



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

JUNE
2013

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Rohingya

10 June 2013 Mr Burrowes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of whether ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed against Rohingya people in Burma.

Mr Swire: The reports from Human Rights Watch in April, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Burma following his visit to Burma in February, contain a number of disturbing and specific allegations. We continue to make clear to the Burmese Government that where serious crimes have been committed, those who have perpetrated them must be held accountable for their actions. This should be done through a clear and transparent investigative and prosecutorial process that meets international standards.

Further independent investigative work to fully establish the facts would be required for an informed assessment as to whether ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed.

Ministers most recently met senior Burmese Ministers to press them on the need for accountability, when the Senior Minister of State, my noble Friend, the right hon. Baroness Warsi, on 15 April, and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), on 16 April, met the lead Minister for Rakhine State and Minister for the President's Office, during their visit to London. The Minister of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr Duncan), will visit Burma and Rakhine State later in June to raise our concerns again. Officials in Rangoon continue to work with other like-minded countries to lobby the Burmese Government to act on the statement by President Thei'n Sein on 6 May, in which he stressed the need to ensure accountability for those guilty of human rights violations.

10 June 2013 Lord Alton of Liverpool : To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of the recent Human Rights Watch report in relation to allegations of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing in Arakan State in Burma; and whether they have asked the United Nations Special Rapporteur to initiate an investigation and to assess the available evidence.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire: The reports from Human Rights Watch in April and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights situation in Burma following his visit there in February contain a number of disturbing and specific allegations. We continue to make clear to the Burmese Government that where serious crimes have been committed, those who have perpetrated them must be held accountable for their actions.

This should be done through a clear and transparent investigative and prosecutorial process that meets international standards.

Further independent investigative work fully to establish the facts would be required for an informed assessment as to whether ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed.

We continue to press the Burmese Government to bring all those accused of having instigated, incited or carried out violence in Rakhine State to justice. This accountability needs to be delivered in a way that is

transparent, credible and in line with international standards.

The EU-sponsored resolution at the March 2013 UN Human Rights Council mandated the special rapporteur to continue to report on human rights in Burma for another year. It drew specific attention to the need for accountability in Rakhine State. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) staff are currently on the ground in Rakhine State, monitoring the human rights situation. We are also lobbying the Burmese Government to allow the opening of a country office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with a strong mandate which allows it to monitor the human rights situation in all parts of the country.

The issue of Rakhine State is under discussion at the current June Human Rights Council session. We will raise our concerns with regard to the situation there during the course of the session.

17 June 2013 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they have made representations to the government of Burma following reports of the reintroduction of a two-child policy for Rohingya Muslims; and whether they intend to ensure that British organisations do not provide support for the implementation of such policies in Burma.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi): We continue to raise our serious concerns about reports of a reintroduction of a two-child policy for Rohingya communities with the Burmese government, citing the human rights obligations to which the country has signed up. The Minister of State for trade and investment, my noble Friend Lord Green of Hurstpierpoint, made these points in Naypyidaw on 14 June. Our implementing partners in Burma should be under no illusion that their support for the implementation of such a policy would be completely unacceptable to the British Government.

We welcome Aung San Suu Kyi's statement that any enforcement of a two-child policy would be discriminatory and not in line with the upholding of human rights in Burma. We note recent press reports quoting a Burmese presidential spokesman who said that the central government did not announce the Rohingya two-child policy and that they would investigate.

17 June 2013 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they intend to take steps to protect religious minorities, in particular Rohingya Muslims, from the reintroduction of a two-child policy pertaining specifically to those minorities in Burma; and what assessment they have made of such a policy.

Baroness Warsi: According to a Rakhine State government spokesperson, a district order enforcing a two-child limit for families in Northern Rakhine State was re-imposed in mid-May. De facto restrictions on the rights of Rohingya to marry and give birth have been in place since the 1990s or earlier. A specific regulation was first introduced in Northern Rakhine State in 2005, when an additional statement was appended to local marriage certificates prohibiting couples from having more than two children.

The British Government is opposed to any measures which contravene the human rights of any community in Burma. We are raising our serious concerns about this policy with Burmese government ministers in Naypyidaw, citing the government's human rights obligations, and the apparent contradiction between the Rakhine State government's approach and the recommendations of the Rakhine Commission report, which was endorsed by President Thein Sein. During his visit to Burma on 14 June, the Minister of State for trade and investment, my noble Friend Lord Green of Hurstpierpoint, raised our concerns with the government in Naypyidaw.

17 June 2013 Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the impact on Rohingya women of the reported reintroduction in Burma of a two-child policy which would specifically apply to the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Baroness Warsi: The Government has made no formal assessment of the impact on Rohingya women of the reported two-child policy. However we understand that since at least 2005, children in Northern Rakhine State born to unmarried parents, or to families with more than two children, have been considered 'illegal'. Where discovered, the authorities have placed those children on 'blacklists', denying them the most basic

rights. Credible research by non governmental organisations, including Medecins Sans Frontieres has shown that the restrictions on marriage and childbirth in Northern Rakhine State have led to serious health consequences. Pregnant women have resorted to unsafe and illegal abortions, sometimes self-induced, leading to high maternal mortality rates and psycho-social stress.

Our Embassy in Rangoon will continue to raise our human rights concerns with Burmese government ministers, including with respect to the Rohingya minority and a two-child policy. The Minister of State for Trade and Investment, my noble Friend, Lord Green of Hurstpierpoint, made these points to the Burmese government in Naypyidaw on 14 June.

24 June 2013 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the recent Human Rights Watch Report on Burma which concluded that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have taken place against the Rohingya.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi): I refer the noble Baroness to the answer given by my noble friend Lord Wallace of Saltaire on 10 June, Official Report, cols WA211-2.

5 June 2013 Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether Ministers in his Department who recently met the Burmese Immigration Minister, Khin Yi, raised with him his investigation into the citizenship of Rohingya MP Shwe Maung.

Mr Swire: The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) and my Noble Friend Baroness Warsi met Aung Min, Minister for the Burmese President's office, and Khin Yi, Minister for Rakhme State, in meetings on 15 and 16 April. The circumstances of specific individuals were not discussed. However, Ministers made clear our concerns about the need for the urgent coordination of humanitarian aid to Rakhine State and a resolution to the Rohingya's citizenship status which is consistent with helping the Rohingya achieve their human rights. British officials in Rangoon, as well as visiting UK Ministers, are in regular and close contact with leaders of the Rohingya community in Burma.

Kachin

6 June 2013 Mr Burrowes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received of allegations that British-made bombs have been used by the Burmese Army in Kachin State.

Mr Swire: Burma Campaign UK and Kachin National Council recently wrote to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office alleging that British-made world war two era 20 pound fragmentation bombs may have been used during Burmese Army offensives in Kachin State in December 2012. I have since replied confirming that the Ministry of Defence has investigated the origin of the munitions, and based on the evidence provided, can confirm that the munitions are not of British origin.

Religious Freedom

5 June 2013 Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what funding the Government has provided to Burma to promote religious tolerance and multi-faith initiatives.

Mr Swire: I have been asked to reply on behalf the Department for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. The Government, through the British embassy, is helping fund an inter-faith project delivered by a local non-government organisation. £9,908 has been allocated for this work which aims to raise awareness of inter-faith peace building concepts among young people to encourage reconciliation between communities. The Department for International Development does not have any specific programmes which promote inter-faith and religious tolerance in Burma, but is working with a range of partners, including faith-based organisations, to support peace and reconciliation in Burma.

More generally, the British Government continues to call on the Burmese authorities to sign up to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which includes commitments on protecting

religious freedoms. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), and I raised this issue with the Burmese Foreign Minister during his visit to the UK in February.

Human Rights

26 June 2013 Mr Nicholas Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the treatment by the Burmese Army of ethnic minority peoples in that country.

Mr Swire: We note the involvement of senior Burmese military in the most recent talks between the Kachin Independence Organisation and the Burmese Government in May, the outcomes of which I welcomed in a statement on 6 June.

However, we are very concerned by reports from a number of sources, including from the UN Special Rapporteur for Burma, Tomas Quintana in February 2013, which have set out incidents of forced labour, rape and sexual violence, arbitrary detention and other human rights violations by the Burmese military.

Many of these abuses have been reported in ethnic areas, including in Kachin, Shan and Karen states. We continue to raise our concerns about human rights, particularly in ethnic areas, on a regular basis in meetings with senior Burmese Ministers. We appointed a Defence Attaché to Burma in February 2013 to build relationships with the Burmese military. The Chief of Defence Staff visited Burma from 2-4 June, where he met with Burma's President, Commander in Chief, lead negotiators in the peace process and ethnic leaders. He emphasised to them the importance of professionalising the Burmese military and pursuing a sustainable peace process in Burma's ethnic areas. The focus of our defence engagement in Burma will be on adherence to the core principles of democratic accountability and human rights. We want to see a Burmese army that protects and respects, and is in turn respected by, the Burmese people.

5 June 2013 Paul Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proportion of grants provided by the British Embassy in Rangoon in the last three years were spent on projects which promote human rights.

Mr Swire: Overall 62% of project funding provided by the British embassy in Rangoon in the last three years was spent on projects which promote human rights, amounting to over £828,000. These projects have included training for civil society advocacy groups and human rights defenders, workshops to raise awareness of new labour rights, a visit to Burma by the Human Rights Institute of the International Bar Association, and building the capacity of disabled people's organisations.

Through our bilateral project fund, we have also assisted in delivering—via implementing partners—technical support over the last two years to the Ministry of Social Welfare to fulfil Burmese Government's obligations under the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, to which Burma is a signatory.

5 Jun 2013 Paul Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the Government has raised with the government of Thailand the possible jailing of British citizen Andy Hall due to his activities protecting migrant workers in Thailand.

Mr Swire: On 5 May 2013; staff at our embassy in Bangkok raised with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs the importance of Mr Hall receiving an independent trial in Thailand. On 20 May 2013, during my visit to Thailand, I raised this case with Thailand's Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs. Embassy officials in Bangkok will continue to monitor the case and raise it with the Thai authorities where appropriate.

6 June 2013 Fiona O'Donnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proportion of grants provided by the British embassy in Rangoon were allocated to projects which promote human rights in the latest period for which figures are available.

Mr Swire: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 5 June 2013, Official Report, column 1121W.

Sexual Violence

5 June 2013 Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs why Burma has not been included in his Department's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative.

Mr Swire: The Government regularly lobbies the Burmese Government on the rights of women, particularly on preventing sexual violence against women in conflict areas. Through international non-governmental organisations, the UK gives support to legal assistance centres in Burmese refugee camps in Thailand and to trauma care in camps in Kachin State in Burma, both of which deal with rape cases. We also work closely with the UN in Rakhine State to strengthen work to prevent and respond to sexual violence there.

The Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) has identified countries, in consultation with the UN and other partners, where the UK Team of Experts can add most value. In January 2013, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), announced initial deployments to countries including Bosnia, Libya, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and to the Syria Border. A number of other countries are now engaging in PSVI at both a practical and political level, taking into account existing national and international efforts. Over the summer, the British embassy in Rangoon will be scoping options to expand the initiative to Burma.

26 June 2013 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government whether consideration is being given to including Burma in its Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi): I refer the noble Baroness to the answer given by the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right honourable Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), on 5 June, Official Report, column 1120W.

26 June 2013 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government whether discussions took place at the G8 Foreign Ministers' meeting about sexual violence in Burma.

Baroness Warsi: During the G8 Foreign Ministers' meeting on 10 and 11 April, Foreign Ministers welcomed both the progress that has been made in a number of areas in Burma and called on the Burmese government to take further steps to end all violence, to respect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities and to pursue inclusive peace negotiations. The discussions on the G8 Declaration on Sexual Violence in Conflict focused on broader commitments rather than specific country engagement.

The Government regularly lobbies the Burmese government on the rights of women, particularly on preventing sexual violence against women in conflict areas. Through international non-governmental organisations, the UK gives support to legal assistance centres in Burmese refugee camps in Thailand and to trauma care in camps in Kachin State in Burma, both of which deal with rape cases. We also work closely with the UN in Rakhine State to strengthen work to prevent and respond to sexual violence there.

The Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) is working closely with the UN and other partners, to identify areas where the UK can work with governments, Civil Society and other organisations to tackle the issue of sexual violence in conflict. A number of countries are now engaging on this agenda at both a practical and political level, taking into account existing national and international efforts. Over the summer, our Embassy in Rangoon will be scoping options to expand the initiative to Burma.

Political Prisoners

6 June 2013 Fiona O'Donnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the British ambassador to Burma has attempted to meet (a) Myint Soe and (b) other political prisoners imprisoned in that country.

Mr Swire: We remain in regular contact with released political prisoners and their representatives, but British officials have not visited political prisoners while they are detained. However, we consider one political prisoner one too many and continue to raise this matter with senior members of the Burmese Government at every opportunity.

We also follow closely the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Burma, Tomas Ojea Quintana, and have had regular discussions with him covering the full range of issues highlighted by Mr Quintana in his reporting, including the issue of political prisoners.

We welcome the creation by the Burmese Government of a committee on political prisoners and note the range of independent civil society organisations taking part. This committee builds on earlier steps by the Burmese Government to grant access to prisoners and prisons to the International Committee for the Red Cross, something for which we consistently lobbied. It will be important that all cases are reviewed promptly, impartially and transparently and we will be watching developments closely.

Ceasefire Negotiation

18 June 2013 Stephen Phillips: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department is taking to encourage the establishment and maintenance of ceasefires in conflicts between the government of Myanmar and minority ethnic groups in that country.

Mr Swire: The British Government believes that a sustainable peace settlement in Burma will only be possible through a process of political dialogue. We are funding experts with experience of the peace process in Northern Ireland to support ethnic groups and the Burmese Government in converting the ceasefires with 10 of the 11 ethnic armed groups in Burma into meaningful political dialogue.

As part of this support, senior Ministers from the Burmese Government visited the UK and Northern Ireland in April; the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), and the Senior Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my noble Friend, the right hon. Baroness Warsi, met with this group of Ministers to extend our support. We also hosted a visit by representatives of the ethnic groups in May, when the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr Duncan), underlined the same messages of support to them.

The UK is also one of the leading donors to the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, which provides funding in ethnic areas to engage communities and civil society organisations in the peace process.

Constitutional Recognition

18 June 2013 Stephen Phillips: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the progress of the government of Myanmar towards the constitutional recognition of equality of all ethnic groups.

Mr Swire: The British Government is supporting Burma to become a prosperous, more democratic, stable nation, where the human rights of all peoples are respected. We regularly call on Burma to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which commits states to recognise the equal rights of all peoples in their territories. Most recently, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), raised this in a meeting with the Burmese Foreign Minister in February. We note the announcement on 20 March that the Burmese Parliament would convene a Committee to examine the 2008 Constitution. We will continue to monitor this process.

ANSWERS TO SPOKEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Burma was discussed in Topical Questions

18 June 2013

Mr Brown: Will the Foreign Secretary update the House, from the latest information known to him, on the conduct of the Burmese army and its oppression of minority peoples in Burma? Has its conduct improved, and will he say something about the systematic use of sexual violence on those helpless minority peoples?

