



# LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

JUNE  
2014

## ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

### *Global Summit on Sexual Violence*

**9 June 2014 Kerry McCarthy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which women's organisations from Burma have been invited to the global summit on sexual violence in conflict being held in London in June 2014.

**Mr Swire:** Women's organisation representatives from the Karen Women's Action Group, the Gender Equality Network and the Women's League of Burma have all been invited and are attending the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict. In addition, faith leaders and other civil society activists are attending as part of a Burmese civil society delegation. I will be hosting this delegation in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 10 June.

### *Rape and sexual violence*

**19 June 2014 Caroline Lucas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the issue of rape and sexual violence by the Burmese Army was raised with the Burmese colonel who received training in the UK from 10 March to April 2014; and if he will make a statement.

**Mr Swire:** The Managing Defence in a Wider Security Context course, delivered in the UK by the Defence Academy, was attended by participants from over 20 countries; one of these was a colonel from the Burmese military. The course is designed for countries making the difficult transition to democracy in a variety of contexts. Specific issues of concern relating to individual countries are therefore not raised during the course. I, however, raised the issue of rape and sexual violence with the Burmese Army's Commander-in-Chief and northern Commander during my visit to Burma in January. I welcome Burma's endorsement of the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict on 5 June; we stand ready to provide any support necessary to assist implementation of the declaration.

**25 June 2014 Valerie Vaz:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on sexual assault of ethnic Chin women and children from Burma in New Delhi, India; and if he will make a statement.

**Mr Swire:** We are aware of such reports. We are committed to working with the new Indian Government and international partners to address the problem of gender-based violence, human trafficking and child exploitation in India. Through the Department for International Development's (DFID) programmes, we support measures in India's 120 poorest districts to promote the empowerment and access to benefits and services of excluded and vulnerable groups. Through DFID, we also provide support to national and state authorities in India helping girls to complete basic education and further tackling violence against women and girls.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), invited the Indian Government to attend the recent global summit to end sexual violence in conflict and has already discussed the initiative with the new Indian Foreign Minister. The Indian high commissioner to the UK attended the summit.

## **Child Soldiers**

**10 June 2014 Alex Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what support his Department is giving to the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict for the campaign to eradicate the recruitment of children by government armed forces by 2016.

**Mark Simmonds:** The Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides funding of £150,000 over three years (January 2013–December 2015) to the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Children and Armed Conflict. These funds strengthen the UN SRSG's capacity to monitor violations committed against children in situations of concern, in line with UNSC Resolutions 1612, 1882, 1998 on children and armed conflict and including countries covered by the UN SRSG's campaign, such as Burma and South Sudan.

Children and Armed Conflict is an important personal priority. I am leading a campaign to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers and to protect children from becoming victims of sexual violence in five priority countries: Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, Chad and Burma. I have raised the issue with a number of leaders, including most recently with the Somali President during a visit in April.

The UN SRSG will take part in the End Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit, from 10-13 June in London, where she will join a Ministerial roundtable that I am hosting on Children and Armed Conflict.

**30 June 2014 Mr Gregory Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions he has raised the issues of child soldiering and progress on tackling it with his counterparts in other countries in the last two years.

**Mark Simmonds:** Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) is an important personal priority. I am leading a campaign to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers and to protect children from becoming victims of sexual violence in five priority countries: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, South Sudan, Chad and Burma. Over the last two years, I have raised this issue with counterparts in Chad, Sierra Leone and DRC, as well as most recently with the Somali President and the Minister of the Interior in South Sudan during visits in April this year. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), also discussed the issue during a visit to Burma in January. During the recent End Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit, I hosted a ministerial roundtable on CAAC attended by UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for CAAC. Ministers from Sierra Leone, DRC and Somalia underlined their commitment to ending the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

## **Rohingya**

**19 June 2014 Caroline Lucas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of whether precursors of genocide exist in Burma for the Rohingya; and if he will make a statement.

**Mr Swire:** It is the policy of the British Government that any judgment on whether genocide has occurred is a matter for international judicial decision, rather than for governments or non-judicial bodies. Our approach is to seek an end to all violations, and to prevent their further escalation, irrespective of whether these violations fit the definition of specific international crimes. We consistently lobby the Burmese Government for further action to address the humanitarian situation in Rakhine State, to improve security, to deliver accountability and to find a sustainable solution on citizenship. I raised our concerns with the Burmese Government during my visit in January, summoned the Burmese ambassador to press for humanitarian access in April, and discussed the situation with Deputy Foreign Minister U Thant Kyaw again on 13 June.

**24 June 2014 Richard Harrington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent steps he has taken to help the Rohingya peoples in Burma; what recent discussions he has had with the Burmese Government on this issue; and if he will make a statement.

**Mr Swire:** The UK is giving £12 million in aid to Rakhine State to support shelter, water sanitation and hygiene programmes, nutrition and protection activities, as well as non-food items for 115,000 people. We

are also funding £4.5 million towards livelihoods projects in Rakhine and support to the UN's co-ordination of the international humanitarian response.

We remain one of the most vocal and active members of the international community in supporting those calling for human rights and democracy in Burma. I was the first western Minister to visit Rakhine State in December 2012. I raised concerns again with the Burmese Government during my second visit to Burma in January this year, and I again saw Rohingya leaders to hear from them about the many issues they are facing.

The plight of the Rohingya was also at the top of the agenda during the Prime Minister's meeting with President Thein Sein in London in July 2013. In March this year, I summoned the Burmese ambassador and called on the Burmese Government urgently to restore humanitarian access to all communities in need, and to ensure the security of humanitarian aid workers and all communities in Rakhine State. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), again raised our concerns in a call with his Burmese counterpart in April, and I most recently discussed the situation with the Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister on 12 June.

We will continue to urge the Burmese Government to take swift and decisive action to protect the lives and rights of Rohingya and other minorities in Rakhine State, and to address the underlying causes of ethnic and religious discrimination and violence.

## **Census**

**19 June 2014 Lord Steel of Aikwood:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of the conduct of the recent census in Burma.

**The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con):** The UK (through the Department for International Development) joined an international effort to provide funding to the census in 2014 because it will be a critical step in the country's development process, underpinning better planning and delivery of vital services and infrastructure, such as schools, roads and hospitals.

The UK, UN and other international donors argued strongly for the right of all people to be enumerated fairly and to be able, where necessary, to self-identify their ethnicity in the census. In most areas where the census was conducted, self-identification was permitted. We were deeply disappointed that, in the case of the Rohingya, the Burmese government contravened its long-standing assurance that all individuals would have the right to self-identify their ethnic origin. We have been clear that this decision is contrary to international norms and standards on census conduct. The Minister of State, my Rt. Hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), summoned the Burmese Ambassador on 7 April to make these concerns clear.

Reports from independent international observers of the census suggest that, with the exception of Rakhine and parts of Kachin state, the enumeration process appears to have been largely carried out effectively. We continue to closely monitor the process.

**26 June 2014 Naomi Long:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of whether there is a causal link between the census in Burma and the violence currently taking place in that country;

(2) what assessment he has made of the conduct of the current census in Burma and the extent to which this has been affected by recent violence and rising ethnic tensions.

**Mr Swire:** Reports from independent international observers of the census suggest that, with the exception of Rakhine State and parts of Kachin State, the enumeration process appears to have been largely carried out effectively. We continue to monitor the process closely. There has not been a census in Burma for 30 years, and this census will provide a vital source of data to inform better government service delivery. We are concerned by reports of the census being used as a pretext for one incident of localised violence in Kachin State. However, we do not believe that there is a link between the census and recent violence

elsewhere in Kachin. Conflict in Kachin State has been ongoing for almost three years, and the challenges of census data collection in the area reflected the continued lack of trust on the ground. We continue to support strongly government and ethnic group efforts to reach a sustainable peace, through a ceasefire and political dialogue that can help bring an end to human rights abuses in ceasefire areas.

Similarly our assessment is that recent violence in Rakhine has been caused by underlying intercommunal tensions that have previously led to violence there. We were deeply disappointed that, in the case of the Rohingya, the Burmese Government contravened its long-standing assurance that all individuals would have the right to self-identify their ethnic origin in the census. We have been clear that this decision is contrary to international norms and standards on census conduct. I summoned the Burmese ambassador to make these points.

## **Zaw Pe**

**17 June 2014 Baroness Nye:** To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the British Ambassador to Burma has raised the jailing of Zaw Pe with the government of Burma.

