



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

MARCH
2011

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Rohingya

8 March 2011 Jeremy Lefroy : To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has made representations to the government of Thailand on reports of forced deportation of Rohingya refugees.

Jeremy Browne : We are deeply concerned over allegations that at the beginning of 2011 Thailand forcibly deported Rohingya refugees. Our ambassador to Thailand reiterated our concern over their treatment with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 9 February 2011. During this discussion he stressed the importance of ensuring that Thailand treats all refugees according to international standards and pressed for unhindered access for the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. We deplore the targeted persecution of ethnic groups in Burma and will continue to underline regularly to international partners that the cause of refugee flows out of Burma is the regime's appalling human rights record.

8 March 2011 Jeremy Lefroy : To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has made representations to the government of Thailand on provision to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees of unhindered access to Rohingya asylum seekers detained in Thailand.

Jeremy Browne : We are deeply concerned by the recent influx to Thailand of Rohingya refugees who have fled Burma to escape human rights abuses. Our embassy in Thailand is in regular contact with the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and has made representations to the Thai Government to press for full access by the UNHCR to the Rohingya. Most recently on 9 February 2011, our ambassador to Thailand raised the issue with the Deputy Permanent Secretary at the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Our embassy is also working with EU partners to continue to press the Thai authorities on this matter.

9 March 2011 Jeremy Lefroy : To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions his Department has had with the Government of India on the provision of assistance to Rohingya refugees recently arrived in the (a) Aceh and (b) Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Alistair Burt : We are deeply concerned over the recent flow of Rohingya people who have fled Burma to escape human rights abuses. At the end of February 2011, following the arrival of refugees in Aceh, our embassy in Jakarta met Indonesian authorities and the International Organisation for Migration where we discussed the process of registering the refugees with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. We have not discussed the issue of Rohingya refugees with the Government of India bilaterally but we support the European Commission and UN programmes for Rohingya refugees through the UK's core funding to the EU and the UN.

10 March 2011 Jeremy Lefroy : To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what humanitarian assistance his Department is providing to (a) Rohingya people in Burma, (b) Rohingya refugees recently arrived in (i) India and (ii) Indonesia and (c) Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Stephen O'Brien : Rohingya people in Burma benefit from Department for International Development

(DFID) contributions to multi-donor programmes which operate across Burma in the areas of health, education and rural livelihoods. They also receive aid from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the European Union, to which DFID makes core contributions.

DFID has not provided humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees recently arrived in India or Indonesia. DFID supports Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh through its core contributions to UNHCR, UNICEF, the World Food Programme, the World Health Organisation, the UN Population Fund and the European Union.

Commission of Inquiry

9 March 2011 Lord Lester of Herne Hill : To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will propose that the United Nations establish a commission of inquiry to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity alleged to have been committed by the Government of Myanmar, as recommended by the United Nations Special Rapporteur.

Lord Howell of Guildford : The Government support the UN special rapporteur's recommendation for the UN to consider the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry to investigate human rights abuses in Burma. We are working with partners to build further international support but this is likely to take time. We recently secured a toughly worded resolution at the UN General Assembly which supported the implementation of all the proposals made by the special rapporteur. We are currently working towards achieving a similar outcome at the March Human Rights Council.

Tripartite Dialogue

9 March 2011 Lord Lester of Herne Hill :To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will propose that the United Nations initiate a tripartite dialogue between the Government of Myanmar, the National League for Democracy and ethnic groups.

Lord Howell of Guildford : We support the UN in its efforts to achieve tripartite dialogue. We have consistently made clear that only a process of genuine inclusive dialogue between the regime and all of Burma's democratic opposition and ethnic groups can bring peace and stability. In recent months, my right honourable friend the Prime Minister and my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary have met the UN Secretary General and underlined the UN's importance in re-invigorating the stalled political process in Burma. We welcomed the visit to Burma by the UN Secretary General's special adviser, Vijay Nambiar, and urge the junta to work with the UN and all of Burma's political actors towards national reconciliation.

Sanctions

22 March 2011 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government how much money has been frozen in (a) the United Kingdom, and (b) the European Union, as a result of European Union sanctions on Burma.

Lord Howell of Guildford : The UK has frozen £52,000 as a result of the European Union sanctions against Burma. We cannot ascertain how much money has been frozen in the European Union as a whole, as member states are not required to report on this.

22 March 2011 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they have taken to persuade European Union member states to implement a ban on European Union companies investing in Burma.

Lord Howell of Guildford : The Government do not encourage trade and investment in Burma. Our international partners are well aware of our concerns over investing in a country with an appalling human rights record where money goes directly into the pockets of the regime. EU sanctions include a ban on imports, exports and investments in the Burmese timber, gems and precious metals sector, which are key sources of revenue for the military regime. My right honourable friends the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe and senior UK officials have all held talks with EU counterparts to ensure that sanctions are rolled over in April.