Mr Hague: We work hard with Burma on human rights, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, and the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), has been there quite

recently. We have also started to establish military-to-military links so that we can have a dialogue with the Burmese military about these and other issues. There is still a lot of work to do in Burma on human rights, and we continue vigorously to take up issues such as the plight of the Rohingya people and continuing ethnic violence in some areas, but we are working with Burma to improve the situation.

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Ethnic tensions and progress towards democracy in Burma

5 June 2013

Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of ethnic tensions and progress towards democracy in Burma.

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi): My Lords, we have seen positive steps to end ethnic conflict and strengthen democracy. We welcome the agreement in Kachin to work to end hostilities and to establish political dialogue. However, concerns remain, including recent attacks against minority religions, especially in Rakhine state, where we support humanitarian work, and have called for accountability for the violence there and for citizenship for the Rohingya.

Lord Alton of Liverpool: My Lords, having seen for myself quite recently the spread of violence against the Rohingya to other parts of Burma and following last week's violence in Lashio, in Shan state, and this week's reports of the escalating exodus of people from the Rakhine state into neighbouring countries, what pressure is being put on the authorities in Burma to prevent such violence, to bring the perpetrators of crimes against humanity to justice, to ensure the rule of law and to resolve the Rohingya's demands for full citizenship and constitutional rights, which after all lie at the heart of the problem?

Baroness Warsi: The noble Lord always comes to these matters hugely informed, usually having just travelled back from the place that we are speaking about, and I am grateful for that. I think the noble Lord is aware that the United Kingdom has been one of the most front-footed and vocal critics of the violence within Rakhine state. Concerns have been raised by the Prime Minister to the President and by the Foreign Secretary to the Foreign Minister; and Hume Swire, the Minister with responsibility for Burma, and I raised these issues specifically with two Ministers, the Minister responsible for ethnic reconciliation in the President's office and the Minister with specific responsibility for Rakhine state. We discussed, among other issues, the long-term settlement of citizenship. There has been some progress, but I completely share my noble friend's concerns about the violence that is spreading beyond Rakhine state.

Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: My Lords, is the Minister aware that the recent human rights report on Burma concluded that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have taken place against the Rohingya? In view of those views, does she agree with the conclusions? A simple yes or no answer will suffice and will tell us all we need to know.

Baroness Warsi: I think the noble Baroness will be aware from her own experience as a Minister at the Foreign Office that it would be inappropriate for me to give a simple yes or no answer to a report that clearly needs to be supported by further independent investigative work. I am, of course, hugely concerned about the concerns raised in that report, and our ambassador has already raised them with the Burmese.

Baroness Falkner of Margravine: My Lords, does my noble friend accept that the broader problem in the transition to democracy in Burma is that the legal, security and police forces have not come to terms with the idea that Burma is now a multilingual, multireligious and multiethnic state? In advance of the 2015 elections, what are the British Government doing to assist in bringing about reforms in those areas, particularly if that involves training and practical assistance?

Baroness Warsi: I can inform my noble friend that we are doing specific work on police reform. There have been a number of visits both ways to try to progress that work. We are also working on reconciliation after conflict. Burmese Ministers have visited Northern Ireland, colleagues from Northern Ireland have visited Burma, and officials on both sides have been in touch. We are clearly focused on this area.

Baroness Cox: My Lords, is the Minister aware that, as a result of the Burmese army's continuing offensives and violations of human rights in Rakhine and Shan states and still in Kachin state, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been displaced and are living in destitution? I have visited many of them and witnessed their suffering. What representations are being made by Her Majesty's Government to the Burmese Government to allow access by international aid organisations to all people in need in Burma?

Baroness Warsi: Noble Lords may be aware that there will be a full debate on Burma during the dinner hour later today, so this is very much an opener; we will have the full course later on. I will be able to give the noble Baroness a lot of detail later about that issue, and about the work that the human rights and refugee commissioner is doing.

Lord Triesman: My Lords, the discussion in the European Union has focused in recent weeks on whether sanctions were lifted too early. I want to be clear that I have not formed a view as to whether that is the case. What have the United Kingdom Government said in EU foreign service circles about that matter, and what course do they plan to take?

Baroness Warsi: The noble Lord will be aware that the sanctions were first suspended, and that every member state had to agree to those sanctions remaining in that suspended state. If a single member state had agreed to those sanctions not remaining, the whole regime would have failed. We felt that we needed to put our energies into getting agreement across member states to make sure that the arms embargo remained in place.

Baroness Nye: After President Obama's visit to Burma last year, the Burmese Government agreed to allow the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights to open an office. What representations have the British Government made on this matter to try to speed things along?

Baroness Warsi: We continue to make representations on this matter. We, too, felt hopeful when President Thein Sein said that he would allow this office to be opened. He reiterated that commitment when he met President Obama, and we continue to press him to make real that commitment.

Lord Howell of Guildford: My Lords, all these concerns about Burma/Myanmar are very welcome and reflect very well on noble Lords and Members of this House who are concerned about these things. However, could we also add the thought that it is something of a miracle that the country of Burma/Myanmar is now moving towards rejoining the comity of nations? In the longer term, if we work positively and closely with the authorities and face their terrific and very difficult concerns, we will bring them to the democratic pattern that we all admire and maybe even to being members of the Commonwealth. Will the Minister recognise this positive side of our work with Burma for the future?

Baroness Warsi: I absolutely recognise the comments made by my noble friend, whether those concerns relate to prisoner release, freedom of the press or political participation. Of course, we must recognise and congratulate the Burmese for moving in the right direction.

Lord Maginnis of Drumglass: My Lords, my noble friend Lord Empey and I had the privilege of being invited to speak with representatives of the Government of Myanmar and, subsequently, with the opposition caucus. They wanted to look at lessons to be learnt from Northern Ireland, although the sizes of those countries have very little in common: 1.8 million against 57 million. The one thing missing is a Senator George Mitchell, someone who can be picked, I suggest, from Australia, New Zealand or somewhere in that region and who will act as the honourable broker in resolution. That is something that we as a Government should be committed to.

Baroness Warsi: Clearly, the noble Lord comes to this matter with expertise and experience. We can take heart from the fact that out of the 11 disputes in Burma, 10 ceasefires have been signed and a reconciliation process has started.

The challenge is now whether the Burmese Government have the political will to see through into real action the commitments that they have made in these reconciliation agreements, but I take the noble Lord's points.

Ethnic tensions and democracy in Burma

5 June 2013

Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the progress being made in Burma to end ethnic tensions and to secure democracy.

Lord Alton of Liverpool: My Lords, just over a year ago on 21 June, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi addressed both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall. There was an understandable sense of euphoria and a sense of "problem solved". Daw Suu now sits in the Burmese Parliament rather than under house arrest. Hundreds of political prisoners have been released and ceasefires have been agreed with most of the country's ethnic groups. Space for media, civil society and political actors has increased significantly, and in two years' time Burma will have elections. Sanctions have been lifted, and Burma's President, Thein Sein, is travelling the world, feted by world leaders.

Only this week the BBC World Service became the first international media organisation to deliver news on a mobile platform in Burma, where it has some 8.4 million listeners. Does this not imply that the problem is solved? Is it not time to move on and focus on the world's other problems?

During a recent visit to Burma it became clear to me that the euphoria is premature, misplaced and profoundly dangerous, a point I made at Question Time earlier today. During that visit, Daw Suu told me—I shall quote her exact words—that some countries are, "going overboard with optimism, making the government think that it is getting everything right".

She said that we must be less euphoric and more realistic, and that nations such as ours must get their response right. This should include a rather better and sympathetic understanding of the constraints which are still being placed upon Daw Suu herself.

To explore those issues, I tabled today's Oral Question and this Question for Short Debate, and I am grateful to all noble Lords who are participating tonight. The focus is on ethnic tensions and the limitations of recent developments. The immediacy of those challenges was underlined by the anti-Muslim violence last week in Lashio in Shan state, which also involved attacks on journalists trying to document what occurred. Mosques, schools and shops had been burnt down, and violence took place in more than 18 townships hundreds of kilometres apart from one another.

As I saw during my visit, partly facilitated by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and from its reports and those of Human Rights Watch, if the challenges posed by ethnic violence are not addressed, they have the capacity to derail Burma's evolution from military dictatorship into a plural, federal democracy. I met representatives of the Rohingya and the Kachin, whose home states are the two of the bloodiest theatres of ethnic violence. Over the past year, some 192 people have been killed and 140,000 displaced in Arakan state.

The plight of the Muslim Rohingya people is well documented, most recently by Human Rights Watch in its chilling 150-page report, *All You Can Do is Pray*. It details mass graves from violence that swept Arakan state in June and October last year. At a meeting on 21 May, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Burma considered that report, along with the first-hand account of Rushanara Ali, the Member of Parliament for Bethnal Green and Bow, who had recently been in Arakan state.

The Rohingya are among the most persecuted and marginalised people in the world, and they are now facing an intensified campaign of ethnic cleansing. This week, Channel 4 highlighted the plight of thousands of displaced Rohingya who have been forced to flee to Thailand, where they are held in deplorable conditions in detention centres. When the Minister comes to reply, I would be grateful if she could tell us what representations have been made specifically arising out of that report by Channel 4.

I first raised the plight of the Rohingya in your Lordships' House on 17 July 2006, when I urged the Government to co-ordinate an approach to the United Nations, and I asked that that should be done particularly with Islamic countries to raise the plight of the Rohingya and the deplorable conditions in the refugee camps.

They are the perfect breeding ground for nurturing a generation of alienated and hostile jihadists. I have repeatedly urged the Government to take action: five parliamentary interventions in 2010, twice more in 2011, again in 2012—and on 28 February this year, I asked the noble Baroness, Lady Warsi, whether she would, “confirm that since 2012, around 5,000 Rohingya Muslim people have been murdered and that many thousands have disappeared”.—[Official Report , 28/2/13; col. 1157.]

I also urged her to mediate a visit by the United Nations special rapporteur on religious liberty to the Arakan state. She and I agreed that the Rohingya are living in a system of 21st century apartheid with their citizenship rights having been formally stripped from the constitution. The years, the months and the weeks have passed by, but there has been very little sense of urgency among or a coherent, determined response from the international community.

Six weeks ago, through five further Parliamentary Questions, I again raised the conditions in the camps. I asked about the core issue, the question of the Rohingya claim to citizenship. The Government of Burma need to repeal the 1982 citizenship laws which stripped the Rohingya of their citizenship, rendering them stateless. They need to introduce a new citizenship law in line with international norms. They should also be challenged for trying to impose a two child policy on the Rohingya, which in the past seven days Daw Suu has described as, “illegal and against human rights”. Perhaps the Minister can tell us whether the Government would be willing to encourage the establishment of two independent inquiries: one through the United Nations to investigate the violence in Arakan state last year and to assess whether crimes against humanity have been committed, a phrase that was used in your Lordships’ Chamber earlier today by the noble Baroness, Lady Kinnock; and the other perhaps consisting of independent academics and other experts to assess the historical basis for the claims of the Rohingya in order fully and conclusively to address the claims of the Government of Burma and many in Burmese society that the Rohingya are, as they put it, illegal Bengali immigrants. Years of misinformation about the Rohingya in Burma need to be countered with a full, comprehensive and independent assessment of the history and the facts, if the suffering of the Rohingyas is ever to end.

Similarly, as part of a serious peace process, Thein Sein’s Government must end the Burmese army’s offensive against the Kachin people. While it is to be welcomed that the Government of Burma have agreed ceasefires with many of the ethnic armed groups, over the past two years they have inflicted a very serious offensive against the Kachin people in north Burma. Last week, Ban Ki-Moon welcomed the agreement reached between the Government of Myanmar and the Kachin Independence Organisation, calling it a first step towards reconciliation in the country. Perhaps the Minister can share with us the details of the seven-point agreement and her assessment of its durability.

Over the past 18 months, a number of fragile preliminary ceasefires have been agreed. However, there is a need not only for a ceasefire, but for a peace process. As one Karen put it, “A ceasefire is simply pressing the pause button, and we need to find a way to press the stop button”. That can be achieved only through a peace process that involves a meaningful political dialogue with the ethnic nationalities to find a political solution to decades of war.

The military campaign which began two years ago has led to the displacement of 100,000 Kachin civilians, at least 200 villages being burnt to the ground, and 66 churches destroyed. Grave human rights violations have included rape, torture and killings. A recent report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide detailed the story of one Kachin who had been jailed for a year. During his interrogation, he was hung upside down for a day and a night, beaten severely, mutilated with hot knives, and a grenade was shoved into his mouth, his torturers threatening to pull the pin. One Kachin has said that, “The impact of the war this time has been enormous. Many have lost land, plantations, livelihoods ... people are living in the middle of nowhere, hopeless, desperate, suffering”.

What are the Government doing to encourage the Government of Burma to develop a serious political dialogue with the ethnic minorities? Those nationalities comprise 40% of the population, inhabit 60% of the land, and live predominantly along the country’s borders in some of the most resource-rich areas that lie along the major trade routes. It is therefore in Burma’s own interests, and those of the international community, to see decades of war end and peace and stability established. That can be achieved only through real political dialogue. So far, the changes on the ground in Burma, welcome though they are, amount primarily to a change of atmosphere rather than a change of system.

I want to end by returning to the recent and shocking rise in religious intolerance, hatred and violence. During my recent visit, I visited a Muslim community in a village called Ayela, two miles from Naypyidaw, which is the new capital. I arrived just three days after a large mob of Buddhists from another area had attacked the village. In this particular case no one was injured or killed, but only because they were able to escape. In many other places, notably Meiktila and Oakkon, there has been appalling loss of life. The tragedy is that, previously, the Buddhists and Muslims had lived together for 200 years. However, someone said to me, "We don't even dare greet each other in the street". There are various theories about why this wave of anti-Muslim violence has erupted. I would be interested to know what role the Minister thinks that the militant group known as "969" has played.

I end by saying this. I have made three earlier visits to Burma, the first 15 years ago, illegally into Karen state. I am honorary president of the charity, Karenaid. That I can now visit legally and meet ethnic leaders and democracy activists is a small but welcome harbinger of change. However, the international community has a responsibility to do all it can to help in the effort to bring about fundamental change.

Lord Patten: My Lords, Burma is at grave risk of joining the list of permanent world trouble spots as a failing state. On present trends, it is sinking fast into a terrible cesspit of racial violence and ethnic cleansing, as the noble Lord, Lord Alton, has just portrayed so graphically; he knows much more about it than I do. I believe that Burma desperately needs three things. First, it needs enlightened and outspoken healing democratic leadership; secondly, it needs a miraculous outbreak—I believe in miracles—of religious understanding and human decency between Buddhist, Muslim and Christian alike; and, thirdly, its people need to recognise that unless they bring about stability, they will fail to hoist themselves out of poverty through economic development, something that is achievable within a generation.