**The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con):** Our Ambassador has discussed the case of Zaw Pe, and those of other arrested journalists, with Deputy Minister of Information Ye Htut. The cases of Zaw Pe and many other individuals were also raised during the first EU-Burma Human Rights Dialogue in May.

## **International aid**

**18 June 2014 Baroness Nye:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what is the total amount of international aid to Burma and what percentage is provided by them.

**Baroness Northover:** DFID publishes aid statistics each year on the gov.uk website as 'Statistics on International Development' (SID). The most recent set of data for which we can compare UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) with the total of bilateral ODA provided by OECD Development Assistance Committee countries to Burma is from 2010, when the overall total was £161 million. The UK provided around 18% of this total.

**30 June 2014 Mr Ward:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of UK aid to Burma is channelled through Burmese government-approved organisations or mechanisms.

**Mr Duncan:** The UK does not provide funding directly to the Burmese Government. We publish details of which organisations receive DFID funding, and how much they have received, on the [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) - Development Tracker.

## **Elections 2015**

**25 June 2014 Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth:** To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they have made any representations to the government of Burma regarding that country's presidential elections; and if so, what representations.

**The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con):** As set out in the public document "UK Activities in Burma", published in April 2014 (available on our website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-activities-in-burma>), the foremost Government priority is to encourage and support Burma to become a more effectively governed and democratic state, holding credible elections in 2015. Ministers and our Ambassador in Rangoon regularly discuss with the Burmese government the prospects for meaningful constitutional change which will enable the 2015 parliamentary elections to reflect the views of the Burmese people, including their choice of president. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), raised Burma's progress towards democratisation with the Burmese Foreign Minister on 28 April. The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), most recently discussed these issues with the Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister on 12 June, and our Ambassador discussed the elections with Minister of the President's Office, U Soe Thane, on 17 June.

## **Chemical Plant**

**25 June 2014 Valerie Vaz:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make an assessment of the accuracy of the report of 9 May 2014 by the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies that a military factory in Pauk Township of the central Magwe Division, Burma, has some features that are consistent with a chemical plant. [201667]

**Mr Swire:** The James Martin Centre report states that it is not possible to determine the nature of the facility in question. We are unable to make any further assessments at this stage.

We have made a concerted effort to encourage Burma to ratify their Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). I raised this most recently with Deputy Foreign Minister U That Kyaw on 12 June. We are working with the OPCW to offer practical support, and the UK National Authority to the CWC has offered to host a Burmese delegation later this year.

## **DEBATES**

### ***Westminster Hall Debate – Burma (Persecution of Minorities)***

**25 June 2014 Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD):** It is good to appear before you today, Mr Howarth. I thank the Minister for also appearing today. His portfolio covers many difficult issues, not least of which is the one we are discussing today. I do appreciate that. I also thank other hon. Members who have been involved in raising this issue. I have spoken to some of them this morning. They are genuinely interested in the issue and concerned and have previously initiated various debates in their own right, which gives an indication of their support for raising the issue, but they could not be here today.

Let me explain why I continue to want to raise this issue. The little secret is that seven or eight years ago, I had to google “Rohingya” to find out what the group was and what its background and history was. That arose when I was approached as a Bradford councillor, which I was then, through a housing association that had been contracted to provide accommodation and support to a group of Rohingya who were coming or wanted to come to Bradford through the Gateway programme, and we did provide a lot of support. There are certainly no votes in this, but there is now an important group of people, whom I consider to be Bradfordians and constituents, who regularly raise with me appalling stories of what is happening. The new arrivals originally came from Bangladesh. We campaigned hard on some of the issues faced by the Rohingyas in the camps in Bangladesh, but obviously in the last few years a new issue has emerged in the public’s awareness—the issue was not new in itself, but it was new in terms of public awareness. I refer to the activities that were taking place in Burma or Myanmar, and those are the ones that I want to talk about today.

The UN special rapporteur, Mr Quintana, produced a report back in April, and I will need to quote from it at some length, because this is someone who knows the issues. He has been to Burma many times—nine times, I think—and has visited some of the most difficult areas in Kachin and Rakhine. He reported back a sombre tale of his time in Myanmar.

The good news, at the beginning of Mr Quintana’s report, was about the release of many prisoners of conscience—more than 1,000—but some of his other comments make pretty worrying reading. In particular, he raised the ongoing issue in Burma of human rights. Despite the release of political prisoners and other reforms that are taking place, he had to conclude that he saw “no improvements in the human rights situation.”

Indeed, he believed that the situation was getting worse, from what was “an already dire state.” He found that the practice of separating or segregating communities “continues to have a severe impact on the Muslim populations in Rakhine...and in particular the Rohingya community.”

The discriminatory and really quite strict restrictions on freedom of movement for Muslim populations remain in place, as the Minister is well aware. Mr Quintana concluded that part of the report by saying that that continues to affect “a range of other human rights including” - sadly - “the right to life.”

So serious are some of the issues that Mr Quintana identified and experienced that he went on to conclude that the extrajudicial killings, rapes and other forms of sexual violence -

**David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He will be aware that since 2011 the Christian community in Burma has been persecuted dramatically, with 64 women and girls raped, 66 churches destroyed, 200 villages burnt down and more than 100,000 people displaced. Right up to 2013, there were gang rapes, as he has mentioned. Surely more pressure should be brought to bear on the Burmese Government to stop this horrendous activity.

**Mr Ward:** That is absolutely right. The fact that many of my comments, because of issues raised by my constituents, refer to the Muslim Rohingya in no way minimises the atrocities that are committed against other groups as well.

These issues are very serious. I started to mention some of them. Others include the lack of due process, fair trials and rights; forcible transfers; and the deprivation of liberty for so many people. These are not isolated incidents; they are happening on a large scale and are directed, in many cases, against the Rohingya population. So serious is the situation that the special rapporteur concluded that they amount to “systematic human rights violations”. They are so serious that they should be referred to the International Criminal Court as crimes against humanity. They are crimes against humanity as defined under the Rome statute and need to be elevated to that level in the public consciousness. We are talking about the worst of the worst.

I know that the Minister is aware of the report, and other hon. Members may want to pick out specific points, but it contains a whole series of recommendations, many of which the British Government could contribute to. I will come to specific actions that I and others believe the Government could and should take. More recently—again, the Minister will be aware of this—there has been a report back to the United Nations by the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Ms Kyung-wha Kang. If anyone has not seen the video of the interview and questioning that took place, I recommend that they watch it. The report back to the UN was made only two weeks ago—I think it was 17 or 18 June; it was very recently. She points out that this is the second anniversary of the inter-communal violence in Rakhine and the third anniversary of the terrible conflict in Kachin.

The UN Assistant Secretary-General found that there were severe issues in providing access to international humanitarian aid. It is restricted, although in different ways, in the two states to which I have referred. In Kachin, there are up to 100,000—the point about the scale of this has already been made—displaced people in camps. Half are in Government camps, where some aid, of a limited nature, is possible and available. However, half are in IDP—internally displaced people—camps, which are under independent army control and where access is simply unobtainable.

The level of suffering is indicated in the comments of the UN assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, who said that in Rakhine she witnessed “a level of human suffering in IDP camps that I have personally never seen before”.

Men, women and children are living in appalling conditions, with severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, in camps and isolated villages. In Rakhine, there are estimated to be 140,000 displaced people, 90% of whom are Muslims, although there are some of other faiths. The problems are made worse by the fact that Rakhine is the poorest state in Myanmar. We can take it as a common state of existence that there is no electricity, no schools, no toilet facilities and no freedom of movement. Many people have been living in those conditions for years, although such accommodation—if we can call it accommodation—was supposed to be temporary.

In theory, humanitarian aid can be provided in those areas, but in practice it is much more difficult for a whole host of reasons. The first of those is travel; the Minister, who has visited the area, will know far more about that than I do. The UN assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs pointed out that a two-hour boat ride was required to reach one of the camps, let alone to transport any aid. There are also administrative barriers to obtaining authorisation. Often, the local community are at best distrustful and at worst hostile towards aid workers, whom they believe favour the Muslim community. We are talking about people who are in desperate straits. Humanitarian aid workers, who are incredible human beings who risk

their own safety and put their lives at risk, are treated with hostility because they are thought to favour a particular group.

