that contribution. The situation in Iran and across the Middle East, the question of south Asia, what is happening in Burma, Indonesia and the new laws set out in Brunei—a great many countries have been mentioned.

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140724-0001.htm#14072438000441>

And:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140724-0002.htm>

Oral evidence: The FCO's Human Rights Work in 2013

Witnesses: The Rt Hon Baroness Warsi, Senior Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Minister of State for Faith and Communities, Department for Communities and Local Government, and Rob Fenn, Head of Human Rights and Democracy Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave evidence.

Baroness Warsi: (...) Again, if I can go back to the programme funding—I note the comments that the Chairman has already made about it—it is one aspect of the work that we do. The amount that was spent on project work on freedom of religion and belief in 2013-14 was £204,000 centrally. We are going to lay a

written ministerial statement about this, but I suppose I am at liberty to say that it is going to be more than that in the next year, so I think that shows our commitment to this area.

There are certain countries where we have done specific work, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Sudan, Syria and Burma. We are hoping that we can bring some of that experience and expertise to what we hope will be a global gathering to take forward some of the practical outcomes I was talking about over the next 12 months. We have already started to use faith as a way of achieving outcomes.

The global summit to end sexual violence in conflict was a classic case. Some of the best sessions at that conference were about using faith as a lever for protecting survivors. The church or faith places are usually the first point of sanctuary and support for survivors, but they have, in the past, been part of the problem.

We had an opportunity where we had a network of NGOs called “We Will Speak Out”, which did a session specifically around how much more work could be done around ending sexual violence in conflict. We had a higher level political meeting, which was attended by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Archbishop Vincent Nichols; we had Sheikh Bin Bayyah who came from Mauritania and is linked to Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi as well; and we had other religious leaders from regions where there is a real issue in relation to ending sexual violence, including Burma. It was an opportunity to turn the spotlight on faith leaders and say that we want faith to be part of the solution, but how do we get there? How do we empower these faith communities not to be part of the problem and not to allow a culture to exist that creates the climate that gives impunity for these crimes? If we are going to use religious terms, how do we make sure the sin—the crime—sits with the perpetrator, and that innocence and protection sits with the survivor?

(...)

Q97 Andrew Rosindell: Minister, what is your assessment of the situation with Burma? Promises have been made by the President of Burma to make changes to the country, to make reforms and to improve human rights. What is your assessment of how we are progressing on that?

Baroness Warsi: Again, I think it is a bit of a mixed bag. It is important that Burma feels—it has, over the past few years—that it wants to come in from the cold and be part of an international community, and it is important that we engage with it. It has made some progress in the release of some political prisoners and some constitutional reform, but the low point, which is probably a terribly low point, is the census, specifically in terms of the Rohingya community and Rakhine province. They have been described by so many independent organisations and human rights organisations as one of the most persecuted groups in the world, and we felt that the census provided an opportunity for the Rohingya community finally to be recognised. We were given a number of reassurances by the Burmese that they would be allowed to self-identify, as is the international norm with censuses, and we felt right until the last minute that that would happen, but it did not. That was a regressive step and it was right that Hugo Swire summoned the Burmese ambassador off the back of that.

We continue to stress to the Burmese how it is important not to exclude certain groups. I had a meeting with the Burmese Economic Minister and the head of the Burmese chambers of commerce when they were visiting earlier this year. The term might not be entirely politically correct—I have used it before—but I said to them, “Persecution is bad for business. If you guys are Economic Ministers and you want a trading relationship and to be part of the international community, you need to wake up to the fact that you cannot have a persecuted community while you are making these cases.” They acknowledged that and the conversations were robust and frank.

The situation is not good, but our record is good. We can stand on that. Our high commissioner was one of the first into Rakhine province once the relationship started to thaw and Hugo Swire was one of the first Ministers into Rakhine province. There is specific work that we are doing through DFID, and DFID is working through other agencies to deliver support in Rakhine province.

For us, this is not just a Foreign and Commonwealth issue. Interestingly, this has quite an important blowback for us domestically. If you look at some of the reporting on CT concerns on what is happening in Burma, Burma is seen to have a radicalising effect on young people in the United Kingdom, in the same way that some people were looking at issues around Srebrenica and how that formed part of a narrative of a group being persecuted while the world looked on. So there is a lot of interest in the Foreign Office

to make sure we get this right and I think we stand on firm territory on that, but we also have a domestic interest in making sure that we get the issue around the Rohingya community—

Q98 Andrew Rosindell: Are you still confident about the British Government's position that Burma is in transition to democracy? Are you confident that we are still in that position, and if so how long do you think it might be before we could support the possibility of Burma joining, or rejoining, the Commonwealth?