On the first point, with hindsight it seems much easier in Burma, as elsewhere, to foment change out of a repressive regime than to embed the further necessary changes thereafter. Remember the soundbite delights of the so-called Arab spring a couple of years back. Tell that to the Copts in Egypt or the Christians in Iraq or Iran alike. Where are the outright and immediate appeals to human decency from the heroines and heroes of recent political change in Burma? They are sadly but understandably muted so far.

Secondly, there is no evidence at all of an outbreak of religious understanding in the face of Burmese, Burman and Buddhist persecution of Muslims and Christians, increasingly led—surprisingly, as they are religious—by some gung-ho Saffron Revolutionary Monks, such as the Venerable Wirathu, who said after last week's burnings and killings, which spread on 29 and 30 May to the north-eastern town of Lashio, to which the noble Lord, Lord Alton, has already referred:

"The Rohingya there burned down their own houses so that they could live easily in the refugee camps". He then went on to say that the burnings and killings by Buddhist mobs in Meiktila was "forgivable". The story is similar for the poor Baptists and others in Kachin, who look as though they will face the fate of the Kurds in ever more repressive Turkey, as we have seen in recent days in that country. To an outsider like me, it looks as if the lessons of these recent changes in Burma simply express that it is best not to be a minority of any kind at all. The world community and the Minister need to show a lead in this.

Thirdly, one can only hope that economic change can ride to the rescue as the majority of hard-working, decent Burmese of all religions realise that this increasing endemic violence will prevent their experiencing the rapid advances out of poverty that an Indonesia or a Thailand managed so quickly in a couple of decades.

The Burmese could grow their economy by four or five times over the next 25 years with all the inward investment that is needed to build a new deep-water port at Dawei or roads into Thailand. It is a country that I read may soon experience the delights of having a Coca-Cola bottling plant, but it will be among pitiful poverty, with hardly an ATM in sight and hardly any mobile phones or the other things that increasingly power democracy through the messages that they send.

Maybe, in the end, the realisation that they can lift themselves out of poverty will produce that national miracle where there is, as yet, neither much uplifting political leadership or an outbreak of human decency among majority and minority groups. It could well be the engine of social cohesion and national salvation for Burma—something I never thought I would say of economic growth.

Baroness Nye: My Lords, I declare an interest as a board member of the Burma Campaign UK and I thank the noble Lord, Lord Alton, for arranging this timely debate and for his tour de force on the situation in Burma now.

As the recent McKinsey Global Institute report says, Burma is an unusual country in that it, “remains an underdeveloped agrarian economy in the heart of the world’s fastest growing regional economy ... one of the few remaining largely untapped markets in the world”.

It has many potential drivers of growth and areas that foreign investors can target, but foreign investment will succeed only if there is a politically stable environment in which to do business. That means that human rights cannot be ignored in the rush to be in at the beginning of an expanding economy.

Following some initial positive steps by the Burmese Government in April 2012, the EU decided to suspend economic sanctions, which had gradually been introduced over the past 20 years. However, the EU specified four human rights benchmarks that would need to be met as a way of marking progress before it would consider lifting sanctions entirely. But two months ago the EU did lift sanctions entirely, seemingly without any regard to those benchmarks at all, as most human rights organisations report that the situation has deteriorated. I hope the Minister will agree tonight to publish any review of the benchmarks the Government have conducted which showed that they had been met, and explain why the Government did not support proportionality or a gradual suspension as and when those criteria had been met.

Take the issue of political prisoners, which is being kept under constant review by the Burma Campaign UK. The release of political prisoners has been used repeatedly by President Thein Sein to coincide with a foreign visit to show that reform is ongoing. None of those released prisoners has received any kind of medical care, compensation or acknowledgement that they should not have been in jail in the first place. They still have criminal records with their sentences suspended and no full pardons, not the unconditional release referred to in the EU benchmark statement. Those released are still subject to restrictions on their freedom, including on travel and future political activity. The repressive laws that sent them to jail in the first place are still in place so, as the already incarcerated are released, more are arrested. The UN special rapporteur, after his visit in February, highlighted not only the ongoing detention of political prisoners but the increasing reports of the use of torture.

The Burmese Government have set up a review committee but questions remain about its composition, mandate, timing and lack of independent international experts. Will the Minister update us on whether the Government have confidence that this committee will finally resolve the issue of political prisoners in Burma? I fear the families of the remaining and the newly arrested political prisoners would beg to differ. The second benchmark was to end conflict but throughout last year, as the noble Lord, Lord Alton, said, the conflict in Kachin deteriorated, with the Burmese army using air strikes on civilians and rape and sexual violence as weapons of terror. With the signing of the seven-point agreement in recent days, there appears to be the basis of a genuine process of reconciliation in Kachin, which is to be welcomed. However, those 75,000 displaced people in Kachin still urgently need humanitarian assistance, which brings us to the third benchmark.

Agencies are still reporting difficulties in gaining access to the IDP camps in Rakhine, and to Kachin and Shan. The situation will get worse for the people in those camps in the low-lying areas during the approaching rainy season. However, as noble Lords have said, the most disturbing development last year was the violence against the Muslim and Rohingya communities. Indeed, on the very day that sanctions were lifted due to the satisfactory progress that the EU decided had been made, Human Rights Watch issued a damning report which documented crimes against humanity and the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims.

After the violence in Rakhine, the President called for the “illegal Rohingya” to be sent to third countries and transferred civilian power to the military in a state of emergency that was extended last month. The recent news that the 1994 ban on Rohingya having more than two children is being enforced again is a clear violation of their human rights. Does the Minister accept the evidence of the Human Rights Watch report that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity are happening in Burma?

Concentrating on the economic opportunities that Burma offers, without parallel regard to human rights

issues, means that progress on reform can stall. The exit of Vodafone from bidding to become Burma's first foreign mobile phone company after seeing the final licence conditions shows the perils of companies trying to do business before the country relaxes its controls on access to information and freedom of expression. In a recent debate on Europe in this House the Minister applauded, "the intelligent use of sanctions, which in the case of Burma have been attributed as one of the most effective levers in encouraging the regime to implement democratic change".—[Official Report, 31/1/13; col. 1695.]

I therefore look forward to hearing from the Minister about what changed her and the Government's mind about the effectiveness of those levers? As an editorial in the Daily Telegraph—not a newspaper I usually agree with—said, on the day that sanctions were lifted: "Mr Hague and his EU colleagues have now cast aside all their sticks, leaving themselves with no option but to rely on the regime's goodwill".

In the absence of those sanctions, what is the policy of the British Government towards the achievement of human rights in Burma?

Lord Williams of Baglan: My Lords, I, too, welcome this debate and commend the noble Lord, Lord Alton, for initiating it and also for his long-standing interest in human rights in Burma. I first visited Burma in 1988, a few months after the suppression of the student revolt, which left many thousands of students killed. Brave students—braver than me—whom I met faced subsequent harassment and in many cases imprisonment. I worked then for Amnesty International.

I have visited Burma many times since, most recently in 2008, following Cyclone Nargis, which ravished the country and claimed more than 140,000 lives. Terrible though that tragedy was, it may well have been a turning point in modern Burmese history, forcing a reluctant and harsh regime to recognise that it could not cope with the scale of the disaster.

When I last visited, 12 months ago, I found a country much changed, despite the continuing human rights violations that the noble Lord, Lord Alton, and others have addressed this evening. That transformation is, I believe, the most significant in Southeast Asia since the ousting of President Suharto of Indonesia in 1998. Over the past 18 months, we have seen significant progress, although it remains one of the poorest countries in the region and one with a human rights record which, to say the least, needs to be addressed and improved greatly. There has been dialogue between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein. The sweeping victories of the opposition National League for Democracy in by-elections last April were described by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as, "a dramatic demonstration of popular will".

Two weeks ago, in the White House, President Obama received President Thein Sein. As President Obama recognised, the scale of the challenge facing Burma, in a difficult transition to more representative governance, is enormous. The country and its Government need all the international assistance, as well as pressure, that they can receive.

I commend our Government for the support that they have given to Myanmar and its people. In that regard, I believe that Prime Minister Cameron's visit in 2012 was critically important and I wonder whether the noble Baroness, Lady Warsi, has any news of a return visit by President Thein Sein, when many of the issues that have been brought up here this evening could be addressed. I commend the Government for what they are doing; in particular, DfID's support in assisting the process of ethnic reconciliation. Can the noble Baroness also say more in that regard? I believe that the UK can, and should, play an important role and am especially pleased by the current visit of the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards. I hope that that visit will lead soon to the appointment of a British military attaché in Yangon. Any news on that would be welcome. The Burmese Government have agreed to many ceasefires—or, more appropriately, cessation of hostilities—over the years but they lack the will and the capability to transform those tenuous agreements into lasting political accords.

Several days ago, as the noble Lord, Lord Alton, mentioned, the Government and the Kachin Independence Organisation agreed a seven-point peace pact. For the first time, in a striking development, the UN Secretary-General's special envoy, Mr Vijay Nambiar, was present during that meeting. I hope that that is perhaps an indication of a greater involvement by the UN in helping Burma in this difficult task of ethnic reconciliation. The most difficult aspect of that at the moment, as has been rightly addressed, is the situation affecting the Muslim population of Rakhine state. The UK must follow that situation closely, and

guard against further substantial breaches of human rights, but I believe that, equally and at the same time, we must tread a difficult path and support Burma's leadership —Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein—in the very difficult path along which they are trying to advance their country.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: My Lords, I, too, congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Alton, on securing this important debate and pay tribute to his active interest in, and commitment to, the cause of freedom and human rights around the world, including in Burma.

I make no claim to any expertise on this specific subject, but I declare an interest for four reasons. First, I hope to visit Burma next month with the All-Party Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health—unless of course my visa is refused as a result of my contribution to this debate. Secondly, I co-chaired the Conservative Friends of International Development. I recognise that Burma is a major recipient of British aid but it is in need of even more humanitarian assistance. Thirdly, I am contributing to this debate having met and talked to Benedict Rogers, deputy chair of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission and a well known Burma specialist, who has visited Burma many times, most recently with the noble Lord, Lord Alton, in March. Fourthly, last summer I put my name to a letter to the Daily Telegraph, along with noble Lords from across the Chamber, expressing concern about the desperate plight of the Rohingya people. We called for emergency aid to all the victims of violence in Rakhine state, pressure on Bangladesh to allow refugees fleeing persecution across its borders, pressure on the Government of Burma to stop the violence, a serious effort to revise, or repeal, the 1982 citizenship law, which stripped the Rohingyas of citizenship, and a new citizenship law in line with international human rights norms. I repeat those calls today.

I echo many of the points already raised in this debate. Although it is indeed absolutely right to recognise the extraordinary and welcome changes taking place in Burma, to encourage further reform and to open a hand of friendship to the people of Burma as the country opens up and moves towards freedom, it is also essential that we recognise that Burma is just at the very beginning of change, that the early signs of increasing freedom are fragile and that there are many grave challenges still to be addressed.

In the time available, I wish to focus my remarks on a couple of these challenges. First, as others have already noted in depth, the recent anti-Muslim violence is of serious concern. Clearly, there are attitudes within parts of Burmese society that are deeply troubling and need to be addressed through public education and inter-religious dialogue. Such efforts must be encouraged at grass-roots levels, as well as at a national level. However, more urgently, it must be a priority for the international community to urge the President and his Government to end the climate of impunity and to ensure that the security forces act swiftly, effectively and fairly to prevent violence, stop violence when it is occurring, protect vulnerable communities and bring the perpetrators of hatred and violence to justice. Can my noble friend give her assessment of the Burmese Government's response to these crises and say what concrete steps Her Majesty's Government are taking to address these serious concerns with the Burmese Government?

Secondly, I am very pleased that Britain has continued to increase aid to Burma and has been the largest single donor to the country. That is a record to be proud of. I am also pleased that, as part of our aid to Burma, Britain has provided humanitarian assistance to displaced people within the country and along the borders. However, as my noble friend will know, there are two areas which are in particular need of further and urgent assistance: Kachin state and Rakhine state. The war in Kachin state has displaced at least 100,000 people and left more than 200 villages destroyed. In Rakhine state, more than 130,000 people, mainly Rohingyas, have been displaced and are living in camps which the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Co-ordinator, the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, described six months ago as "dire". Will my noble friend tell the House what efforts Her Majesty's Government are making to secure unrestricted access for international humanitarian aid to all displaced peoples in Kachin and Rakhine states, including those outside government-controlled territory, and what contribution Britain is making to the needs of displaced people in these areas?

I wish to end with one of the most serious challenges in Burma and an issue that should be at the centre of Her Majesty's Government's focus on the country, given that it is a personal priority of the Foreign Secretary: sexual violence and rape as a weapon of war. Over the past decade, hundreds of cases of rape and sexual violence have been documented by women's organisations in six different states. Of the cases of rape that have been documented, almost half are women who were raped and also killed. In Kachin

state, many women have been raped during the conflict over the past two years. According to an article in the Guardian in February, Muslim Rohingya women, including teenagers, were raped. Will my noble friend tell the House what plans the Government have to ensure that Burma is included in the Foreign Secretary's preventing sexual violence initiative?

Baroness Cox: My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lord Alton on his tireless work for oppressed people and his commitment to obtain first-hand evidence, enabling him to introduce this debate with characteristic authority, knowledge and concern. I will focus on my experience of recent visits to the Shan and Kachin peoples and meetings with representatives of the Rohingya, Karen and Karenni ethnic nationals. Of course I also welcome reforms, including the freedom of the iconic democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the release of several hundred political prisoners, although hundreds more remain in prison. But all ethnic national peoples share fears that reforms may be used by the Burmese Government to further their own agenda, including more exploitation of their resource-rich lands. When I was in Shan state with my NGO, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, or HART, one of the Shan leaders said: "When the lights went on in Rangoon, all the world rushed to Rangoon; no-one stopped to see us in the darkness".

The UN Human Rights Council resolution on Burma passed in March highlighted many aspects of the darkness, including, "arbitrary detention, forced displacement, land confiscations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, as well as violations of international humanitarian law".

These violations of human rights and military offensives against civilians have forced hundreds of thousands of ethnic nationals to flee their homes to live in destitution as IDPs or into exile in neighbouring lands. I appreciate the visit by Minister Hugo Swire to the Rohingya people in Rakhine state but, as we have heard from my noble friend Lord Alton and other noble Lords, their plight remains dire with an increase in anti-Muslim propaganda, attacks on communities and the destruction of mosques, homes and businesses. The condition of those who have had to flee into camps is desperate, with many dying from lack of medical care or other essentials.

In Kachin state in June 2011 the Burmese Army broke a 17-year-long ceasefire with military offensives, including aerial bombardment of civilians and widespread violations of human rights such as extra-judicial killings, rape and torture. We in HART visited Kachin state in February and we saw the suffering of the people, 100,000 of whom have had to flee from aerial bombardment and ground defences. We visited some of them living in destitution in makeshift camps along the border with China and we heard gruesome accounts of brutality inflicted on civilians. In Shan state fighting continues in the north and the Burmese Government continue exploitation of this resource-rich land. During our last visit to Shan state we met civilians who had to flee their lands because of military offensives by the Burmese army or expropriation of their land by deals made by the Burmese Government with foreign investors, such as the pipeline being built from India to China which has driven countless Shan civilians off their lands with derisory or no compensation. We met one lady in a camp for Shan IDPs who had lost absolutely everything. All she had left were the ragged clothes she was wearing, and she was one of many.