The real concern, as the Minister knows, is the continued statelessness of the Rohingya, on which there seems to be very little progress. It is telling that Ms Kang was advised not to refer to the Rohingya as Rohingya, because to do so would be controversial and might trigger tension, which might provoke a violent reaction. Considering the awful past in Burma, it appears that relationships with other states, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have improved—although they could not really have been much worse. Notwithstanding Ms Kang's comments about the negative aspects of the situation, to which I have referred to, she pointed out that huge strides had been made in political and economic reform, but little progress seems to have been made on the question of the Rohingya in Rakhine. She echoed Mr Quintana's comments about the need for a change in culture. Pressure is being applied for constitutional change, but a fundamental reconciliation and a change in culture are the most important things. What is the point of a constitutional change if it is not supported by a change in attitude and culture in the region?

There are some points that I would like the Minister to respond to. Ms Kang refers in her statement to the Government action plan on Rakhine. Does the Minister know anything about that, and what progress is being made on it? There is also an opinion—I would like to know whether the Minister is aware of it—that the UK Government's criticism of the Myanmar Government is muted because foreign Governments do not want to disrupt the progress being made and are therefore taking a softly, softly approach. We want reforms to continue, but that cannot happen at the cost of providing much-needed support for the Rohingya. Defending the Rohingya cannot be seen as contrary to a desire to support changes and reform in the country.

There is also a view that the reforms to date have simply been a smokescreen—that the President is carrying out limited reforms with a view to trying to get the international community to remove or reduce sanctions. As I understand it, some sanctions have been removed, so the strategy is working. It does not seem to be of any benefit to the Rohingya, however. I am grateful to the Burma Campaign UK, which has supplied me and other Members with briefing material over the last several months. The campaign has raised some specific concerns, to which I would like the Minister to respond. One is the census in Burma, to which the UK contributed £10 million. As the Minister knows, however, the promise that the Rohingya would be allowed to register as Rohingya was not kept. That is a broken promise. There is also a view that the Minister was somewhat snubbed and was banned from making a planned speech at Rangoon university; I do not know whether that is true. In addition, within hours of his visiting Kachin state and calling for peace, the Burmese army attacked two civilian villages.

There is also the issue of the limitations being placed on the numbers of children that Muslims can have and the restrictions on non-Buddhist men that prevent them from marrying Buddhist women. I find the whole question of the Buddhist faith difficult, and it is not something I have a great deal of knowledge about. Some time ago, however, I saw a BBC report—I think it was—of a Buddhist monk who was justifying the slaughter of children. When he was asked how he could possibly justify that and be a Buddhist, his response was: "It's a bit like weeding a garden: if you want to get rid of the weeds, you have to get right down to the roots." The killing of children was therefore justified on the basis of destroying the roots of a plant to prevent it from growing and becoming a problem later. It was sickening and appalling, and if that is Buddhism, I have a completely wrong perception of what that religion is.

There is also the question of political prisoners. More than 1,000 political prisoners of conscience have been released, but I understand that the number of political prisoners is increasing again. The number of people being held has doubled this year. Many prisoners were released with the intention of removing sanctions, but we now have another escalation in the persecution of political prisoners. I do not know the details of the Andy Hall case, and I do not know whether the Minister has any comments. Does he know of that case? If Andy Hall is convicted, he could face many years in prison, but I am not too aware of the case. The other issue is military training, which I and others have raised in parliamentary questions. Military training, like many of the other things to which I have referred, could have been used as a lever to try to bring about improvements, particularly for the Rohingya.

**David Simpson:** I have seen research showing that young Christian adults and teenagers have been threatened with conscription to the army if they do not give up their faith. They are told to shave their head,

as the Buddhists do. If not for charities such as Barnabas and others, which provide shoes and clothing to Christians in Burma, they would be in a very bad state.

**Mr Ward:** That echoes the familiar pattern that emerges. Burma is almost like two nations. Good news stories continually come out about the progress that is being made, and on the other side there are horrendous atrocities and abysmal behaviour towards large sections of the ethnic minority communities. It is almost like two parallel worlds that exist alongside each other. I can understand why we want to encourage one side to improve and become part of the international community and—if we want to be cynical—to develop trade. We know the benefits of international trade and how it can bring about political reform, but what about the other side? What about the daily reports of behaviour that would be unacceptable in any other part of the world?

Burma Campaign UK has produced eight steps that it believes the British Government could take to improve human rights in Burma. First, the Government should put human rights—not trade or political reform, but human rights—at the top of the agenda, elevating human rights as the Government's policy priority in Burma. Secondly, the Government should support an international investigation into human rights violations against the Rohingya. We hear about various internal investigations, but an international investigation is required into what the UN special rapporteur believes to be crimes against humanity.

Thirdly, the Government need to consider the use of aid as a lever. I believe that twice as much aid— £20 million—is spent on building Government capacity and moving towards democracy than is spent on helping civil society and relations between the different ethnic groups across Burma. Is that the right balance? As I said earlier, there seems to be a view that if we can bring about political reform and constitutional change, everything else will follow. That view is contested by those who believe that cultural change is required as well as constitutional change.

Burma Campaign UK also calls for a global summit on countering hate speech. The Minister may want to say something about that, as it has been well documented. Hate speech is becoming a severe problem, and such a summit should not be a talking shop, but should lead to a clear action plan with significant—it would have to be significant—international funding and technical expertise provided to address hate speech. Further, the campaign recommends that the UK Government should make any future training of the Burmese military conditional on the ending of Burma's tactics in ethnic states. There is clearly a lot for which the Burmese Government are either responsible or to which they turn a blind eye.

Burma Campaign UK also recommends that the UK Government should support the establishment of an international investigation into rape and sexual violence in Burma, which has continued unabated since Thein Sein became President. No steps seem to have been taken and impunity seems to be a major problem. Human rights violations are committed on a regular basis, with impunity for the perpetrators. The campaign calls for support for an internal, cross-departmental investigation into the decision to fund the census. Again, was that another lost opportunity to provide something that would lever the changes we seek? Finally, the campaign supports a new independent review mechanism for political prisoners in Burma. We welcome the number of prisoners who were released, but it seems that, after the international acclaim and praise for those actions, the Burmese Government simply reverted back to their old ways. The review mechanism has to be lifted out of the internal investigations and appraisals within Burma and be done by the international community.

There are quite a few things there, and I hope others want to contribute, but the main message that I bring to the debate is the frustration felt by everyone who understands the issues, particularly those from within the Rohingya community, which I now know very well. The Rohingya community has fitted into our own community, but it feels totally powerless about what is happening so far away. The Rohingya community believes that its cause is not forgotten, but is not considered a top priority compared with other important international diplomatic measures.

**Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. Does he agree that some of the Rohingya in Burma have not even been counted in the census?

**Mr Ward:** I thank the hon. Lady for that question. The census was supported by UK funding, but the Rohingya are not only not counted, but are not allowed to describe themselves as Rohingya, so we are not



aware of the scale of the problem. We can only conclude that the problem is greater than is publicly known. That, among many others, is an issue that I hope the Minister will address.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate and to see the Minister back in his usual spot; as always, we look forward to a very good response from him. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) on securing the debate and giving us this opportunity to participate. In this House, we are charged with the responsibility of looking after our constituents—in my case, the constituents of Strangford. But the people of Strangford, along with all the other constituents across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, have an interest in what happens in the rest of the world. They are interested in what happens to ethnic minorities. They are also interested in those who are being persecuted for their faith, and I would like to comment on that.

The topic of this debate is the situation in Burma and the persecution of the Rohingya and other minorities. I will comment on the Rohingya minority and how they are being persecuted for their faith, and also talk about those who are persecuted because of their Christian faith, which is equally important.

It is very sad that we should again be discussing tragedies in Burma, which concern Members here, those who would have liked to be here and those who have raised the issue in Adjournment debates both in the main Chamber and here in Westminster Hall. Burma, as we all know, is a troubled region with a troubled past.

We become aware of that when we read the history and observe what has happened. Decades of military dictatorships have wreaked havoc in the country, and ethnic people, especially those in resource-rich areas and areas of armed conflict, have paid the highest price—with their lives, both in deaths and in injuries. In the past 13 years, more than 3,500 ethnic villages have been destroyed in Burma.

I am conscious of the background information. In particular, I take note of the comments made by United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Kyung-wha Kang. She said that the level of suffering that she saw in Arakan was something she has never seen before anywhere in the world. That puts into context the issue before us. Such devastation and malice are incomprehensible.

The UN listed the crimes by the state of Burma as including forced relocation, forced labour and sexual violence, which both the hon. Member for Bradford East and my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) mentioned. The calculated rape and murder of women and young girls are completely unacceptable. That they are being carried out by the Burmese army on some occasions is even more incomprehensible, and that underlines the need to do something about it.