Baroness Warsi: I don't think I could predict on the second bit, or even the third bit, of the question. I still think Burma is on the right journey. I think the Rohingya community is quite uniquely persecuted in Burma, and again it has overlaps with Sri Lanka, which we were just discussing. There is evidence now to show that there is an overlap between some of the extremist Buddhist ideology in Sri Lanka and the impact that that is having in terms of the ideology in Burma, which is kind of overlapping that ideology.

I still feel that Burma is on the path to democracy and therefore we have to keep supporting them, but we have also got to hold their feet to the fire on this particular community. I had the opportunity to visit the Rohingya community in Bangladesh, because some of the camps there are where they have fled to. As I said, tragically, they really are one of the most persecuted communities in the world at the moment.

Q99 Mark Hendrick: That was an unfortunate phrase—"hold their feet to the fire." I know that you didn't mean it in any context other than getting them to improve. However, the situation is far worse than you painted it. The Rohingya are obviously being persecuted terribly and the way that Buddhist nationalists are operating is absolutely disgraceful; it is beyond any acceptable norms. Even in Aung San Suu Kyi's party, there is this feeling towards Burmanisation that not only excludes, to some extent, the recognition and the acceptance of Rohingya but many of the other ethnic minorities that exist throughout Burma.

My colleague mentioned Burmese democracy and asked whether Burma would be accepted at some stage in the future into the Commonwealth. You say there is a "journey" but it is a very long path, if you can describe it as a journey, because there are so many minorities and so many atrocities being committed against the ethnic minority tribes within Burma, as well as against the Rohingya themselves. I hope that Aung San Suu Kyi becomes President at some point in the future, but that issue has to be addressed as well, because in the quest to get more democracy and eventually to get her as a President, part of the price of that has to be to keep some of this stuff on the back burner and not be quite open about it. And I think we make the mistake—in Britain and the west—of thinking that she is the end of the problem. She is actually the beginning of dealing with the problem that is Burma.

So, when we say our record is good, well our record is only as good as the outcomes that we see in Burma, and while there has been some movement, there has been very little in terms of what needs to be done in the future to make that a democratic state and a state that recognises human rights as we would begin to understand them in this country. That is less of a question, Chairman, and more of a comment, but I would still appreciate a response.

Baroness Warsi: I agree with you, which is why I didn't give a prediction in terms of timings, and I said this is a journey and I don't think we can predict the timing of that journey. I am not always convinced that on that journey they will keep heading in the right direction. I am sure we will have many lapses.

The point that you raise in relation to Aung San Suu Kyi is really well made, and it is a point I have made in the past, which is: you cannot say, "I fight for the rights of individuals, except for that lot over there." She has to be much braver. I think we were all disappointed by her interview when she was last here when she chose to avoid to support the Rohingya community. We need to be much more robust in our engagement.

A lot of people in Parliament had spent many years supporting her through some very difficult times, and it is absolutely right to say that to her. Politics and leadership is never easy, but leadership is about being prepared to lead and that is an issue on which she has to show leadership.

For full oral evidence, see:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-fcos-human-rights-work-in-2013/oral/11255.html>

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

BURMA

Date tabled: 25.06.2014

That this House supports the call for action for peace in Kachin State signed by 55 organisations worldwide; further supports calls from 80 organisations for Burma to scrap proposed legislation that would unlawfully restrict the right to freely choose a religion; notes that it has been over three years since the Burma Army broke a 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army; calls on the government of Burma to cease its attacks in Kachin State; further notes since June 2011 over 120,000 Kachin people have been displaced and over 200 villages have been destroyed; condemns the human rights abuses and breaches of the Geneva Conventions in Kachin State, especially the use of sexual violence; acknowledges the need for further peace talks between the Burmese government, the Burma Army, Kachin Independence Organisation and the Kachin Independence Army; welcomes Charles Bo, the Archbishop of Yangon's call for the rights of all ethnicities and religious faiths to be protected and his message of peace; call on the Government to provide humanitarian assistance to the internally displaced people in Kachin and Northern Shan States; and further calls on the Government to establish an independent investigation into the use of rape and sexual violence.

Signatures: 21

70th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BURMA CAMPAIGN

Date tabled: 22.07.2014

That this House recognises with respect and gratitude all who fought in the war in Burma 70 years ago; notes that this was the longest land campaign of the Second World War; salutes the memory of nearly 40,000 British and Commonwealth Service personnel who died in the fighting, as well as the thousands more killed in captivity; and commends the work of The Not Forgotten Association, a tri-service charity for the wounded in keeping alive the memory of such sacrifices.

Signatures: 2

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

On the 16th of July the All Party Parliamentary Group For Democracy in Burma held a meeting with Baroness Cox and Benedict Rogers, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, about the current situation in Burma with focus on the humanitarian situation in the ethnic states.

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Thank you.

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