Given the gravity of the suffering of these ethnic national peoples, there is widespread concern over the Burmese Government's refusal to allow access to international aid organisations, a point that has been raised by other noble Lords. Other ethnic national peoples who have signed cease-fire agreements, such as the Karen, emphasise that those ceasefires are used by the Burmese Government to extend roads into their lands, for possible future hostile military activities or to increase the expropriation of their natural resources, such as teak and other forms of timber. Although the Kachin leadership and the Government have resumed talks, as has been mentioned by other noble Lords, this is also simply seen as a precursor to a ceasefire and not real peace. The Burmese Government have a sorry record of brokering and breaking ceasefires.

Following the lifting of EU sanctions, what specific tools, mechanisms and leverage do the EU and the UK have to encourage and pressure the Government of Burma to address these grave concerns of the ethnic national peoples and to establish a genuine lasting peace process leading to a political agreement enshrining justice and equality for all peoples of Burma? Finally, what progress is there in encouraging the Government of Burma to sign and ratify the international covenant on civil and political rights, and will the

UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief visit Burma with an assurance of unhindered access to all parts?

I conclude by referring back to the words of the Shan leader: “When the lights went on in Rangoon, all the world rushed to Rangoon; no-one stopped to see us in the darkness”.

I hope the Minister’s replies tonight will prove that the UK Government have stopped to visit them in the darkness and will do all in their power to prevail on the Burmese Government to bring them into the light of genuine peace, freedom, justice and equality as citizens of Burma.

Baroness Berridge: My Lords, when faced with such expert eye witnesses to the tragic facts on the ground in Burma as those of the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, and the noble Lord, Lord Alton, it is hard to know what to add. But for outside observers I suspect the abiding image is the satellite photo from late last year that so clearly showed the destruction in Rakhine state. A picture does indeed speak more than 1,000 words. I will concentrate on the proposed international and domestic actions which could assist in bringing to an end the ethnic and religious intolerance against the Rohingya people. I declare an interest as the chair of the All-Party Group on International Religious Freedom.

At international institutional level in the UN and the OIC there has been much debate around international religious freedom as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Unfortunately, the events in Burma bring sharply into focus the distinction between protecting individuals’ human rights, which is what Article 18 enshrines, and protecting religions—in this case Buddhism—which is not what Article 18 protects. The UN and member states need to show in this situation that they can use soft power, institutional mechanisms and financial pressure to protect the Rohingya Muslim population. I had the privilege of accompanying the Minister on a trip to Srebrenica in 2009. Of course there is a different dynamic for the UN when you are actually physically present as an atrocity such as Srebrenica occurs. But bearing in mind the situation in Syria, I sense that there is a particular need for the international institutions, especially the UN, to show that they can effectively protect a Muslim population like the Rohingyas.

Can the Minister tell this House whether there is a danger of extremists influencing Burma’s Muslims from neighbouring nations if the UN fails to act to protect the Rohingya people? Also, could she outline, due to her role in the Department for Communities and Local Government, whether she has received representations from British Muslims on this issue? Nowadays there are very few international issues that do not have a potential domestic dimension.

Although ethnic and religious issues are not always separable, it is clear from the propaganda of the Buddhist monk Wirathu and the 969 campaign that there is a religious dimension to these atrocities. It is sad to note that with the Rohingya people there is almost certainly a racial dimension as well. There is mention made in news reports such as in the Guardian in April 2013 that Wirathu’s teachings have large followings on YouTube and Facebook, but does the Minister know if these followings are in Burma as well? I join with the noble Lord, Lord Alton, in congratulating the BBC World Service for being the first international news service to broadcast from a mobile platform in Burma where there are now estimated to be 4 million mobile phone subscribers. But highly developed states struggle with the issue of the boundaries of freedom of expression on new technology. How are the Burmese Government coping with this issue and might some simple assistance with monitoring and removing footage have a huge effect and assist long-term peaceful co-existence between Burma’s religious communities?

I would particularly value my noble friend’s assurance that Her Majesty’s Government will request an urgent visit by the UN special rapporteur on international religious freedom, not just to report on the current violations but to look at how a long-term strategy can be developed so that all Burmese people are respected as equal human beings, enjoy citizenship and live under the rule of law. Perhaps also the UN special rapporteur could be asked to look at the use of new technology in promoting religious hatred. There is much that can be done by the UK Government. Between 2011 and 2015 £187 million of UK taxpayers’ money will be spent on aid, according to DfID’s operational plan for Burma. In that plan there is a section entitled “Alignment to DfID and wider UK Government priorities” and the Minister has been prioritising the work on international religious freedom and Article 18. This alignment section does not mention her priorities and as it is clear that there are violations of Article 18 on the ground in Burma, should this not be reflected in DfID’s plan? DfID support is given not to the Burmese Government but only through United

Nations organisations and trusted international and local NGOs. Is Her Majesty's Government ensuring that the UN and these NGOs which are spending UK aid are funding work that assists the understanding of religious freedom at community level with Burmese citizens?

No one expects overnight transformation in Burma. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is not a miracle worker and mature institutions of a democratic state take decades, even centuries, to form. But I do not believe with all the plaudits the world has given to the Burmese leaders and the aid and the investment that is now flowing in that asking them not to oversee or even assist in the annihilation of certain religious and racial communities is too much to ask.

Lord Triesman: My Lords, I add my thanks to the noble Lord, Lord Alton. This debate takes place at a point where it is hard to make completely clear judgments because the evidence has not, as yet, pointed conclusively in any one direction. I found the latest report by the special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar particularly helpful. I know it is unedited, but it was published on 6 March and is therefore very recent. It is an attempt at a balanced review, occasioned, it appears to me, by a wish to give encouragement to former prisoners of conscience and to sustain, and even increase, their remarkable and brave efforts.

When Aung San Suu Kyi visited our Parliament, the admiration felt for her was evident. The facts that she was no longer a prisoner, she was active in political life in Burma and that she was able to speak and publish very widely were all powerful signs of progress. Her measured optimism was an encouragement and from what I heard of what she said, I conclude that she was not overoptimistic. She is plainly wholly seized of the massive issues in democratic life, the continued violence against opponents of the Government, their military leadership's actions, the deadly assaults that still continue and the cultural subjugation of minority peoples. In part because of what she had to say and in part because of the changes that we can observe, we have also tended to add qualified encouragement. Earlier today the noble Lord, Lord Howell of Guildford, invited the Government to recognise the progress that has been made, and in a way, he is right, as is the noble Lord, Lord Williams, tonight. I know they are both far too wise to believe that things are now okay or may not go into reverse. None the less, as the noble Lord, Lord Williams, said this evening, ceasefires, prisoner releases and so on are welcome.

The noble Lord, Lord Alton, invites us to ask whether it is reasonable enough for us to look at both sides of this balance sheet rather more acutely and without any euphoria. Uncritical optimism is not a policy. Last September, the President of Burma said that changes are irreversible. Is that true? Eight amnesties have freed about 850 prisoners of conscience, but there are certainly in excess of 250 still in prison, and it is unclear to me why any kind of special committee is needed to oversee the process of their release. Does the Minister know the rationale? How have representations made by the Government about medical help for current and past prisoners or those who are in the revolving door of repeated arrests been received? Do the Government think that the Burmese authorities will ratify CAT and OPCAT and, if so, when? Do the Government regard this, as I would, as a benchmark test for eradicating the torture of detainees and others? How have the Burmese Government reacted to representations that we have made on the impropriety of imprisoning peaceful demonstrators? I know there have been improvements in this area, but there have also been significant lurches backwards.

Have the Government made representations on illegal land seizures and, if so, with what response? How much progress does the Minister believe has been made by the national planning authority on the pledge that has been made to halve the rate of poverty? My noble friend Lady Nye and the noble Lord, Lord Patten, have illustrated the economic potential, if it were to be grasped. Does the Minister have an estimate, which has been recommended several times in the past by the UN Commission on Human Rights, of when universal education for younger children—their human right, if I can put it that way—might be achieved?

I am very grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, this evening for her report on her recent visit and also to the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, for her proposals.

The noble Baroness, Lady Jenkin, made a very powerful statement on this. I, too, note with deep apprehension the reports of every kind of vile atrocity suffered by ethnic minorities in Burma. The announcement in the joint statement of work on de-escalation between the authorities and the KIO on 6

February is an important step, and China is to be thanked for the constructive hosting of the talks on Kachin state.

The crisis in Rakhine state raises the same deep apprehensions. Blame is attributed by both sides to each other. The offer by the UN of an independent investigation is welcome, but removal of the violent assaults and killings in the wider Rohingya community is surely the starting point before there is any prospect of a serious discussion on a federal outcome. I am with the noble Lord, Lord Patten, and my noble friend Lady Nye in asking this question—I hope I am not putting words in their mouth. Does the Minister agree that we are witnessing, in the words that they carefully chose to use, ethnic cleansing?

I appreciate the typically thoughtful statement by Hugo Swire MP, the Minister responsible for Burma. He is right to emphasise that our Government's action must go beyond lobbying. The noble Lord, Lord Williams, called for a much wider and more active UK role. Policy will, as Mr Swire said, evolve, but I urge a process somewhat faster than evolution, which is a slow process. Let us include active sponsorship of ethnic reconciliation, no impunity and closer co-operation with China on these matters. Their roles, alongside the bravery of the opposition, should be at the forefront of all our involvement. Finally, if progress stalls, will we press for the reinstatement of sanctions?

The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Alton, for once again calling a timely and important debate. Burma is going through a complex political and economic reform process. It will take time and requires scrutiny, support and guidance from the UK and like-minded partners in the international community to realise the full benefits of what Burma can become. It is not simply a matter of relying on evolution, which the noble Lord, Lord Triesman, referred to; it is about going further and using every opportunity to make sure that Burma is heading in the right direction.

The noble Lord, Lord Alton, who has visited the country, described horrific incidents, but he noted the progress that is being made. Perhaps the most visible is the growth in freedom of expression, including for NGOs and civil society. People are now able to buy a wide selection of newspapers, and civil society is active. We provide funding to support this, which includes a number of initiatives that strengthen civil society. For example, later this month, we will be hosting prominent former political prisoners from the 88 Generation who are coming to the United Kingdom.

Moves have been made to bring about an end to the internal conflict that has blighted the country since independence. The Burmese Government have signed ceasefires with eight of the 11 ethnic armed groups. We welcome last week's potentially significant agreement with the Kachin Independence Organisation to begin political dialogue and work to cease hostilities. We continue to support the Government and the representatives of the ethnic groups to reach robust and sustainable peace agreements through a political process. Recently we hosted visits from ethnic leaders and the Burmese Government to share our experiences of peacemaking in Northern Ireland, but I take noble Lords' points when they say that this has to move beyond peace agreements into real reconciliation.

The noble Baroness, Lady Nye, and the noble Lord, Lord Triesman, asked specifically about political prisoners. There have been releases of large numbers of political prisoners, the establishment of a mechanism to review political prisoner cases and, for the first time in many years, the International Committee of the Red Cross now has access to Burma's jails. The Foreign Secretary pressed the Burmese Foreign Minister in February to release all political prisoners. We note President Thein Sein's statement on 4 June that all prisoners of conscience will be released soon. This is an optimistic statement and one that we will continue to monitor closely to ensure that progress is made. We particularly welcome his clear commitment not to enforce Section 401, under which released political prisoners can be returned to jail to serve the remainder of their original sentence. We have always emphasised that releases of political prisoners should be unconditional and we are pleased that the Burmese Government have publicly confirmed that they share that view. We will also continue to follow up on cases of reported abuse in Burma's jails and we raise individual cases of political prisoners when we have the opportunity.

The noble Baroness, Lady Nye, also raised the two-child policy. Aung San Suu Kyi has said that any enforcement of a two-child policy would be discriminatory and not in line with the upholding of human rights in Burma. The British embassy in Rangoon is raising our serious concerns with Burmese Government

Ministers citing the human rights obligations to which the Burmese Government have signed up. A presidential spokesman said earlier this week that the central government did not announce the Rohingya two-child policy—this was something that was being done on a local level and they would be looking into it. In relation to political reform, Aung San Suu Kyi has, of course, now taken a seat in Burma's Parliament. It was an amazing moment when we all welcomed her at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall. She is now building alliances across the political spectrum to drive reform forward. We welcome the announcement on 20 March that the Burmese Parliament will establish a committee to review the constitution. This is a crucial next phase in underpinning the wider political reforms. We are funding work to strengthen the capacity of the Burmese Parliament, an institution vital for deepening democratic politics. Over the past six months we have hosted Burmese parliamentarians from the Public Accounts Committee and the Bills Committee.

The issue of sanctions was raised by a number of noble Lords. I think I raised this matter in some detail in an Answer to noble Lords at Oral Questions earlier today. In the context of the ongoing political transition, on 22 April the EU lifted all sanctions on Burma except for the arms embargo which remains in place. My right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary made clear at the time that our work in Burma is not remotely finished. The judgment of the UK and of all EU member states supported by Aung San Suu Kyi is that Burma's remaining challenges are now best dealt with not through sanctions but through deeper engagement.

We will continue to be a constructive, supportive and critical partner to Burma, committed to supporting the reform efforts that have started. Our vision is for Burma to become a prosperous, stable, peaceful and more democratic country with respect for human rights and the dignity of all people. Without that respect for all people, this vision of Burma will not become a reality. Guided by these principles we remain concerned by a number of issues that the Government of Burma must address in order to sustain the momentum of the reform process.

Most specifically there is the issue of Rakhine state and the human rights abuses there, which were referred to by a number of noble Lords. We are extremely concerned by allegations of these abuses during the violence last year which was documented by Human Rights Watch and the UN special rapporteur. The Rakhine commission set up to investigate the causes of last year's violence emphasised the importance of ensuring accountability and the president has endorsed this but these commitments now need to be translated into action. We continue to press the Burmese Government to bring to justice all those accused of having instigated, incited or carried out violence in Rakhine state. This accountability needs to be delivered in a way that is transparent, credible and in line with international standards. The EU-sponsored resolution at the March 2013 UN Human Rights Council mandated the special rapporteur to continue to report on human rights in Burma for another year. It drew specific attention to the need for accountability.

OHCHR staff are currently on the ground in Rakhine state monitoring the human rights situation and we are lobbying the Burmese Government to open a country office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights with a strong mandate which allows it to monitor the human rights situation in all parts of the country. On the question raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Nye, on whether ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity took place in Rakhine in 2012, further independent investigative work would be required for an informed assessment as to whether ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed.

My noble friend Lady Jenkin raised the issue of humanitarian aid and assistance. On humanitarian assistance, we have continued to call for unhindered access to conflict-affected areas at every opportunity. I raised this with Aung Min, the Minister for the President's Office, when he visited the UK on 15 April. The Minister of State for Asia, Hugo Swire, raised with the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, when they met last week the need for improved humanitarian aid co-ordination. Ministers announced a further £4.4 million in aid to Rakhine on 15 May and we are giving £3.5 million to Kachin and have given £600,000 to support the Shan Women's Action Network in Shan state. Our total commitment over the four years up to 2015 will amount to £187 million.