We saw extrajudicial killings, torture and the recruitment of child soldiers on our television screens last week—not in Burma, but in Iraq, where children as young as 10 were carrying weapons. How can that be? It is happening in Burma as well. All that is bad in a conflict zone has taken place in Burma.

I shall quickly comment on the issue of war crimes. Our background information mentions that a massacre of Rohingya Muslims took place in January this year. I am a Christian, but I believe strongly in freedom of religion for everyone. I believe strongly that those who want to practise other religions should be able to. The massacre of Rohingya Muslims occurred in the northern part of the Rakhine state in that month. Some 48 Rohingya men, women and children were brutally murdered and slain in the village of Du Chee Yar Tan, and they included the local police sergeant. The Government have flatly denied that there have been any killings. Thousands of people have been killed and injured, with between 120,000 and 140,000 displaced. There clearly is an issue, and we cannot close our eyes to what is happening around us.

For those people in Rakhine state and the north of Burma, I put this point: what is happening in Burma that we as a Government can respond to? I have every faith in the Minister; I genuinely mean that. I know that when he responds, he will do so with research and compassion.

**David Simpson:** My hon. Friend may be aware that recently—I think on 27 or 28 May—a draft religious conversion Bill was introduced in Burma. Anyone who wants to marry in or convert to another faith, or marry inter-faith, would have to ask for permission through some specially set-up local authority. That is an absolute nonsense, but it is how people are being treated over there. Any violator of the legislation could, I

understand, receive at least a two-year sentence in Burmese prisons.

**Jim Shannon:** My hon. Friend is right. How wrong can it be? We are confronted on many occasions with examples where human rights and the freedoms of expression and religion are denied to people. The Government there are apt to introduce legislation that restricts those rights. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to the attention of the House; I was going to comment on that further on in my speech. Speaking of such crimes, the website Burma Partnership says that documentation “demonstrates that attacks on civilian populations are not isolated, but are widespread and systematic tactics of the regime”—that is, the Government—“used to secure their economic and political control. As such, they constitute not only human rights violations, but are crimes against humanity and war crimes.”

When we talk about war crimes, we are talking about something that needs accountability for those involved. It is time that those who think that they can carry out, in their own countries, crimes that are unspeakably brutal, violent and evil know that a day of reckoning is coming in this world.

**Valerie Vaz:** Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, even earlier this year, a priest was murdered in Kachin state, and that a 17-year-old girl was raped? While on the face of it, things look as though they are going well, there are still people who are arrested arbitrarily.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady. I will comment on that particular incident, which clearly illustrates what we need to address. Burma Partnership continues: “And yet, the military regime has not been held accountable for these acts; impunity prevails in Burma.” In other words, people do it and get away with it, if they are a part of the Government. There is no accountability.

I would like to know clearly from the Minister what discussions have taken place and what the response has been from the Government. Is there accountability in this process? If not, we have to find ways to make them accountable. Why has the military regime in Burma not been held accountable for such acts? What pressure, if any, have the British Government put on Burma so that it desists and takes action to stop those acts?

It has always been known that Burma was religiously intolerant, but that is becoming clearer as an increasing number of stories about the treatment of the Rohingya emerge. The UN believes that, since mid-2012, when sectarian violence broke out, more than 86,000 Rohingya have attempted to flee Burma to neighbouring countries. In 2013, 615 people died during the flight for freedom. It is believed that the outbreak of pogroms against the Muslim Rohingya has left around 140,000 people in squalid displacement camps, a point well illustrated by the hon. Member for Bradford East.

What steps have the British Government taken to help and protect the Rohingya? Are we providing aid to Burma’s neighbours to help cater for the influx of asylum seekers? What medical help is available to those in displacement camps? Is there sufficient help for them in relation to housing and temporary accommodation? There is a risk of disease breaking out; that is bound to happen, in confined places. Have we been able to assist? If not, what can we do?

Another issue that has come to our attention is the theft of land. I said at the beginning that there are large veins of minerals in the country. What international economic pressure has been put on Burma? Ordinary, good peasants who own a bit of land are victimised, pushed and discriminated to hand it over. What is happening about that?

On Friday the 20th of this month, the Burmese Government closed the consultation window on its proposed religious conversion law, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann referred a few minutes ago. It would require Buddhist women to seek permission from their parents and the authorities before marrying outside the Buddhist faith. The law states that those people found to be applying for conversion “with the intent of insulting or destroying a religion” can face imprisonment for up to two years. Clearly, this is a human rights and an equality issue, and the Burmese Government must respond to it. This law is a poorly disguised form of religious persecution and it will affect those from all religions who are not Buddhist.

Have the British Government had discussions with the Burmese about this proposed law? What steps have

been taken to ensure that it is not ratified? What pressure are we applying? When it comes to applying pressure, it is not only the Minister who can do it but all the European countries, as well as the US, by acting together. We must combine and use our collective power to influence the Burmese Government.

This issue has been discussed in Parliament before and it has now raised its head again. Would the Government care to give more information about how British taxpayers' money is being spent on training the Burmese army? In introducing the debate, the hon. Member for Bradford East mentioned that subject—the training that the British Army gives the Burmese army. We find out through reports and other information that the Burmese army have subsequently been involved in atrocities—vile, evil, wicked atrocities—against the ethnic groups across Burma. We get annoyed that our Army has trained their army in tactics and that then their army uses those tactics against their own people. There has to be a system whereby we can make the Burmese army accountable for that. Whether such training is for warfare or not, do the British Government intend to continue working alongside this brutal regime?

In her intervention, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) talked about the allegations of systematic war crimes. Burma Campaign UK, a human rights group, has produced a report called, "Rape and Sexual Violence by the Burmese Army". Within the Burmese army, there is clearly a systematic and orchestrated campaign of attacks on women and young girls, such that rape and sexual violence are the norm rather than the exception. This Parliament has taken a strong stance on this issue. Through early-day motions and other contributions, we have urged that more action be taken right across the world to combat such violence.

I will give an example of what has happened in Burma. Since January, there have been fresh allegations of rape against the small number of Christians in the Kachin province; Christians there are being brutally denied their rights, too. The hon. Lady referred to the case of the 17-year-old girl who was raped by two Burmese army soldiers. Again, there is no accountability for that. Such people seem to have immunity from prosecution and from accountability for their actions, and I certainly feel strongly about that.

Christians are one of the other minorities who face severe persecution in Burma. Release International reports that many Christians there still have to engage in forced labour, that huge numbers of them have been removed from their homes, and that rape is used as a weapon of war against minorities. Christians in Burma have had to deal with the Burmese Government's catchphrase, "To be Burmese is to be Buddhist", and Christianity is commonly referred to as the "C-virus". Christians are denied the right to maintain and build places of worship, as my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann said earlier. When they do maintain or build places of worship, the buildings are often burned down. In Karen state, Buddhist propaganda is played during Christian services and Christians in the military or Government are denied promotion. Clearly, we have many concerns about all of that.

In Kachin province, some people practise Christianity; it reflects their language and culture in what is predominantly a Buddhist country. Kachin province is rich in jade and timber, but Christians there have stated that they are fighting for their culture and history. They are also fighting for their lives against a Burmese army focused on trying to destroy them.

The Burmese army broke a 17-year-old ceasefire on 11 June and since then up to 1,000 people have been killed or injured, while another 120,000 people have been displaced from Kachin province. Some have fled to China; others have sought shelter in refugee camps elsewhere throughout the region. Clearly, there are a number of places in Burma where there are abuses of human rights, which affect not only the individuals involved but their families.

The Kachin leader is General Gun Maw, who is also the chief negotiator. He had a meeting in Washington with President Obama. Talks were held, with great hopes for peace, but peace did not materialise. The uncertain peace was broken by the junta, and that has cast a dark shadow over Kachin province and the way forward.

There have been multiple recordings of the issues in Burma. I will quickly quote Human Rights Watch: "There have been long standing and well documented reports for many years that the Burmese army perpetrates widespread sexual violence against women and young girls in ethnic conflict areas, often with utter impunity and denials. The Burmese government's admission that it had investigated and punished

eight perpetrators”—just eight—“from the military is obviously a fraction of the scale of this repugnant practice, and the Burmese military has a long way to go in tackling this problem and reigning its rampant troops in to accord to the rule of war.”