The issue of Rohingya citizenship was raised by a number of noble Lords. This remains fundamental to resolving their statelessness. We have consistently said that there needs to be a sustainable solution to citizenship for the Rohingya community, consistent with ensuring their human rights. I pressed senior Burmese Ministers on this in April and will continue to make the point. The Rohingya community, most

of whom have lived in Burma for many generations, should be entitled to citizenship in line with Burma's current legal framework. Any further independent work into the origins of the Rohingya community could have value on the question of their citizenship. We are in close contact with the UN which is reviewing the 1982 citizenship law to assess whether it is consistent with international treaties to which Burma is a signatory. Noble Lords will be familiar with the arguments that are made against the granting of citizenship in relation to the length of stay in a country, the look apparently of the people and the minority religious background. The irony of that argument was lost in light of the fact that they were discussing the matter with me.

The wider violence against religious minorities, which has affected other parts of Burma, is also a serious concern. Attacks against the Muslim community in Meiktila and other areas have led to deaths and the destruction of mosques, madrassahs, businesses and homes. The violence in Shan state last week has shown that there is still much more to do to prevent further outbreaks. As is the case with the violence in Rakhine state, the Burmese Government must ensure, in line with statements made by the president, that those guilty of acts of violence are held accountable. We are this week sending out a mission to assess what help is needed to improve the capacity of the police force so that it can sensitively and effectively deal with civil unrest and better protect minority communities.

The noble Lord, Lord Alton, raised the issue of an impartial investigation. An international inquiry would be most effective if it had the support of all parties. The issue of Rakhine is under discussion at the moment at the current Human Rights Council and we are engaging with other countries as to whether this is something we could take forward. The noble Lord also raised the issue of the two-child policy. I think I dealt with that matter earlier. He also raised the issue of the militant group 969. There is evidence to show that the violence was organised. I do not have the information to attribute it to one group at this stage. The noble Lord referred to the Channel 4 report asking what representations we had made, I think, to the Thai Government. We have lobbied them and asked them to ensure that they adhere to international protocols governing the treatment of refugees. We have also asked them to ensure that full access to detained Rohingya refugees is given to international migration organisations and the UN. I am more familiar with the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh who I visited on my last visit.

My noble friend Lord Patten raised the issue of trade. I agree with him. We have put responsible investment at the heart of our future commercial relationship with Burma. We want to encourage investment that will benefit local communities and respect the local environment. He is right that if we give some people a stake in what could be a more prosperous future for all it could help with some of these tensions.

The noble Lord, Lord Williams, raised the question of whether the president could visit the United Kingdom. We have asked President Thein Sein to visit the UK and we hope that it will be soon. That could be an opportunity again to raise these matters. The noble Lord also raised the issue of the visit by General Richards. I can tell the noble Lord that the UK now has a non-resident defence attaché who was appointed in February this year. A resident defence attaché will be in place, we hope, by November this year if it is agreed by the Burmese Government. That again could help with that relationship building.

My noble friend Lady Jenkin asked about PSVI. Over the summer the British embassy in Rangoon will be scoping options for increasing UK engagement and embedding PSVI approaches to tackle sexual violence in Burma.

My noble friend Lady Berridge specifically spoke of freedom of religion and belief. She asked a number of questions about which I will write to her in detail. To address the issue of radicalisation, we are concerned, both in relation to issues of radicalisation of the Burmese Muslim community, where the narrative has been fed in that they are a group that has been left to suffer in this way while other people stand by, and concerns among British Muslims and how the issue of the Rohingyas could be used as a recruiting sergeant by radicals and extremists in this country. It is something we are acutely aware of and in discussions with the Home Office about.

In conclusion, after almost half a century of repression, the past two years have seen Burma make rapid progress towards the goal of a freer and more democratic nation but there is still much more to do. In order to achieve greater democracy Burma must deal with the ethnic conflicts it faces and tackle discrimination against its minority groups. We will continue to engage with the Burmese Government to shape the process

of this reform and we want the UK to contribute with meaningful and targeted assistance. Above all, we will ensure that human rights, preventing further violence and ethnic reconciliation remain high on the agenda and, to respond directly to the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, we will not stop looking for, speaking of, or supporting those who are still left in the dark.

WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATES

12 June 2013

Human Rights in Rakhine & Kachine State

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a privilege to open this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hood. The issues of human rights, equality and justice and the plight of the persecuted people of Burma are potent for Members of both Houses and have caused considerable concern to a number of my constituents in Bolton South East who have family and relatives living in Burma. Indeed, a number of them formed a small campaign group called the Burma Action group, which has organised two peaceful vigils in Bolton town centre. I thank both that group for its hard work in raising awareness of human rights abuses in Burma and the London-based charity, Burma Campaign, for its excellent work. I acknowledge and pay tribute to Members who have worked hard to raise the awareness of some of the issues, especially my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali).

The Foreign Secretary once said that the Government of Burma must be judged by their actions and not their words, yet over the past 18 months the UK Government have reversed a decade-long policy of prioritising human rights in Burma and supported the lifting of all European sanctions on the country despite the fact that none of the human rights benchmarks of the European Union has been met. Even TheDaily Telegraph described that decision as “deeply embarrassing”. Undoubtedly, there have been some changes in Burma over the past two years, but still more need to be encouraged. However, the policy must be carefully calibrated, taking into account the wide disparity between words and action. Burma still has one of the worst human rights records in the world. Since Thein Sein became president, human rights abuses, which violate international law, have increased.

In June 2011, the Burmese army in Kachin state broke a 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Organisation, and for the past two years it has pursued a brutal war against the Kachin people, targeting civilians and violating international law. The United Nations special rapporteur has documented widespread abuses, which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. Rape and gang rape, torture, executions, arson, mortar bombing of civilian villages, beatings and the use of child soldiers are commonplace. The UN Human Rights Council resolution on Burma, passed in March 2013, highlighted serious human rights abuses that violate international law, including arbitrary detention, forced displacement, land confiscations, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, as well as other violations of international humanitarian law. None the less, the Government of Burma still deny that human rights abuses have taken place, and when asked about the abuses in a recent interview, Lieutenant General Myint Soe said: “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

Perhaps one of the most disturbing elements of the conflict in Kachin has been the widespread use of rape by the Burmese army. It is reported that more than half of the women raped or gang raped by soldiers were also tortured, mutilated and killed. Perhaps the Minister could explain why, in the G8 summit, the Prime Minister decided to leave Burma out of the preventing sexual violence initiative? I would have thought that highlighting the increased use of rape by the Burmese army was of more importance than promoting an inaccurate positive image of Burma, which is what we have seen in recent months. I urge the Minister to press the Burmese Government to enter proper political dialogue on Kachin state to ensure that they address the root causes of the violence instead of constantly delaying such talks.

In Rakhine state—or what is now known as Ankhaw state—we see the heartbreaking plight of the Rohingya people, described by the UN as the “most persecuted group in the world”.

They are a little publicised Muslim people, who are historically located in the coastal Rakhine state, dating their ethnic lineage in the region over centuries. When the military junta under General Ne Win, an ethnic

Burmese, came to power in 1962, it implemented a policy of “Burmanisation”, which was based on a nationalist ideology of racial purity. It was a crude attempt to bolster the majority Burmese ethnic identity and to strip the Rohingya of any legitimacy. The Rohingya were declared foreigners in their own native land and labelled illegal Bengali immigrants. By stripping them of citizenship and denying them citizenship, the Government institutionalised discriminatory practices in Rakhine state.

The Rohingya have no rights to own land or property and are unable to travel outside their villages, repair their decaying places of worship, receive education, or even marry and have children without rarely granted Government permission. Although I am sure that hon. Members will recall the events of last summer, I will none the less run through them quickly. In June 2012, deadly violence erupted between the Buddhist Rakhine community and the Rohingya Muslims. Human Rights Watch, a respected and independent international body, reported that state security forces failed to intervene to stop the violence or protect civilians, and in some cases they directly participated. Rather than defuse the situation, President Thein Sein was highly provocative. He called for the “illegal” Rohingya to be sent to a third country. Since most Rohingya, even those whose families have resided in Burma for generations, lack formal legal status, his language implied that the great majority of Burma’s Rohingya did not belong in the country. His comments were eagerly seized on by those who favour the expulsion of all Rohingya from Burma.

In a recent Human Rights Watch report, a copy of which I have with me, it is documented that the violence that resumed in October was a co-ordinated campaign of ethnic cleansing, which sought to remove or relocate the state’s Muslim population. The October attacks were organised and carried out by local Rakhine political party officials, Buddhist monks and ordinary Rakhines, often directly supported by state security forces.

The report says that Rohingya men, women and children were killed; some of them were secretly buried in mass graves, and their villages and neighbourhoods were razed. In the months since the violence, the Burmese Government have done little to investigate the killings and abuses or to hold people to account for such crimes.

Along with complicity in crimes against humanity, the Burmese Government have contributed to the severe humanitarian crisis facing the displaced Rohingya and other Muslim communities. More than 125,000 people are now living in internally displaced persons camps in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, yet the Government have consistently obstructed the delivery of aid to them. The camps are overcrowded and lack adequate food, shelter, water and sanitation, as well as medical care. Unless there is a dramatic improvement in conditions in the camps, including unfettered access for international humanitarian organisations, the situation will almost certainly deteriorate further, especially with the coming monsoon season.

We are faced with considerable evidence of crimes against humanity; ethnic cleansing; mass graves; and the obstruction of humanitarian aid to displaced communities. Those claims should not be taken lightly. There has been a tendency to describe the violence in Rakhine state as communal and a reflection of deep-seated hatred between communities on the ground. However, the findings in the Human Rights Watch report tell a very different story—of extensive state involvement, and planned killings and destruction of property, as well as the forced displacement of a population.

Only last month, the Foreign Secretary congratulated the Burmese Government on their role in leading “remarkable changes” in the country. That upbeat assessment was premature, just as the EU was premature in its haste to lift economic sanctions on Burma. Human Rights Watch, an internationally respected non-governmental organisation, has carried out more work and it has found that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed, and that Government forces were involved.

There are some questions that we naturally ask. Why have no steps been taken to hold to account for their actions those who are responsible for organising the violence? It is easy to call on the Burmese Government to investigate themselves when we are fully aware that they will not do so. The Burmese Government-organised Rakhine commission, which was set up to investigate the violence, did not even consider any issues relating to who was responsible.

There needs to be an international investigation into the violence. I urge the Minister to support the

establishment of a UN commission of inquiry to examine the allegations of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. After all, we worked with the rest of the international community to set up the International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda, precisely because there had been ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity in those countries. I do not see why there should not be a similar inquiry in Burma; even if there is not a tribunal, at least in the first place there should be an independent inquiry led by the UN, which can investigate and deal with all the issues that have arisen. Obviously it must be an impartial international investigation.

Then we will know the truth, and we will be able to hold to account the people responsible. Of course, such an investigation may also provide useful information and act as the basis for future reconciliation.

The Rohingya people have no place on earth to call home; they are a stateless people. The Burmese Government should face international pressure to repeal the discriminatory 1982 citizenship law. All the Rohingya people want is reinstatement of their citizenship in their own land, and the dignity, human rights and opportunities that come with it. Human rights must be the single most defining test for the Burmese Government's commitment to democratic change and the rule of law. It is a test that they are failing.

I sincerely ask our Government to push for an independent inquiry into what is going on in Burma, because the evidence is clear. These are not just communal riots because different communities do not get on with each other. Since the 1960s, there has been a deliberate policy of effectively trying to drive out people who are not ethnic Burmese Buddhist.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this timely debate on a very important matter. Does she agree that, on occasions such as this, it is international pressure and the embarrassment and shame of the individual Government responsible for many of the actions that will bring the necessary change, and that we all have a part to play in applying pressure and bringing embarrassment and eventually shame to the Government responsible?

Yasmin Qureshi: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point. That is why we are asking other Governments to put pressure on the Burmese Government. There have been suggestions that we are almost in haste to have negotiations and win contracts with the Burmese, to increase financial gains or financial stability. That is all very well, but the human rights issue is paramount, and the Burmese Government must be told that what they are doing is wrong.

As I was saying, the issue is not just that different communities are not getting on with each other, as it has been described. Those who have studied the history of Burma, particularly what has been going on since the 1960s, know that there is a deliberate, calculated policy effectively to get rid of people in Burma who are not ethnically Burmese Buddhist. In Kachin state, which I have talked about, most of the people who are persecuted are, in fact, Christians; they are treated badly. The Rohingya people are Muslims. In another state, the Karen people are treated just as badly because they happen to be neither Christian, Burmese Buddhist nor Muslim. It seems that there is a pattern. There is not just one group the Burmese Government are against; there is a very sinister and deep underlying issue. The motive behind most of these actions is to get rid of other communities and other religions in Burma, not only to leave the Burmese Buddhist community as the main community but perhaps to keep Burma almost ethnically pure Burmese and Buddhist.

That is why the state has been completely complicit, as has the army. Yes, Burma held elections last year, which we thought would bring progress, but everybody knows that all that happened was that most of the generals took off their uniforms and got into civilian clothes, and the majority of the people who are involved in Parliament are military people. There is still very much a military dictatorship in every form. The situation should not be seen as conflict between communities who are not getting on; a much worse and far more sinister agenda is being pursued by those in power at the moment in Burma.

In the past, other Governments have gone into various parts of the world on the basis that there were human rights violations. I am not for one minute suggesting a military intervention, but there should be robust sanctions and a robust programme against what the Burmese Government are doing. They should be held to account.

At the G8 summit that is taking place, rape will be looked at in different countries. Burma has been omitted

from those countries, yet Burma is the place where most rapes are taking place. As the Minister may be aware, many years ago an international case held that rape is, in fact, a form of genocide, because the idea of carrying out rape—not to get graphic—is effectively to ensure that the women of the population being attacked are impregnated by members of other ethnic groups, and therefore rape is effectively about trying to get rid of that particular generation. There is a high level of rape in Burma, and it is an indicator of what I described earlier, which was not scaremongering or exaggeration; it seems to be part of a ploy to make Burma a Buddhist Burmese country. Surely that cannot be right, when there have been communities made up of different ethnic or religious groups living in Burma for hundreds of years.

I thank the Minister for listening to my speech, and I hope that the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister will be able to take this matter further.

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hood. I am pleased to take part in this debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing it. This is the most recent in a series of debates, each of which has shown that hon. Members are passionately committed to seeing Burma emerge as a successful, flourishing country with a mature and maturing society at peace with itself. Unfortunately, although a lot of progress has been made, that is not the case at the moment.

I am also here because, like the hon. Lady, I have been approached by constituents concerned about the human rights situation in Burma—not exclusively the matters on the Order Paper today. As the hon. Lady rightly said, conflicts in various parts of Burma involve all the minority groups in the country, including minority religious groups such as Christian and Muslim groups as well as animist groups and those from other marginal religions, and they seem to involve just about any group that does not have some claim to what might be described as pure Burmese heritage or lineage. That cannot be right. The persecution of religious and racial minorities—of those who have been excluded from citizenship—is what this debate is about and what I want to spend a few minutes talking about.

It would be wrong not to recognise that there has been progress, as shown by the 42 by-elections last year that resulted, for the first time, in Opposition Members being elected to Parliament. We need to recognise that the restoration of some stability in the country has led to rapid economic growth, the rate of which the Library briefing states was estimated at 6.5% last year. Let us face it: that is something we cannot match in this country. There are plans for fair and free elections in 2015. Those are all things that we ought to celebrate and encourage and not in any way undermine.

The reality is also that Burma is the poorest country in south-east Asia; it is a by-word for poverty and under-investment and, as the hon. Lady passionately pointed out, for discrimination as well. I support exactly what the hon. Lady said—that discrimination is not casual and not accidental; it is clearly orchestrated and state-sanctioned, or at least the state allows things to proceed with complete impunity. Reports of destruction of mosques and homes, and attacks on individuals, with the police and security forces standing by and simply allowing it to happen, illustrate that point.

I do not want us to be blind to our own history, either. There is a tendency for us—perhaps particularly in England, but certainly in western countries—to imagine that we have lived for the past 1,000 years in countries with secure human rights, where these things could never have happened, and we seek to export that to other people. I remind hon. Members that 200 years ago I would not have been permitted to be in this House, because I am not a member of the Church of England.

So we have history ourselves. Even 70 years ago, we had a somewhat flaky history about what to do about the Jews—the internment of Jews who came from Germany, for example, is not necessarily something that we would want to celebrate. The idea of universal human rights is politically contested, even now, within this building. We sometimes need to stand in other people's shoes.

Burma is having to catch up with 200 years of our history and our developing understanding of what it means to have a civilised, mature democracy. It is only to be expected that that will be a difficult and sometimes painful process.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Although the right hon. Gentleman is right to

acknowledge the time it took us to achieve the standards that we hope other countries will achieve, would he not agree that now our role and that of the EU, in engaging with Burma, is to apply our influence to ensure that history does not repeat itself and that people in Burma who are being persecuted do not have to wait hundreds of years before they have the kinds of rights that he enjoys now, and which his forefathers should have had?

Andrew Stunell: The hon. Lady, for whom I have a lot of time, could have been reading the next paragraph of my speech, so I have to agree with her. Indeed, our own history should give us the determination to help and support other countries and ensure that they do not have to spend 200 years getting to where we have got.

I give credit to the work that successive Governments have done, particularly in the past three years, in making this country the biggest aid donor to Burma at the moment. That gives us a significant role and voice in respect of Burma's future and how it should develop. A contribution of some £1 million was made last year towards improving governance and civic society in Burma, and humanitarian help was in the order of £2 million or £3 million. That means that it must be right for us to engage strongly, as a country, as well as through EU and UN institutions, with the Burmese authorities to ensure that our voice, and our learning, can be shared with them.

Of course, the humanitarian aid and support is going in not simply because there are poor people and a harsh climate in Burma, but because of the purges and the cleansing that the hon. Member for Bolton South East outlined so well. That is part of a bigger pattern, as she also said. It is to be welcomed that the military forces have signed some kind of ceasefire in 12 out of the 14 different conflicts that had been going on in Burma, but those remain fragile and do not in any way seem to represent the military power structure's accepting the legitimacy of alternative views and alternative religious persuasions, let alone alternative ethnicities as having legitimacy inside the country. We can welcome the fact that there is less conflict in some parts of Burma, but we also need to recognise that that does not mean that the underlying problems have been confronted and resolved.

I think—perhaps the Minister will comment on this—that there is a certain amount of game-playing by the military authorities in Burma. They gave in to international pressure, and pressure from their own citizens, to go through at least the appearance of sharing power and drawing in the Opposition, but, as the hon. Lady said, the current President is a general, but not with his uniform on.

Some of the macho posturing that we have seen in conflicts inside Burma comes in the category of flexing muscles and demonstrating the role and strength—and perhaps the necessity, as the military authorities would see it—of continued military participation in the governance of Burma. That is surely something we need to keep a close eye on, and I hope Britain will challenge it.

I notice, again from the papers prepared for the debate, that the UK was proud to boast that its military officials were the first foreign military officials to visit Burma since 1950 or some other early date. I can see the value of getting alongside the military forces in Burma and of demonstrating to Burmese military officials and leaders our forces' values and their role in civic society, but I would be concerned if we were showing them how to be better at suppressing internal dissent. It would be interesting if the Minister commented on the role of our military mission and on the placing of a defence representative in the embassy in Burma.

At the moment, we are seeing a denial of citizenship and deliberate tactics to drive out minorities. That is all cloaked in a dangerous racial nationalism, which we in western Europe have, thankfully, utterly rejected. I hope the Minister will be forthright in saying that we are determined to help Burma do the same and to reject utterly that nationalism, as it develops its state, which it very much needs to do. Perhaps we could start by simply saying that if a country denies people within its borders citizenship, that does not mean that it is entitled to deny them law, basic services and human rights. The right to life, the right to family life and the right to practise one's religion are not dependent on citizenship, and it is a function of any state to ensure that those within its borders are free to worship and live as they wish.

Let me echo the words of the hon. Lady by saying that it is puzzling why Burma is not on the preventing sexual violence initiative list. I have seen some of the parliamentary answers on the issue. As somebody who was giving parliamentary answers himself until last September, I know how they are written and what

lies behind them. There really is no good reason why we should not be saying that we want to put Burma on the list. It is an excellent initiative, which is capable of doing a lot of good. We should take real credit for initiating and promoting it, but there is a strange reluctance to apply it in this case.

The hon. Lady commented on the removal of sanctions. It is perhaps worth underlining that military sanctions remain in place, and rightly so. However, I would like to hear from the Minister whether consideration has been given to making the withdrawal of sanctions conditional on further positive developments. Sanctions have been lifted, but they could be reimposed, and the Burmese authorities need to be clear that that is a consideration.

The hon. Lady talked about the UK supporting a UN commission of inquiry, and there are established mechanisms for doing that. What is the Government's view of how such an initiative might be proceeded with? If the Minister's brief does not allow him to say that, will he at least tell us that the views of Members speaking in this debate will be taken back to the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister, to assist them in forming the view that they need to support that inquiry initiative as soon as possible?

I am not one of those Members who have been to Burma and seen it first hand; I have only newspaper reports and briefings. Some of those briefings have been eloquently put to me by constituents with first-hand, or at least immediate second-hand, knowledge of the country. There are real prospects for peace and development, and we celebrated that in this very building only 18 months ago. However, there are worrying and dangerous signs that the process is going off track, and I hope the Minister will reassure us that the Government are determined to help the Burmese authorities to get back on track, stay on track and deliver a peaceful, prosperous and inclusive Burma in due course.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hood.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this important debate. As she knows, I recently visited Rakhine state, courtesy of Refugees International and Burma Campaign UK. I had the opportunity to visit Rohingya, Kaman and Rakhine camps. I went because I wanted to see first hand the humanitarian challenges faced by those communities, and particularly by the Rohingya Muslims, whose situation I, like other hon. Members, want to highlight. Many constituents have come to me to raise concerns about what is happening in Burma and about the treatment of the Rohingya community, not to mention the many other minorities that form 40% of the Burmese population.

Since inter-communal violence erupted a year ago almost this month, Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state have been forced into segregated settlements and camps, and many have been cut off from life-saving aid. The humanitarian situation in Rakhine state is dire. Tens of thousands of people are still living in makeshift camps, where they lack food, water, sanitation, adequate shelter and access to health care.

The violence has caused not only massive internal displacement, but loss of life, livelihoods and property. Many have seen their homes and villages burned to the ground. I witnessed places where there was row after row of cut-down trees and nothing else. Such places used to be people's homes, where Rohingya lived side by side with Rakhine neighbours. Muslim and Buddhist communities that had previously been able to live together, albeit not necessarily in full harmony, remain deeply divided, and the violence is spreading around the country. It is directed particularly against the 9% of Burma's population that is Muslim. As the right hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell) said, Christian minorities are also likely to be affected.

During my visit, I met displaced Rohingya who were forced to flee to remote areas of the countryside completely unsuitable for displacement camps. I also saw informal camps, which were not registered, or allowed to be registered, by the UN, and which therefore had no access to humanitarian assistance. They had to rely on the good will of local people and Muslim charities, whose access to the camps is also extremely limited. Those camps need to be registered, but the UK Government and other Governments have been unable to get state authorities and the national Government to agree to register them. By any standards, these camps should be a high priority for registration and should be recognised as being desperately in need of help. They are adjacent to the registered camps.

One camp I visited, in Pauk Taw township, was accessible only by means of a two-hour boat journey. Non-governmental organisations had to bring drinking water in on boats, and primary health care was provided just one morning a week. The shores adjacent to the camp were covered in faeces, and dead rats floated in the water just metres from children who were bathing to keep cool in the scorching heat. Their home is a camp on a beach; I was there for only two hours, and that was long enough for me and the delegation I went with. I recommend that the Minister and his ministerial colleagues from the Department for International Development visit that camp. It is only when we see the desperate situation those children and families face that we can truly understand the plight of Burma's internally displaced people.

Most of the shelters I saw were made of tarpaulins and rice bags, which cannot withstand even moderate rains. One Rohingya man told me that displaced people—particularly those living near the coast—were growing increasingly frightened of the rains. With the start of the rainy season there are serious concerns that flooding will exacerbate the humanitarian situation and increase the risk of waterborne diseases.

I visited a hospital that was set up with state assistance. A couple of charities were allowed to provide some additional funding, but the only people able to help there were untrained nurses. Doctors were not allowed in, even though international NGOs had offered to provide doctors. The only other place where people can get emergency care is the local Rakhine hospital, where there is a unit of 12 to 14 segregated beds for the whole population of 140,000 people. What I saw was shocking. A man was waiting for an operation. I did not see any sign of anaesthetics, and the hygiene was appalling, yet doctors could go in there if they were allowed access by the state and national Governments.

We need the British Government, and particularly the Foreign Office, to apply pressure on the state government and national Government to provide unfettered humanitarian access. There is no shortage of good will from international NGOs and foreign Governments or of willingness from UN agencies to provide help. The World Health Organisation needs to step up and apply pressure for access, so that emergency care can be brought to people. I heard stories of many people—particularly women—dying unnecessarily because of the lack of health care. That experience—observing hospitals turning people away in life-and-death situations because of their ethnicity and the fact that they are not recognised—echoed, to me, apartheid. I do not use that term lightly. Being forced into camps and not allowed out is the equivalent of being a prisoner in one's own country.

Will the Minister reassure the House that he is working with his colleagues in the Department for International Development to help to improve the conditions I have talked about? Given that there are flood-prone areas, the need for shelter should be dealt with urgently. It is likely that the existing crisis will turn into a catastrophe if we do not act immediately.

The Burmese Government recently evacuated 120,000 people in Rakhine state, ahead of cyclone Mahasen. However, the lack of safe evacuation sites remains a key concern during the monsoon season. The Foreign Office has significant influence over the Burmese authorities, so in making representations, what pressure is it using, with DFID colleagues, for people to have the security to return voluntarily and safely to the places they came from, or places nearby? At the moment there is little hope that they will be able to return. Many people said to me that they had pretty good relationships with their neighbours. It was not those neighbours who caused the violence, but Buddhist extremists, who came and stirred up tension and conflict. Now, people are too frightened to go back, as are the Rakhine refugees who were caught in the violence. These are ordinary civilians, who were getting on with their lives. Both sides need security so that they can return. However, there is concern that the state government's agenda is not to allow that, but to keep people in the camps. That is not sustainable.

The movement of the Muslim community in Rakhine state has been heavily restricted, as I have said. The story is one of segregation and desperation—a humanitarian catastrophe that cannot be dissociated from the fact that the Rohingya population do not have the right to Burmese citizenship, or, therefore, any further consequential rights, including access to humanitarian assistance, freedom of movement, or connecting with their Rakhine neighbours to trade with them.

One of the things that I experienced was trying to get to one of the few Rohingya villages that are left in the part of Rakhine I visited. Half way through the journey the Rakhine driver had to stop. He was too frightened to go beyond the point where he saw the military. He would not go further, and we had to find

a Rohingya driver to take us further. On the way back we had to do the same thing. Likewise, we had an interpreter who was supposed to go to Pauk Taw with us. However, we were refused passage in the boat, because we were going to visit Rohingya Muslims in the camp, which was two hours away by boat, so we came close to not having access. The Rohingya interpreter was not allowed to go in with us to interpret, and we had to find another one. Rakhine interpreters were not prepared to go with us. One person agreed in the end, subject to anonymity. That gives an idea of the scale of the problem, and it is why we need to act fast. We need to ensure that what little good will remains between people—it is being annihilated by the understandable fear in the different communities—does not become overwhelmed, with little room left for reconciliation and reintegration with security.

I mentioned that the Muslim community's movement is restricted. The critical point is that its members cannot do anything: they cannot do business, or trade, and supplies to those that still trade are blocked. They are therefore increasingly vulnerable, and the only route by which they can get food, shelter and help is through international agencies. The displaced Rohingya and Kaman told me they would never be allowed to return home because, in their words, the local authorities were trying to create Muslim-free zones. As the recent Human Rights Watch report highlighted, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that what happened was well orchestrated and backed by the state government. At best the national Government turned a blind eye, and at worst they were complicit.

A recurring theme that came up in my discussions with internally displaced people was the threat to their security and safety, which often prevented them from returning to their place of origin, even if they were allowed to. Will the UK Government use their position and influence to exert pressure on the Burmese national Government and state government in Rakhine, to ensure that security forces on the ground provide adequate protection to all ethnic communities, and particularly the Rohingya community? There are concerns—and this has been documented—that police who were present during the violence tended to stand by. There seems to be much more confidence in the security forces, and that must be encouraging. However, it would be helpful to know what the Minister thinks the UK Government can do to encourage the authorities both to help people to return home, and to resettle them with the protection they need to avoid further similar events: I am thinking of what happened in the key events of June and October last year, and March this year, in Meiktila.

At the heart of the humanitarian crisis, as hon. Members have already said, lies the question of citizenship. The Rohingya have been described by the UN, as my hon. Friend has said, as the “most persecuted minority in the world”.

When I visited camps, where malnutrition rates are dangerously near emergency levels and where people are forced to live in segregated areas cut off from their livelihoods and are struggling to survive, I did not expect citizenship and identity to top the list of issues that people wanted to talk about. However, every group of Rohingya men and women, including children, to whom I spoke told me that their priority was recognition of their Rohingya identity and the restoration of their Burmese citizenship rights, which were taken away from them in the 1980s. Many Rohingyas were keen to insist that ethnic Rohingya Muslims had been in Burma for centuries, yet the national and state Governments deny them their Burmese citizenship and their ethnic Rohingya identity, instead claiming that they are “Kala,” a racist derogatory term, or Bengali migrants from Bangladesh.