They also have to teach their troops what is right and what is wrong. Human Rights Watch continued: “Even Ban Ki-moon recently called for an investigation by the Burmese government into sexual violence in conflict.”

When a country’s army is engaged in something as odious as sexual violence, it is time that its troops were held accountable too. The issue also brings into question our relationship with Burma, particularly in relation to our training of their troops. Action has to be taken in all cases of sexual violence and reports of prosecution of offenders in courts should be published.

Burma Campaign UK has said that last year 133 Burmese civil society organisations wrote to our Prime Minister about Burma, but they have not had the response that they had hoped for. I hope that today the Minister can give us some indication of the way forward.

In conclusion, this abuse that I have talked about is just the tip of the iceberg. We are greatly troubled by it, and we seek the Minister’s response and thoughts on how we can go forward in a constructive fashion. What can the EU do to assist us to help the Burmese people? What is the United States of America and its Government doing to ensure that we can address these issues together? What are the Burmese Government doing to protect Christians and other minority groups in Burma? What steps can be taken to ensure that Burma complies with international standards of human rights?

**Mr George Howarth (in the Chair):** It might help if I point out that a considerable amount of time is available to the two Front-Bench spokesmen. They are not obliged to use it all, because there is a provision for me to suspend the sitting until 11 o’clock if we happen to finish early. It is their decision, not mine, whether to use the time.

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr Howarth, for calling me to speak. As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) for securing this debate today. Although it is undeniable that Burma has made considerable progress in recent years, many Burmese civil society representatives who I have met have made the point that the hon. Gentleman made. That point is that in some ways the narrative has been established that there has been so much progress in Burma—it is moving towards democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest and elected to Parliament, and, I think, 42 of the 43 seats in by-elections were won by her party—that everything is well and good in Burma. However, people have expressed their anxiety to me that that narrative has allowed some of the real concerns that have been highlighted today to be overshadowed by it, almost to the extent that there is a degree of complacency about Burma’s progress. Obviously, we have to be vigilant that that is not the case.

We have discussed the plight of the Rohingya on several occasions in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) has had to leave to attend another meeting, but she and my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) have a particular interest in this topic, mainly because their constituents have raised it with them, as was the case with the hon. Member for Bradford East. Sadly, however, there is little sense that much has changed since we started talking about this issue.

Since the outbreak of inter-communal violence two years ago, hundreds of people have lost their lives, as we have heard, while 140,000 internally displaced persons are living in camps, where their freedom of movement is restricted.

Following a visit to Burma earlier this month, the UN deputy humanitarian chief described conditions in one camp as “appalling, with wholly inadequate access to basic services including health, education, water and sanitation”.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East quoted, she witnessed “a level of human suffering in IDP camps that I have personally never seen before”. We have also heard that aid workers came under attack in March. It is not just the local community that is impeding the efforts of aid workers; the Burmese Government suspended Médecins sans Frontières’ work in a number of states and were alleging bias towards the Rohingya community.

Such is Burma’s rejection of the Rohingyas that they are commonly referred to as Bengalis and, as we heard, there are disputed reports that UNICEF had to apologise for using the word “Rohingya”. The Government have yet to bring the perpetrators of the attacks on NGOs and the UN to justice and aid workers continue to put their own safety at risk.

Questions have been raised about whether the treatment of the Rohingya and the systematic denial of basic rights amount to genocide. Human Rights Watch has previously warned of ethnic cleansing in Rakhine state and the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burma voiced his alarm at the deteriorating crisis, warning that, “recent developments in Rakhine state are the latest in a long history of discrimination and persecution against the Rohingya community which could amount to crimes against humanity”.

These are allegations of the utmost severity, yet the gravity of the situation does not seem to be matched by the response from President Thein Sein and it is not matched by the international community’s response, which lacks urgency. Concern has been expressed, but expression of concern is simply not enough to deal with the situation.

Our concerns are, of course, not only confined to Rakhine state. The Kachin conflict has been ongoing for three years after the breakdown of the 17-year ceasefire, and there are continuing troubles in northern Shan state. The UN special rapporteur estimates there are 100,000 internally displaced persons in Kachin and Shan, and reported to the Human Rights Council in March allegations of sexual violence against Kachin women and the arbitrary detention and torture of young Kachin men. He continues to receive allegations of “serious human rights violations accompanying military offensives” in those areas, including reports that more than 100 women and girls have been raped by army soldiers since 2010; 47 cases of gang rape; and 28 women dying from their injuries.

Between March and October 2011 alone, the Women’s League of Burma documented 81 rapes in six months in Kachin and Shan states. The Minister will know that there are great difficulties documenting such atrocious crimes, not least because many victims or witnesses have been intimidated into silence by the army, so the real figures may well be much higher. The Kachin Women’s Association Thailand looked at 34 cases of rape in the Kachin conflict between just June and August 2011 and found that 44% of the victims were killed by their rapists. Such attacks have been perpetrated with impunity, as we have heard. Ethnic women’s organisations are concerned that President Thein Sein’s Administration is reluctant to work with women’s groups to stem the sexual violence, while the Burmese constitution protects military officers, who can only be tried in military courts. It is difficult to achieve prosecutions either in the usual criminal courts or the military courts.

Women’s organisations have also emphasised to me how land grabs, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, are increasingly a concern in Shan state. It is not only the military who are responsible. If the military seize land in an area, the rate of sexual violence increases, too; it seems to accompany their presence. Mining companies are also responsible. Burma seeks to open its country and economy to overseas businesses, which the UK Government have been keen to support. I will return to that in a bit more detail later. As mining companies come in, there is a real issue—as we have seen in so many other developing countries—with land being confiscated from the people who have sustained a living from it for many years.

It is known that Thailand wishes to return refugees from the Thai-Burma border. It returned 1,300 Rohingya refugees last year. I understand that, with the military coup in Thailand and the new regime there, this demand for refugees to be returned and the lack of consideration for refugees is exacerbated. China has returned refugees, too. The continuing conflict and difficulties in providing humanitarian assistance mean that it is by no means safe to return. It is no longer clear where the refugees would return to, given what I have just said about land grabs: the land belonging to the IDPs has been confiscated.

It had been hoped that this year's census could provide a breakthrough in upholding the rights of ethnic minorities. DFID contributed £10 million for the census, as we heard, making the UK the leading donor, among contributions from the UN and other states, which obviously puts the onus on us to ensure that the census is conducted fairly and properly. The Burma Campaign was among those to warn that Burma was not ready for its first official census in 30 years, highlighting ethnic groups' concerns that it could exacerbate inter and intra-communal tensions. It has also been reported that 23 civil society groups wrote to the parliamentary Speaker to ask for the census to be postponed, amid heightened tensions and objections to the categorisation of ethnic groups and sub-groups.

It was notable that the census did not use the preferred names of the ethnic groups themselves and was only produced in Burmese, except for some English copies for foreigners. So from the outset it was not an inclusive process that recognised and respected the language and heritage of Burma's many ethnic groups. The UN special rapporteur observed that, "the Government has approached the census without sufficient or meaningful consultation with all affected communities". As we have heard, the UK received assurances that the Rohingya would be able to self-identify, but Burma's Government failed to honour that commitment. As the UN special rapporteur highlighted, the decision to prevent self-identification "is not in compliance with international human rights standards".

I understand that the FCO subsequently summoned the ambassador, but it is not clear whether any conditions were attached to UK funding for the census or what precautions were taken by DFID and the FCO to reduce the likelihood of further violence caused by publication.

As I have said, I have on a few occasions met women from ethnic minority groups in Burma, most recently meeting women who visited for the summit on ending sexual violence in conflict. I congratulate those who participated in that initiative and, in particular, I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his work. When I met those women we talked, obviously, about sexual violence, particularly in respect of ethnic minority women in Burma. They told me that there are no specific legal protections for women and children, most particularly in the ethnic and rural areas; that Burma's rape law is based on a penal code from the 19th century and it is, for example, legal for a man to rape his wife; and that domestic violence is not taken seriously.

The thing that struck me was that, right through the chain of trying to take action against sexual violence, there are obstacles in the way. It is partly to do with a culture that treats domestic violence and attacks on women as acceptable. But the police officers are all male, so when investigating rapes and talking to victims, that is obviously a problem. There is little in the way of rape support services and certainly no official rape support services; it is difficult to obtain a prosecution; victims are intimidated, as hon. Members have said; and prosecutions against military officers have to go through the military courts. At every step there are problems achieving prosecutions.