One woman lost her entire family—I met a group of women, many of whom had similar stories—and she told me, “If, after having lost everything, including my whole family, because we are Rohingya Muslims, the Government still don't recognise me as Rohingya in my own country, then I might as well be dead.” During my visit, the authorities were conducting a “verification exercise” in displacement camps, trying to force Rohingyas to sign forms admitting that they were Bengalis. Citizenship is key to the rights of freedom of movement, work, marriage and much more. The displaced Rohingyas are effectively living the lives of prisoners in the camps with no right to get out.

The authorities in Rakhine state recently issued a directive placing a two-child limit on Rohingya couples in predominantly Muslim townships in the region, which is a chilling development and a gross violation of their human rights. Will the Minister tell us what his Department is doing to prevent the Burmese Government from applying such discriminatory practices?

An urgent resolution is needed to the question of Rohingya human rights and citizenship. The future of Burma and its reform process can be assured only if the question of citizenship for the Rohingya minority is properly addressed. The UK Government need to act urgently to end the segregation and human rights violations in the region. I hope the Minister will work with his counterparts to apply pressure, and I echo the points raised by my hon. Friend about the need for international inquiries into what happened and into how we can move towards reconciliation and the protection of all minorities, including the Rohingya minority, in Burma.

I hope the Minister takes on board my hon. Friend's point about the need for the Foreign Secretary to include Burma in his anti-sexual violence initiatives. Will the Minister explain, given that the EU has lifted sanctions, what leverage he thinks the UK Government and the EU still have to exert influence on the Burmese authorities to get the results that we need on this important issue? Why does the US have a different position? What does he make of that? How can we work with our US allies on this matter?

This is a critical issue for Burma's transition to democracy. We all welcome the changes and improvements that have been made overall, but if people's human rights are not secured—some 40% of the Burmese population come from minority backgrounds—Burma's transition to democracy could be at risk. I hope the UK Government will not put trade alone at the top of their agenda. Trade is important, but human rights are integral to our discussions on trade and investment. The Minister should not overlook this vital and important issue, which is critical to Burma's advancement over the coming decades.

Mr Jim Hood (in the Chair): There are three other speakers on my list, and I doubt whether I will be able to call all of them. I will be calling the Front Benchers at 10.40 am at the very latest. If speakers are quick with their contributions, we may get a contribution from all three Members.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will be brief, because I want to give the other two hon. Members an opportunity to be involved.

The UN has a key role to play. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on bringing this matter to the Chamber. There have been some impassioned pleas on behalf of the Rohingya people, which is good because the House has an important democratic role to play in promoting the matter. The situation in Rakhine and Kachin states is one that must be highlighted internationally in the House today, as it has been in the past.

Some 125,000 Rohingya and other Muslims have been forcefully displaced. There is an ongoing humanitarian crisis and there are questions about access to aid; the hon. Lady has spoken about the amount of aid that goes towards that humanitarian crisis. Burmese officials, community leaders and some Buddhist monks organised and encouraged ethnic Arakanese, backed by state security forces, to conduct co-ordinated attacks on Muslim neighbourhoods and villages in October 2012, and they forcibly relocated the population. Christians have also been attacked, abused and displaced.

I believe the Burmese Government have engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya that continues today through the denial of aid and the use of restrictions. There have been violent mass arrests, aid to displaced Muslims has been blocked and there have been months of meetings and public statements promoting ethnic cleansing, all of which builds up to a co-ordinated plan. A number of mass graves have been found. The news last night carried stories of displaced people and of hundreds—indeed thousands—of people murdered and buried.

Human Rights Watch has outlined the issue, too, and given many examples of those who have witnessed or suffered abuses. There are examples of state forces participating in some of the events. The local police have stood by in many cases. One soldier told a Muslim man who was pleading for his protection, "The only thing you can do now is pray for your life." There is clearly no compassion or help from the security forces, which is disconcerting.

On 23 October 2012, 70 Rohingya were killed in a day-long massacre in a village, and the security forces stood by and let it happen. Imagine the situation of those who had not yet been killed but who were listening to the screams, shouts and murders. Twenty-eight children, 13 of whom were under five, were hacked to death. Children of that age—look at what happened to them. The security forces told them, "We

will look after you and protect you,” but they did not look after or protect them.

There are many other examples out there. Local authorities, politicians and monks have also made public statements and used force to deny Muslims their rights to freedom of movement, opportunities to earn a living and access to markets and humanitarian aid. All those things are disconcerting. On 13 June 2012, a Government truck dumped 18 naked and half-clothed bodies near a Rohingya displaced persons camp outside Sittwe, the Rakhine state capital. That is another example of what is going on.

I will conclude with a couple of points, because I want to give the other two hon. Members a chance to speak. The main Opposition party in Burma has been unfortunately quiet. Why are the Opposition quiet in their own country whenever we are highlighting the issue here? I am not being disrespectful to the Opposition leader, because I respect her greatly, but I think that has to be said. I ask for direction from the Minister on the effective delivery of humanitarian aid, on disease and deadly water-borne diseases and on the right of the displaced to return to their original townships—there is also the question of their citizenship. We must address all those issues, and I ask the Minister to take them on in his response.

Burma should accept an independent international commission to investigate crimes against humanity in Arakan state, to locate victims and to provide redress. Burma’s donors need to wake up and realise the seriousness of the Rohingyas’ plight, and they must demand that the Burmese Government urgently stop abuses, promote the safe return of displaced Muslims and Christians and ensure accountability to end the deadly cycle of violence in Arakan state.

I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate, and I give an opportunity for the other two hon. Members to speak.

Mr Jim Hood (in the Chair): There are 10 minutes left.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): My remarks will be brief, because I have previously spoken at length on these matters in both Westminster Hall and the Commons Chamber. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her excellent speech and the kind remarks she directed towards me. I will cut down my comments so that my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) may take part in the debate.

I should say at the outset that it is right to praise the progress that Burma has made, as hon. Members have done. Freedom of expression and media freedom have increased, political prisoners have been released and moves have been made to a form of democratic election, even though some seats are reserved for the military. Aung San Suu Kyi has been released.

However, I will focus, as have other hon. Members, on the treatment of the Rohingya in Rakhine state. The last time we debated the subject in this Chamber, all Members referred to the plight of the Rohingya. The deaths number in the hundreds—or the thousands, according to some reports—and many Rohingya have been displaced to camps that have been described as some of the most dire in the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) was particularly eloquent and moving in describing what she saw there on her recent trip. Rohingya mosques, madrassahs and homes have been burned down, and shops looted.

Although the violence has not been on the scale that we saw last October, small-scale violence remains. The perpetrators have been allowed to continue and have not been brought to law. Anti-Muslim sentiment appears to be increasing across Burma. In recent weeks, in the Mandalay area, clashes and deaths have been stoked by extremist monks from the 969 movement, and the security services seem to stand by and do nothing. There are parallels with what happened in Rakhine state last year.

We know that the Burmese Government set up an inquiry, but it was their own internal inquiry. Every speaker in this debate has said that that is not satisfactory and that we should have an international inquiry at UN level. I hope that the Minister will endorse that. As many Members have said, we also need complete, unfettered access to the camps, which are a dire situation, for all humanitarian and human rights agencies. I hope that he will support that also.

I would like to press the Minister on the stories that have emerged in the past few days about the two-child policy in Rakhine state. A couple of days ago, the Burmese Minister for Immigration and Population endorsed the policy, saying that it would benefit “Bengali women”. Note the phrase: he still refuses to recognise the Rohingya people.

Human Rights Watch says that the law violates international human rights protections and endangers women’s physical and mental health. Aung San Suu Kyi calls the policy discrimination and not in line with human rights, and health workers have reported an increase in illegal abortions and in women giving their children to other women in order to avoid fines or arrest. That is an appalling abuse of human rights, and it is another example of the unacceptable way in which the Rohingya people of Burma are treated. At the root of the issue is the citizenship question, which has been referred to many times. I remind the Minister that even though the current Burmese Government consider the Rohingya to be illegal Bengali refugees, the first President of Burma said many years ago that the “Muslims of Arakan”—that is, Rakhine— “certainly belong to one of the indigenous races of Burma...if they do not belong to the indigenous races, we also cannot be taken as indigenous races”.

I am sure that everyone would agree that the citizenship law must be sorted out. It is absolutely unacceptable that Rohingya children born in Rakhine are being denied the citizenship that they deserve. It is a moral disgrace. Does the Minister agree that it contravenes various UN protocols on the treatment of children?

We are a significant donor to Burma, and the UK has supported lifting sanctions. Given that we have done so, what other diplomatic tools does the Minister have at his disposal to put pressure on Burma to deal with human rights abuses? We are rightly and understandably positioning ourselves to take full advantage of the economic opportunities of that mineral-rich country. I understand that, and I support international trade, but if we go down that route while doing nothing to insist on human rights, it will be a tragedy for the Rohingya people, who are some of the most oppressed in the world.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hood. I pay tribute to all hon. Members, who have made thoughtful speeches. I will move on quickly to my speech in the remaining time.

Let us remember that Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy won the election in 1990 with 60% of the vote and 80% of parliamentary seats. Although those results were not recognised, we must acknowledge that Burma is moving forward and taking steps as part of the reconciliation process.

My contribution will focus on three main issues: the Kachin state, land grab and humanitarian issues. I apologise for the speed. Kachin is predominantly a Christian state. I was pleased that Mr Speaker granted my urgent question in January. On the day of that debate, a child of 15 and a pastor were killed. I got a helpful response from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), saying that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. What we see as crimes go unrecognised in that state. The police stand by. Some 100,000 people have been displaced in Kachin. Although a ceasefire has been announced, it appeared to be on the very day that General Thein was in America. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that abuses are still taking place, even after the ceasefire.

The second issue is land grab. People who have been living on the land and using it to feed themselves have been displaced. The Asian Legal Resource Centre, in a submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council in June, warned that Burma is in danger of a land-grabbing epidemic. Forests have been cleared, dams and pipelines are being built and the people are just being ignored. The Burmese Parliament has a land investigation committee, but it has seen only about 500 complaints, and many ethnic minorities do not even know that it exists.

Thirdly, on the humanitarian aspects, all Members have rightly mentioned the reports from Human Rights Watch, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and even the Kachin Women’s Association. There is a global movement against human trafficking. Women are being trafficked into China and back again. They cannot do anything with their lives once they have been humiliated in that way. Attacks are consistently systematic. The reports are clear, and they all say the same things: people are being threatened. Local aid groups say

that workers are also being threatened by local administrations. A child died after drinking from a stream poisoned by pesticides.

Daw Suu Kyi has gone the extra mile to ensure that her country moves on. Although EU sanctions were lifted, with some criticism in some quarters, I ask the Minister to raise a number of issues in exchange. First, will he raise the human rights issues set out in the reports and ensure that he speaks to the Burmese Government or his counterpart and that the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights finds a place in Burma, as agreed by the Burmese Government? Will he ensure, more importantly, that aid given to Burma goes to the correct people in a transparent way, so that women who have been raped get the support that they need?

In the long term, a constitutional solution is needed, as is a second Panglong conference. We must use our resources and expertise to ensure that the NLD's aim of equality of nationalities is supported. Religion must not be used to divide people; people must be allowed to live and choose their own religion, whatever it happens to be. We have a long history with Burma, and we should be able to walk hand in hand as Burma finds a new constitutional settlement that respects human rights and the rule of law. As one worker said, we need to move away from the ceasefire process to a peace process. We can help Burma step out from behind the faded politics of the past. That can be achieved only through dialogue, respect for each group and the rule of law and, most importantly, reconciliation.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hood. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) both on securing this debate and making an excellent speech in support of it. It is a matter of great concern to her constituents, to Members across the House and in the wider community.

We should start by welcoming the major changes made in Burma over recent years. The country had been so long isolated from the rest of the world, had suffered severe repression for many years and was of concern to the world community. That is why this Parliament was so pleased to welcome Aung San Suu Kyi to Westminster Hall and to hear her message of hope, and why the world is renewing and expanding business and other relationships with Burma. We welcome the corresponding economic growth that is taking place.

It is also right to acknowledge the significant persuasive role of President Thein Sein in bringing about change, and the patient diplomatic role played by Burma's fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which worked steadily to persuade the previous regime, often facing criticism for what seemed to be their cautious approach. All that offers hope for the future, for Burma and for its people.

As we have seen elsewhere in the world, however, such rapid change can often release old tensions and conflicts that have been repressed under the old regime. That is why we must acknowledge the progress that Burma has made towards peace and democracy. The conflicts in Rakhine and Kachin states demonstrate all too powerfully why there can be no complacency, whether from President Thein Sein or us and the international community. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) alluded to that. The Rakhine conflict started a year ago, following the rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman and the killing of 10 Muslim men. June and October in particular saw shocking inter-communal violence, with more than 200 deaths and by now an estimated 140,000 internally displaced persons, predominantly Rohingya. Conditions in the camps are shocking, as ably reported by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali).

The conflict also raises fundamental human rights concerns, including the seemingly arbitrary arrest of hundreds during the Government-imposed state of emergency. The special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burma noted "harsh and disproportionate restrictions on the freedom of movement of Muslim populations in the IDP camps" and received "credible allegations" of "widespread and systematic human rights violations by state officials targeted against the Rohingya and wider Muslim populations".

That includes "extrajudicial killings, rape and sexual violence, arbitrary detention and torture and ill-treatment in detention, deaths in detention, and denial of due process and fair trial rights". My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow also mentioned the chilling report from Human Rights Watch "All You Can Do is Pray", which expresses considerable concern about possible state

collusion in what is argued to “amount to crimes against humanity carried out as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing.”

I understand and welcome the fact that our ambassador has raised that report with the Burmese Government. Will the Minister tell us the outcome of those talks, and whether the claims will be discussed at the highest level between the UK and Burma? The senior Minister of State at the Foreign Office commented that “further independent investigative work would be required”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 5 June 2013; Vol. 745, c. 1248.]

Will the Minister here today elaborate on what investigations the Government would like to see and on what steps the UK is taking to secure an inquiry and to ensure that the Burmese Government recognise the gravity of the report?

President Thein Sein initiated an inquiry into the inter-communal violence last year, and the Rakhine investigation commission finally reported at the end of April. Unfortunately, it seemed to provide further evidence of the rejection of the Rohingya community, as the report referred to them as “Bengali” throughout. That reinforces the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East. There were a number of comments on the birth rate among the community and, as mentioned in the debate, the two-child policy imposed on the Rohingya was reaffirmed last month, a move I am pleased to see was condemned by Aung San Suu Kyi as discrimination that “is not in line with human rights”.

What discussions have there been with the Burmese authorities and in the European Union or the UN about the Rakhine investigation commission report?

In particular, the report notably failed to support a review of the 1982 citizenship law, which denies the Rohingya citizenship and renders them stateless. What recent representations has the Minister made in support of a review of the law and of positive action to address the prejudice and discrimination suffered by the Rohingya community? Does he agree that continued segregation, as endorsed by the commission, should not be seen as a permanent solution? There was also a strong emphasis in the report on a greater presence for the security forces. Given that we have already discussed grave concerns about their past role, is the Minister satisfied that they can be deployed as a force for good and to calm the tensions, and that they will be held accountable for their actions?

Non-governmental organisations have reported worrying difficulties in supplying vital humanitarian support to the thousands who have lost their homes, and that was acknowledged by the investigation commission, which concluded that 15% of food needs are unmet and that “some 90% of needs are unmet in the construction and provision of shelter”.

Can the Minister provide an indication of how reliable those figures are and tell us what steps the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development are taking to ensure unhindered access for humanitarian support, an issue stressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South? Can the Minister also update us on the current safety of internally displaced persons and on efforts to protect them from the monsoon season? What recent representations have been made to the authorities in Thailand and Bangladesh regarding the treatment of Rohingya asylum seekers? Is the Minister aware of any work by the Burmese authorities to stem the violence and to promote inter-religious dialogue?

The focus of today’s debate has been primarily but not only on Rakhine, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East is absolutely right to say that the human rights situation in Kachin state also requires international attention. That conflict intensified in November last year, after the 17 years of ceasefire. There are now estimated to be 90,000 internally displaced persons, to whom humanitarian support was reportedly restricted. There is also evidence that, unfortunately, those fleeing Kachin and seeking asylum in China have been turned back, adding to the humanitarian crisis. As has been mentioned, the UK has contributed £3.5 million in humanitarian aid to people affected by the Kachin conflict. Is the Minister confident that assistance is reaching those who need it, and can he update us on the humanitarian situation?

Amnesty International has received claims of extrajudicial executions, torture, arbitrary detention, forced labour and sexual violence, and concerns about the involvement of elements of the Burmese army.

What investigations have the Government made into the actions of the armed forces in Kachin. What representations has the Minister made in support of justice for the Kachin civilians?

We support the Government in welcoming the agreement in the past couple of weeks between the Burmese Government and the Kachin Independence Organisation to begin dialogue and to work towards a ceasefire. Does the Minister consider that to be a likely scenario? What assistance can the international community and regional bodies provide to ensure that the talks prove successful.

As mentioned by a number of colleagues, the Foreign Secretary has been rightly commended for his work on tackling sexual violence in conflict. Understandably, there have been calls for Burma to be included in the initiative. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), stated: "Over the summer, the British embassy in Rangoon will be scoping options to expand the initiative to Burma."—[Official Report, 5 June 2013; Vol. 563, c. 1120W.]

Can the Minister assure us today that the urgent need to end the sexual violence and to hold those responsible to account has already been discussed with the Burmese Government? Can he elaborate on how and when the preventing sexual violence initiative could be expanded to Burma, as also discussed by the right hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell)? Furthermore, will the issue be raised at the G8 next week?

In April, the EU Foreign Affairs Council took the decision to lift sanctions, with the exception of the arms embargo. Some have argued that that was premature, and this morning's debate has certainly highlighted that far too many people in Burma are still waiting for sustainable peace and respect for human rights. That is not to say that those things cannot be achieved, but does the Minister agree that the EU's decision to lift sanctions must place an even greater obligation on Burma to comply with international law? Will he assure us that the UK, bilaterally and through the EU, will use the lifting of sanctions to press for more concerted action on human rights? What discussions have the Government had with the authorities in Burma since the sanctions were lifted, and what expectations have been set out? Answers to those questions will enable Burma to move on and start to build the democratic, peaceful and prosperous society that its long-suffering people richly deserve.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mark Simmonds): I am pleased to see you in the Chair this morning, Mr Hood, and I am delighted to be under your guidance.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this important debate, and on the articulate and passionate way in which she put her case. She is absolutely right to highlight the concerns about human rights, sexual violence, displaced people and other ethnic violence, as well as the humanitarian concerns that she articulated. Many other hon. Members made a significant number of points, which, unfortunately, I will not have time to address in their totality this morning, although I will try to deal with the particular points made in the debate. If I do not have time to respond to all of them, I or the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), will of course be happy to do so in writing after the debate.

I must first reiterate a point that the right hon. Member for Warley (Mr Spellar) and other hon. Members have made. There has been progress in Burma in the last two years. Hundreds of political prisoners have been released, most notably Aung San Suu Kyi, who now sits in the Burmese Parliament building alliances and working to strengthen the process of reform. There has been a general relaxation of the crippling censorship and onerous infringements of freedom of expression that once characterised Burma. Civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, unions and individuals are freer to organise and to act. The international community—Governments, NGOs and others—deserve praise for their significant pressure on successive Burmese Governments, which has led to the improvements of the past two years. However, that does not mean that there are not significant issues that need to be addressed, as we have heard this morning, and that progress is not still a long and difficult road ahead.

It is right to acknowledge the strides that have been made in Burma since President Thein Sein took office, and it is also right to continue to express our concerns and to take action. Human rights and ethnic reconciliation remain at the heart of UK policy and our discussions with the Burmese Government. I assure hon. Members that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International

Development are significantly engaged at senior ministerial level with Burma. The Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, was the first EU Minister to visit Rakhine last year. He visited five camps for people displaced by the violence and heard for himself the terrible stories that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) outlined in her articulate contribution. He also heard the stories of loss and abuse. He raised at all levels in the Burmese Government the need for a co-ordinated humanitarian response, accountability and security. That has been followed up by the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development.

I want to take the opportunity to address head-on the point made by hon. Members about European Union sanctions. As the right hon. Member for Warley rightly said, the arms embargo has not been lifted. Its purpose, which was agreed in the EU, was to deepen engagement and to encourage reformists. It was also agreed and suggested by Aung San Suu Kyi, although she has said that it “is time we let these sanctions go...we can’t go on relying on sanctions forever to aid the democracy movement.”

I assure hon. Members that human rights will be at the centre of UK and EU policy on Burma. EU Foreign Ministers have agreed a comprehensive framework that sets out how we will work with the Burmese Government and apply pressure on them to address the many challenges that Burma still faces.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell) made a key point about the importance of humanitarian aid and the alleviation of suffering in parts of Burma. It is not just about those who are suffering from being internally displaced, although that is of course a pressing concern. The UN is building temporary shelters for 24,000 people, but 40,000 more remain vulnerable to flooding, a point that hon. Members rightly made. We must continue to do more. Significant work has been done and continues to be done, but I want to ensure that hon. Members understand that we do not pass UK taxpayers’ money through Burmese Government mechanisms; we do so through the NGO community, most if not all of which does sterling and excellent work on the ground.

We are a leading donor to Burma and in the past few years no country has given more humanitarian aid to the Burmese people than the UK. Our commitment to aid for Burma is £187 million over four years until 2015. If hon. Members are interested, I will be happy to provide details of the geographical breakdown of where that money is being spent. It is focused on health care, responsible investment, good governance, improving livelihoods, strengthening the work of Parliament and civil society, and, importantly, assisting people affected by conflict with a focus on ethnic reconciliation.

Britain also has a package of emergency measures. Nearly 80,000 people will be able to access safe drinking water and improved sanitation facilities. Acutely malnourished children will receive treatment in the rural camps to which some hon. Members referred, and hygiene kits will be available for 40,000 people. There is significant co-ordination and co-operation between the FCO and DFID to ensure that we maximise the impact on the ground of UK taxpayers’ money.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove referred to the relationship between the UK and Burmese militaries. At the request of Aung San Suu Kyi during her meeting with the Prime Minister last year, we have an accredited defence attaché in Burma. She specifically recommended that appointment as a key channel for engagement with the Burmese military. As my right hon. Friend said, the Chief of the Defence Staff visited Burma from 2 to 4 June as the next stage of our engagement. I assure my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members that the focus of that engagement will be on adherence to the core principles of democratic accountability and human rights. There must be accountability for those who took part and organised last year’s violence. The process of justice must be in accordance with the rule of law and should adhere to international standards. Accountability is important in its own right and underpins the process of reconciliation between the Rohingya and Rakhine communities.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East made an essential point related to the recent report from Human Rights Watch—the UN special rapporteur raised similar concerns in his report in February. I reiterate the point that she rightly articulated: the report contains disturbing and specific allegations, backed up by evidence. We will follow up those allegations directly with the Burmese Government. If serious crimes have been committed, those who perpetrated them must be held to account for their specific actions. That should be done through a clear and transparent investigative and prosecution process that meets

international standards. Further investigative work must fully establish the facts that will be required for an informed assessment of whether ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed. The Government are looking carefully and seriously at the contents of those reports.

Some hon. Members referred to the two-child policy. I want to put on record the fact that a presidential spokesman in Burma said on 2 June that the central Government did not announce the Rohingya two-child policy and that it would be looked into. I am happy to keep the House informed as the matter develops. Finally, I want to address a point that several hon. Members made about the initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. There is support for the initiative throughout the House, and significant progress has been made in engaging the international community, including the G8 Foreign Ministers' meeting in London in April. Sadly, Burma is not the only place that suffers from terrible and unacceptable levels of sexual violence. Somalia, Mali, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and Syria are but a few examples. As the right hon. Member for Warley pointed out, during the summer the British embassy in Rangoon will scope options for increasing UK engagement and embedding the initiative to tackle sexual violence in Burma. Wherever it occurs, whether in conflict or elsewhere, sexual violence is completely unacceptable, and the impunity that has existed for too long must be stopped.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) rightly raised the issues in Kachin state. Although significant challenges remain, there has been progress recently, which we should encourage. With its expertise in Northern Ireland, the UK is playing a positive role.

In conclusion, the UK will remain a constructive, supportive and critical partner for Burma, committed to supporting reform efforts to ensure that the Burmese people, wherever they live in Burma, can live in peace and harmony, for the betterment of themselves and their families.

PRESS RELEASE: Rushanara Ali MP calls on the UK Government to exert pressure on Burma to end discrimination against the Rohingya and find an urgent resolution to their citizenship status

17 June 2013

For Immediate Release

Following her recent visit to Rakhine State with Refugees International, Rushanara Ali MP, Shadow Minister for International Development, spoke in a Westminster Hall debate to call for an end to the discrimination against the Rohingya community in Burma and an urgent resolution to their citizenship status.

The humanitarian situation

Since inter-communal violence broke out a year ago in Rakhine State, Rohingya Muslims have been forced into segregated settlements, completely unsuitable for displacement camps, and many have been cut off from lifesaving aid. Rushanara said that the humanitarian situation she witnessed was dire with tens of thousands of people living in makeshift camps lacking food, water, sanitation, adequate shelter and access to healthcare. She said:

“One camp I visited, in Pauk Taw township, was accessible only by means of a two-hour boat journey. Non-governmental organisations had to bring drinking water in on boats, and primary health care was provided just one morning a week. The shores adjacent to the camp were covered in faeces, and dead rats floated in the water just metres from children who were bathing to keep cool in the scorching heat.”

“I heard stories of many people—particularly women—dying unnecessarily because of the lack of health care. That experience—observing hospitals turning people away in life-and-death situations because of their ethnicity and the fact that they are not recognised—echoed, to me, apartheid. I do not use that term lightly. Being forced into camps and not allowed out is the equivalent of being a prisoner in one's own country.”

Citizenship rights and human rights violations

At the heart of this humanitarian crisis lies the question of citizenship. The Rohingya have been described by the United Nations as “one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.” Rushanara condemned the discriminatory orders against the Rohingya, including a directive placing a two-child limit on Rohingya couples and restrictions on their movements, cutting them off from their livelihoods and rendering them

reliant on aid. She said:

“When I visited camps, where malnutrition rates are dangerously near emergency levels and where people are forced to live in segregated areas cut off from their livelihoods and are struggling to survive, I did not expect citizenship and identity to top the list of issues that people wanted to talk about. However, every group of Rohingya men and women, including children, to whom I spoke told me that their priority was recognition of their Rohingya identity and the restoration of their Burmese citizenship rights, which were taken away from them in the 1980s.”

“Many Rohingyas were keen to insist that ethnic Rohingya Muslims had been in Burma for centuries, yet the national and state Governments deny them their Burmese citizenship and their ethnic Rohingya identity, instead claiming that they are “Kala,” a racist derogatory term, or Bengali migrants from Bangladesh. One woman lost her entire family—I met a group of women, many of whom had similar stories—and she told me, “If, after having lost everything, including my whole family, because we are Rohingya Muslims, the Government still don’t recognise me as Rohingya in my own country, then I might as well be dead.”

Following the lifting of EU sanctions she called on the Government to use what leverage remained to exert influence on the Burmese authorities to prevent human rights violations.

Rushanara also called on the UK Government to:

- Press the Burmese authorities to facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access to Rakhine State and other parts of Burma.
- Improve conditions for displaced people, particularly in flood prone areas, and address shelter needs as a matter of urgency.
- Exert pressure on the Burmese authorities to restore the Rohingya’s Burmese citizenship status as a matter of urgency.
- Encourage the Burmese authorities to support a safe and voluntary return process for Rohingya with adequate protection.
- In light of Human Rights Watch’s recent report ‘All we can do is pray’ which concluded that crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing were being committed towards Burma’s Rohingya Muslims, she called on the UK Government to exert pressure on our international partners for an international inquiry into the events of June and October 2012 and March 2013.

A full transcript of the debate can be found here:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm130612/halltext/130612h0001.htm>

ENDS

Notes to Editor: If you require further information please contact Rushanara Ali MP’s office on 0207 219 7200 or email rushanara.ali.mp@parliament.uk

Rushanara Ali MP
Member of Parliament for Bethnal Green and Bow
Shadow Minister for International Development

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

On 25th June 2013, APPG Burma organised a meeting with a senior delegation of Burma’s ‘88 Generation’ as part of their historic visit to the UK.

The delegation, many of which are former political prisoners, included some of Burma’s most senior political activists. They were in London as part of a visit organised by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and British Council. Their programme focused on enhancing their knowledge of UK parliamentary system and the work of political parties in a democracy.

That was a key opportunity for the Burmese delegation meeting with MPs and Peers from across the political spectrum to learn about the UK’s parliamentary system.

On 26th June 2013, APPG Burma organised a meeting with Child Soldiers International.

On the eve of the one-year-anniversary of the signing of the Joint Action Plan by the UN and the government of Burma, Charu Lata Hogg, Asia Program Manager with Child Soldiers International, discussed a summary of Child Soldiers International's research on the situation of underage recruitment in Burma and a range of recommendations to the international community to take steps to definitively end underage recruitment in the country.

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

ROHINGYA MUSLIM PERSECUTION IN MYANMAR

Date tabled: 20.05.2013

That this House notes that the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar is not only continuing but sectarian violence is getting worse; further notes that a boat carrying well over 100 Rohingya Muslims fleeing a cyclone capsized on 14 May with many drowned; further notes that the Myanmar President Thein Sein has been invited to Washington to meet President Obama as part of the normalisation of relations with western countries; deplores the continued persecution of the Rohingya Muslims; and calls on the Government to take all necessary measures to get the Myanmar government to act to protect the Rohingya Muslims from sectarian persecution and violence.

Total Signatures: 14

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