One outcome of the recent summit was that the Foreign Secretary said that prosecutions have to be the way forward, but it is much easier to say things than achieve them, and so much needs to be tackled. I urge the Government to consider working specifically with women's groups, particularly from the ethnic minority communities in Burma, to see how we can address some of these issues.

Women have fewer than 5% of the seats in Parliament. That is exacerbated by the fact that 25% of the seats are reserved for the military, although there are now two female representatives in the military section. Women are even more under-represented in the Government. The Global Justice Center cites Burma as an example of the failure of the UN resolutions on women, peace and security and there are particular concerns that women are not involved in the talks to end the ethnic conflicts. I urge the Minister to talk to colleagues in DFID about what further work can be done on capacity building with women's groups. It is encouraging that the President has now agreed to sign the declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict, but, as I have said, that can only be the start of the process. The women I met who had been to the summit displayed a degree of scepticism, saying, "It is good that we have got this far, but it shouldn't just be about the summit. The action has to be matched by words and a detailed plan for implementation."

I shall, as the hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East did, mention the role of the Ministry of Defence and the British Army in offering training to the Burmese military. This gives the UK a certain degree of leverage, as does the aid funding that we have put towards the census

and other programmes. The UK needs to use that leverage to challenge the constitutional role of the military—as I have said, it has 25% of the seats in the Burmese Parliament—and, more specifically, the human rights violations, sexual violence and land grabs for which the military are responsible, as well as to question the culture of impunity. Very few military officers have been prosecuted.

Finally, it is important to highlight other recent worrying developments, including the President's reported support for laws preventing inter-religious marriage and religious conversion. Those would constitute serious breaches of international human rights, which I trust the Foreign Office is discussing with its Burmese counterpart. Human Rights Watch has reported that the electoral commission has tried to intimidate Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, and to restrict comments on military and constitutional reform, while Amnesty International has cited the recent arrests of human rights defenders and new prisoners of conscience in detention.

The Government's cross-departmental paper "UK Activities in Burma" focuses on encouraging responsible investment in Burma. It is welcome that Burma is opening its doors to foreign investment, and there is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations free trade agreement as well. That is important and needed, but efforts to promote the GREAT Britain campaign, run by the Foreign Office, must not overshadow work to promote democracy and human rights in Burma. Last September, the Government published their business and human rights action plan, and I hope the Foreign Office is ensuring that British businesses are aware of the human rights situation in Burma and, in particular, the need to respect land rights when they seek to invest in that country.

"UK Activities in Burma" states: "We are well positioned to have a positive impact in Burma." I urge the Foreign Office to use that position to push for the constitutional reforms that Burma needs for free, fair and inclusive elections next year, including the removal of the barrier to Aung San Suu Kyi perhaps taking on the mantle of President; for basic political and human rights to be respected; for the opening of a country office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; and for an end to the conflict. I realise I have focused on the negative; I am not underestimating how far Burma has come—the progress is welcome—but it is a grave danger to underestimate how much further the country still has to go.

**The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Hugh Robertson):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) on securing this debate on an important issue. Having said that, I start by apologising to him, because I do not have ministerial responsibility for Burma. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), holds that responsibility, and he is travelling. I am merely standing in for him. I have had a crash course in Burmese politics overnight.

One of the things that has struck me in listening to this debate—there have been extremely good contributions on all sides—is that there is a classic Foreign Office dilemma here. I think everyone would agree that the country is in transition. There is therefore a very difficult judgment on whether to stand off it and criticise it or get involved in it and try to influence and affect that change. Doing that, however, can open one up to many of the criticisms that are levelled at the UK Government—that we take too rose-tinted a view of the situation or that we are not tough enough. These are complicated diplomatic matters, and I absolutely understand many of the concerns that have been expressed. I will try to pick them up and answer them.

It is fair to say—I think everyone has acknowledged this—that the last three years in Burma have been a period of remarkable change. The country is undertaking an extraordinarily complex transition. It had an authoritarian military regime and is trying to move to a system of democratic government. The economy was centrally directed and, as the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, is moving to be market-oriented—hence the Foreign Office guidelines. The country has come out of literally decades of conflict, and the good news is that there is peace in much of the country. As the hon. Member for Bradford East said, more than 1,000 political prisoners have been released and there is greater freedom of expression, but neither of those is in itself enough. The judgment is that the 2012 by-elections were credible, but there is clearly an awful lot more to do. The initial ceasefire agreements that have been signed between the Burmese Government and 10 of the 11 major armed groups appear to be holding.

I can sense that some will say that that is typical of the Foreign Office's complacent approach, but it

absolutely is not. Let me recognise at the outset that serious challenges remain. There are political prisoners who are still in jail and more activists have been detained in 2014 as repressive laws have failed to be amended in line with international standards. Small-scale conflict continues in many ethnic areas and there are worrying reports of incidences of sexual violence, which all Members have highlighted. The UN and other agencies struggle to gain unhindered humanitarian access to Rakhine state, where the humanitarian and political situation remains deeply concerning. I would not for a moment pretend that everything is rosy in this garden, and I would not want people to think that we have a rose-tinted view of the matter. We really do not; we absolutely recognise many of the issues that have been highlighted this morning.

There is a view, which I understand, having spent last night looking into this in some depth, that the parliamentary elections in 2015 are the watershed moment for Burma's transition. It is absolutely incumbent on us here to try to create the conditions for credible elections to take place that involve all the minorities in Burma. I hope that will enable the Burmese people to take part in a democratic process where all their views count. We will be doing everything we can to build and reinforce Burma's electoral network.

Before I talk about Rakhine, I will try to answer the various questions that the hon. Member for Bradford East and others asked. He first asked me about the Government's action plan. It might help if I try to address his criticism that the UK's approach to Burma has been too soft. We have consistently raised the importance of the reform process and human rights at the highest level. It was at the top of the agenda at the Prime Minister's meeting with the Burmese President last year, and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon has consistently raised his concerns directly with the Burmese Government, including during his most recent visit to Burma in January. During that visit, he met separately with leaders of the Rohingya and Rakhine. The Foreign Secretary raised our concerns again in a call with his Burmese counterpart. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon did so again with the Burmese deputy Foreign Minister as recently as 12 June. As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, the Burmese ambassador—this happens relatively unusually—was summoned to the Foreign Office so that we could express our concern about the conditions in Rakhine state. I hope that gives Members confidence. I cannot think of a country in the portfolio that I directly look after where there has been that level of pressure. It is unusual, and I hope it gives Members some comfort that we are taking the matter seriously.

The hon. Member for Bradford East asked about the Burmese Government's action plan. We have constantly called on them to share that action plan with us, and I regret that they have not yet done so. It is therefore difficult to form an impression of exactly what is in it. He raised the question of war crimes, and the hon. Member for Bristol East generously paid tribute to the Foreign Secretary's initiative on that. Not in every area are the answers to many of these problems easy, but at least with crimes of sexual violence we have had the largest global initiative. The hon. Member for Bristol East was good enough to say that she had met the Burmese delegation that came over. I cannot remember, but I think some 140 Governments were represented in that initiative in some way, shape or form and enormous numbers of people have signed the declaration that came out of it. We are all clear that signing the declaration is one thing, but action and delivery are the crucial test.

**Jim Shannon:** The Minister is right that it is all very well to make verbal commitments, which are a good start, but the message has to get to perpetrators at every level—lower ranks, sergeants, officers—so that it filters down. Anyone who commits a crime must know that they will be accountable under law, which is not currently happening.

**Hugh Robertson:** The hon. Gentleman, who has extensive military experience, is absolutely right. He would have been interested to hear the absolutely spellbinding speech made by the Australian Chief of the Defence Force on exactly that issue and what needs to happen to ensure success. All those who were there for that speech heard that message loud and clear. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—I would not say anything else—that making it happen will be the real challenge. It is an extraordinary achievement to have signed the declaration, but that is the easy part and making it happen is different.

The hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned the census, which the British Government, along with other members of the international community, did indeed help to fund because we believed that it would be crucial to the development of Burma as a whole. Reports from international observers suggest that, with the exclusion of Rakhine and parts of Kachin, the process was largely carried out effectively. The Government



are deeply disappointed, however, that the Burmese Government simply reneged on their long-standing assurance that all individuals would have the right to self-identify their ethnic origin. That remains a point of dispute and a disappointment, which leads to a judgment of whether it was right to support the census. Looking at Burma as a whole, it is a better country for the delivery of that census, but the decision to prevent the Rohingya from self-identifying is a straightforward contravention of international norms.

The hon. Member for Bradford East asked whether I felt “snubbed”. I am not aware that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, who was there, did feel snubbed.

Political prisoners are a matter of great concern that was key during the Prime Minister’s discussions. We have urged both the Burmese Government and Parliament to repeal all existing laws that allow the Government to imprison political prisoners, and all laws that are not in line with democratic standards. We will continue to put pressure on the Government to ensure that democratic activists are able freely to voice their opinions without fear of arrest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East asked about military engagement, which was also raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The focus of our defence engagement is on democratic accountability, international law and human rights. Aung San Suu Kyi has made it clear that the Burmese military, for better or worse, is a core political force in Burma and will be key to the process of political reform, which again returns to the judgment of whether to stand back and criticise the reform if it does not succeed or to engage with it and try to affect the situation for the better. We have tried to do the latter and will continue to use our leverage over the Burmese military to get them to tackle issues, such as child soldiers, and to bring sexual violence to an end once and for all. I should just add that the EU arms embargo on Burma remains in place following the majority of sanctions being lifted in April 2013.

I was asked about an international investigation. It is absolutely our view that all allegations of human rights abuses must be dealt with immediately through a clear, independent, transparent investigation and, crucially, a prosecutorial process that meets international standards. We have made and will continue to make those concerns clear to the Burmese Government. It is absolutely the Government’s approach to seek an end to those violations and to prevent their further escalation irrespective of whether they fit the definition of specific international crimes.

**Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con):** I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the debate. We should pay tribute to our Speaker, who has visited Burma on several occasions and has helped to draw attention to the problems. Nearly 30 years ago when I was a Minister, I went out to meet Sir Nicholas Fenn, the then ambassador, who made the claim, which the Minister kindly repeated today, that to be engaged with people is better than to be disengaged. We should pay tribute to the progress that has been made and make it clear that the Burmese people will benefit if Burma pays attention to international norms and applies them to allow its people, including the Rohingya, to prosper in their own country.

**Hugh Robertson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, with which I entirely agree. The longer I spend in the Foreign Office, the more I begin to realise that engagement with countries that do not accept our norms and standards is uncomfortable; there is no doubt about that, but I am absolutely convinced that engagement is the correct approach. If we fail to engage and simply stand off from a problem and criticise, we will lose both moral authority and the authority to try to influence. Sometimes, even when engagement does occur, influence does not come from making a lot of noise. Change is often effected by years of quiet diplomacy and initiatives such as those mentioned by the hon. Gentleman and those undertaken by the Speaker and others, which play an important role.

**Mr Ward:** Most people would understand the dilemma to which the Minister refers. The frustration, particularly for the Rohingya, is that when they say that things are going badly for them in Rakhine, they are constantly told that things are going well elsewhere. They say, “Violations and murders are taking place,” but the response is, “Yes, but things are going well over here. Be patient.” It is difficult to be patient when crimes are being committed against a number of ethnic minority groups. The continual message is, “Put up with it, because we are making progress in so many other areas.”

**Hugh Robertson:** I entirely understand that frustration. The hope is that a policy of constructive

engagement will help to move the whole piece along. I acknowledge that the situation may move much more slowly than we all would want, and that those who are affected will be annoyed and frustrated by the pace of change and will wonder why more is not happening internationally. I understand all the frustrations that my hon. Friend properly articulates, but I am not saying that progress is fast enough; it is far too slow and the situation has not moved at the desired pace.

I hope that those who arrive at my hon. Friend's surgery will be given some comfort to know that the matter is being raised in a balanced and sensible way in today's debate. I hope that he will be able to point to the Government's actions and the assurances that I have been able to give him, and to the fact that we recognise that a huge amount of work still needs to be done. In a sense, this covers the last point in his excellent speech, which was about the sense of disempowerment and frustration at the pace of progress. I understand and acknowledge that the affected must feel that way, but I hope that I have provided some assurance that we are taking the matter seriously. If we consider the list of responses, including those from the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State, and the summoning of the Burmese ambassador, that is quite a catalogue of actions, and I do not think many other countries receive such a high level of diplomatic attention.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised, as he always does, the plight of Christians, with his customary attention to detail. He also mentioned Kachin province. During his recent visit, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, made a particular point of asking to see members of the Kachin Baptist Convention, which is the largest religious organisation in Kachin state, and he discussed a large range of issues with them. He raised our concerns about the Christian community and other human rights issues with senior members of the Burmese Government. He made a particular point of calling for religious tolerance and dialogue during his speech at the British Council. Earlier this month, we also welcomed Archbishop Bo to London for the preventing sexual violence initiative summit.

As I have told the hon. Member for Strangford in our many conversations about my area of responsibility, the Foreign Office gets an enormous number of letters on the treatment of Christians around the world. We take the issue seriously, and it is definitely moving up the agenda. He knows from debates we have had—indeed, we had one yesterday—that I have particularly prioritised the issue. I am off to Lebanon on Sunday, and I will make a particular point of seeing members of the Christian community on Monday. This really is something that we take very seriously.

We have talked a bit about the preventing sexual violence initiative summit. As a specific result of the summit, funding of £300,000 is earmarked for projects in Burma offering greater support and protection to survivors of sexual violence.

In her speech, the hon. Member for Bristol East highlighted many of the issues that have been raised this morning. She said there is a danger that the narrative of progress will breed complacency. I hope my response has given her some assurance that that is absolutely not the case, and that we realise the problems we face.

The hon. Lady talked briefly about the intermarriage laws. The issue is very much on the radar, and she is right to highlight it. We are concerned about the possible implications of the proposed legislation, and we are following the ongoing discussions through the embassy in Rangoon. We have already raised our concerns with the Burmese Government, and we want to make sure all draft laws are in line with international standards. We want to make it absolutely clear that respect for the rights of women and for the freedom of religion and belief must be guaranteed. To give the hon. Lady further reassurance, let me add that the EU also raised concerns at the recent EU-Burma human rights dialogue.

I hope I have covered the various points that have been raised. Let me finish by returning to where I started half an hour or so ago and thanking the hon. Member for Bradford East for raising this issue; he and other Members are absolutely right to raise it. The Government know that much remains to be done and that progress is not guaranteed; there is an enormous way to go. However, it is worth reflecting—this goes back to a remark made earlier—on a comment made by the International Development Committee in March: "Progress will not happen by standing back, adopting a cynical attitude to change."

It really is important to have a constructive agenda if we are to try to force the changes we all want to see. The best way to help achieve our vision of a democratic Burma that enshrines freedom and human rights for all is to engage with the parties there. I understand that that will be a frustrating process, and that progress may well not seem quick enough for representatives of minority groups. However, engagement is the key to helping Burma embed reform and to encouraging further meaningful progress towards peaceful and democratic government.

### ***Burma mentioned in Westminster Hall Debate on Human Rights: Saudi Arabia***

**24 June 2014 Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gray, and to have the opportunity to open this Adjournment debate on human rights in Saudi Arabia. I am very grateful to have been allocated this slot. I am not quite sure how Adjournment debates are chosen, but this is an important subject that requires scrutiny and therefore I am very grateful for this opportunity today.

The UK Government accept that Saudi Arabia has a poor record on democracy and human rights, particularly in relation to women. The country is deemed a “country of concern” by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has one of the worst records in the world for executions. More than 2,000 people were executed between 1985 and 2013. The most recent Economist Intelligence Unit democracy index listed Saudi Arabia as the fifth most authoritarian Government in the world. Saudi Arabia is ranked equal to Burma and even lower than Iran in that index. However, although other countries with appalling human rights records are criticised and, indeed, action is taken against them, Saudi Arabia is often courted.

**For full debate see:** <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140624/halltext/140624h0001.htm#14062423000001>

### ***Burma mentioned in House of Lords Queen’s Speech Debate (5th day)***

**11 June 2014 The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi):** (...) I am sure that the continuing global trend towards official restrictions on religious practices will concern the whole House, as will the continued religious extremism in some parts of the world, which has been matched by a growing intolerance towards those who think differently. We have seen this in Nigeria with the slaughter, kidnap and human trafficking of innocent schoolchildren by Boko Haram. We have seen this in Sudan, where women have been sentenced to death simply for marrying across religious divides, and we have seen this in Burma, where religious and ethnic tensions continue to cause indiscriminate loss of life throughout the Rakhine province. In all its work, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office fights to protect the fundamental rights of every individual to practise or change their religion, or to follow no religion at all. Without these values, we cannot guarantee our security, our prosperity or indeed our international influence. (...)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140611-0001.htm#14061142000111>

**The Lord Bishop of Coventry:** (...) Secondly, on freedom of religion and belief, I am grateful for the reference made by the noble Baroness, Lady Morgan, to the persecution of Christians, but of course there are other religious groupings—Baha’is in Iran and Muslims in Burma, to name just two—that also face severe violence and the threat of violence to adhere to majority religious norms. I am very grateful for both the renewed parliamentary attention to issues of religious freedom and the commitment that the Government have shown to protecting this most basic right. However, I am concerned that the Government may be investing too much energy and expectation in the OIC-led initiative on defamation of religions. I hope that the Government are alert to the danger that the concept of defamation of religion may provide a cloak under which a state acts to repress both religions and individuals who, in expressing their own faith and belief, with no intention of offending another faith or inciting hatred, may none the less be perceived to have contravened the tenets of the majority religion. (...)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140611-0002.htm#14061158000341>

**Baroness Cox:** My Lords, I wish to focus on the plight of women suffering from sexual violence in war, as this is particularly timely, given the global summit which has already been mentioned by noble Lords, and

is a much needed initiative. My small NGO, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, takes us to places, often off the radar screen of major aid organisations and international media, where women are routinely subjected to such violence and where Governments allow it to continue with impunity. I shall give two examples: Burma and Sudan.

All is not well in the beautiful land of Burma. Despite some welcome reforms, the Burmese Government are continuing brutal policies of repression against the Muslim Rohingya people and the Burmese army has been continuing military offensives against ethnic nationals, with frequent violations of ceasefires in Shan and Kachin states and associated atrocities, including the use of rape and sexual slavery as weapons of war. As one story can portray horror more powerfully than a hundred statistics, I shall give an example: when our small team from HART was across the border in Kachin state, we came across a deserted village. The local people explained why the villagers had fled. There was a Burmese army camp on the mountain above the village. One day, a group of soldiers attacked villagers working in the paddy fields below and abducted a woman. She was tied to a stake in the camp, in full view of the villagers below, she disappeared at frequent intervals over the next few days and eventually disappeared for ever. One can only imagine the horrors inflicted on her or the anguish of her husband, parents and children having to watch her endure her fate.

Therefore, while we welcome the recent signing by the Burmese Government of the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, one cannot help but wonder a little whether the timing of the signing, on the eve of the global summit, was designed to maximise positive publicity for the Burmese Government. I understand that a delegation of women from Burma is attending the summit to highlight the ongoing use of sexual violence by the Burmese army. I therefore ask the Minister whether Her Majesty's Government will urge the Burmese Government to make essential commitments—to be implemented within a timeframe of, say, six months—to end impunity and to hold perpetrators of sexual violence to account; to support an independent investigation involving international expertise; to amend the 2008 constitution that condones sexual violence by guaranteeing impunity for sexual crimes; and to provide support for international civil society organisations, including women's organisations such as the Women's League of Burma, for their work in documenting cases of rape and providing support for victims of sexual violence. (...)

I conclude by asking the Minister what steps are being taken to ensure that the full reality of all situations in all countries relevant this evening, including those in Burma and Sudan, will come under consideration, and what substantive measures will be taken to help women trapped in countries with obdurate Governments and armies still perpetrating sexual violence with impunity.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140611-0003.htm#14061162000134>

**The Advocate-General for Scotland (Lord Wallace of Tankerness):** (...) I think we all agree that identifying the problem is one thing and the next step is implementation. We very much hope that we will be able to start taking these matters forward. We note the challenges in many countries. Burma was mentioned, as were Somalia, northern Nigeria, Syria and Sudan. It is because women and girls are more likely to be poorer, more marginal and with fewer rights that DfID puts them front and centre. (...)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140611-0003.htm#1406122000038>

### ***Burma mentioned in House of Lords Question for Short Debate - Middle East: Jihadism***

**19 June 2014 Lord Ahmed:** (...) Then we have Boko Haram, a terrorist organisation that commits the most heinous crimes. The word Boko means western culture and Haram means forbidden—so it means rejection of western culture. Then there are the terrorists in Pakistan, Tehreek-e-Taliban, which attacked the Karachi airport; all those fighters were from Uzbekistan. They are no representatives of Islam or Muslims, just as the Lords Resistance Army is not representative of Christians, nor are the RSS or VHP representatives of the great Hindu religion, nor is the Buddhist 969 movement in Burma or the activities of Buddhist monk Gnanasara in Sri Lanka, whose organisation Bodu Bala Sena, or BBS, has allegedly killed seven Muslims, including a child with a sword, in the past two days. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140619-0002.htm#14061957000516>

## WRITTEN STATEMENTS

### *UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2014-17*

**16 June 2014** The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague): I wish to inform the House that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, together with the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence, published on 12 June 2014 our “National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, 2014-17”.

The national action plan is a tool to enable us to articulate our priorities on women, peace and security and co-ordinate implementation of our work at national level. It serves as a guiding national policy document that is able to capture the diverse set of initiatives on this agenda taking place within the UK Government across our security, foreign policy and development work. It outlines the results that we expect these initiatives to bring. It serves to provide direction and vision for our staff and partners to ensure that women and girls are at the centre of all our efforts to prevent, resolve and respond to conflict.

The UK has a strong global reputation on women, peace and security, which I am committed to maintaining. We play a lead role at the United Nations Security Council on women, peace and security, including on debates and ensuring the role of women features in the mandates of peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions. The landmark UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security has been built on by six new resolutions, and calls on UN member states to adopt and deliver national action plans. The UK was one of the first countries to publish a national action plan in 2006. It was revised in 2010 for a further three years.

The aim of this latest three-year national action plan is to put women and girls at the centre of all UK efforts to prevent and resolve conflict, to promote peace and stability, and to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. It sets out our intent to strengthen our ability to reduce the impact of conflict on women and girls and to promote their inclusion in conflict resolution. As well as bringing together all of the UK Government’s activities on this area, it shows the depth and breadth of our work on the women, peace and security agenda. It builds on the momentum generated from the range of women, peace and security-related initiatives including the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, DFID’s strategic vision for girls and women, including broader work on violence against women and girls, and the call to action on protecting women in emergencies.

This national action plan focuses specifically on tackling the challenge to advance women and girl’s participation, to prevent violence against women and girls and protect them from it, to provide targeted relief and recovery, and to build UK national capacity to deliver all of this. It signals the UK Government’s continuing commitment to the agenda in our focus countries, which include: Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Somalia and Syria—as well as work at home. In identifying these countries, we have considered whether it is a priority country for the work of all three Departments and of the National Security Council and that through our local consultations in-country, we have determined there is local appetite for change.

Government staff working in UK embassies and DFID offices in conflict-affected states have been consulted, as have women who have been or who are affected by conflict. This plan reaffirms this Government’s ambition to work as one to pursue visible change for women and girls affected by conflict, including in partnership with NGOs, Parliament and our international partners.

We will develop and publish an implementation plan, including indicators and baseline data on this national action plan by the end of 2014. For the first time, this baseline data will be used as a benchmark to assess UK efforts on women, peace and security throughout the life of this national action plan and will further articulate the key actions to be undertaken together by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. This national action plan will be reported on annually from autumn 2015. The annual reports will be deposited in Parliament and shared with the Associate Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security.

I am placing a copy of the national action plan in the Library of the House.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140616/wmstext/140616m0001.htm#1406169000004>

Same statement was referred to by Baroness Warsi in the House of Lords: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140616-wms0001.htm#14061612000078>

## EARLY DAY MOTIONS

### **BURMA**

**Date tabled: 25.06.2014**

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

Signatures: 15

## ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON BURMA

On the 17th of June, the APPG held its AGM, followed by a regular APPG meeting with a women delegation visiting for the End Sexual Violence in Conflict summit. Speakers were Tin Tin Nyo, General Secretary of the Women's League of Burma; Susanna Hla Hla Soe, Director of the Karen Women's Empowerment Group; Wah Ku Shee, Karen Women's Organisation, Moon Nay Li, Kachin Women Association Thailand; May Sabe Phyu, Kachin Peace Network and Hseng Moon, Shan Women's Action Network.

On 24th of June there was a meeting for APPG members only with Head of DFID in Burma, Mr Gavin McGillivray.

On the 30th of June a joint APPG meeting was held with the British Council APPG, about British Council programmes in Burma including a new footballing project called Premier Skills.

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Thank you.

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