Elections

23 March 2011 Valerie Vaz : To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the conduct of the recent elections in Burma.

Jeremy Browne : Although voting on the day was calm, the UK Government received widespread reports of severe vote manipulation, particularly through the use of additional advanced votes after the count had officially closed and coercion of voters. Moreover, we have serious misgivings over the regime's official results. The Election Commission initially reported that in some constituencies voter turnout exceeded 100% and in Kachin state where the regime had banned the elections, two pro-government candidates were declared winners. Before any votes were cast, 25% of seats in the legislature were reserved for the military, the regime's proxy political party received privileged access to state resources, and Aung San Suu Kyi was excluded from the process.

Under such circumstances, there is no doubt that elections were not free, fair or inclusive.

Overseas Aid

14 March 2011 Lord Lester of Herne Hill : To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will seek to persuade the international community substantially to increase support for cross-border humanitarian assistance and funding for informal civil society groups promoting human rights and democracy in Myanmar.

Baroness Verma : The Government will encourage other donors to follow our example in providing aid for the people of Burma. We are expanding our programme substantially over the next four years. We will focus on mother and child health, controlling malaria, primary education, food production, affordable credit for women, civil society and people affected by conflict. Our aid will be provided through the United Nations and non-governmental organisations, not the Burmese central government. A proportion of our aid will be delivered from neighbouring countries, in instances where that is the most effective way to reach people with the greatest needs.

21 March 2011 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the European Commission about the cuts to its financial support to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium.

Baroness Verma : Department for International Development (DfID) staff frequently discuss financial support for the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) with European Commission counterparts as well as with other donors. DfID has consistently made clear that the well-being of Burmese refugees in Thailand should not be adversely affected by funding reductions. DfID has allocated £1.1 million to TBBC for 2011.

23 March 2011 Valerie Vaz : To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether his Department had discussions with Aung San Suu Kyi on its policy on aid to Burma.

Stephen O'Brien : Officials from the Department for International Development (DFID) and Her Majesty's ambassador to Burma are in regular contact with Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy. Recently DFID officials have informed Aung San Suu Kyi about the UK's plans on aid to Burma and sought her views.

23 March 2011 Valerie Vaz : To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether his Department provides funding to the Women's League of Burma.

Stephen O'Brien : The Department for International Development (DFID) is providing funding to one member of the Women's League of Burma, the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). In 2010, DFID provided £76,413 to SWAN to improve health, education and livelihoods, and to empower women and promote their rights, in communities displaced by conflict along the Thailand-Burma border. DFID does not provide funding to the Women's League of Burma itself.

HOUSE OF LORD DEBATES

International Aid Reviews: Conclusions — Statement

1 March 2011 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: Will the Government make a commitment to increase cross-border aid to reach parts of Burma where the dictatorship refuses access for aid to people there? Is the noble Baroness aware that DfID aid to Burma under the current circumstances is almost entirely channelled through registered organisations that have been vetted by the regime? Should DfID not seek other channels to achieve a more equitable outcome?

Finally, after the funding of part of the Pope's visit and the loan to the Turks and Caicos Islands, can we feel sure that our aid programmes will not be driven by the priorities of other departments of state?

Baroness Verma: First of all, I thank the noble Baroness for her opening comments. We all accept that DfID did some fantastic work when the Opposition were in government. However, the focus there was on inputs. We want to try to reshape the programmes and put the focus on outputs as well as inputs, so that we can measure the results and see that, where programmes are working, they are working well. The noble Baroness has asked a number of questions and I will try to answer as many of them as I can. Where I do not answer, I will of course write back to her.

International Women's Day

3 March 2011 Baroness Cox : I now join all other noble Lords in congratulating the noble Baroness, Lady Gould, on this very timely debate, providing an opportunity to highlight some of the challenges confronting women today, as well as some of the initiatives, especially those undertaken by women, to address them. I will focus on challenges confronting women in just one part of the world, women who are largely off the radar screen of international awareness; those who live in the regions in Burma which I visited last week, the Shan, Karen and Karenni states. Their challenges and their suffering are replicated in many other parts of the world, especially areas affected by war and the aftermath of conflict.

The ethnic nationals of Burma, including the Shan, Karen, Karenni, Chin, Rohingya and Kachin peoples, comprise 40 per cent of the total population. Last week colleagues from Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust and I met the Shan leadership and were informed that the situation for the Shan people remains dire, as also for their Karen and Karenni neighbours. Military offensives by the brutal ruling military junta, the Orwellian-named State Peace and Development Council, continue unabated and have forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee from their homes into hiding or exile. Women are especially vulnerable, particularly those who are pregnant or caring for young children or the elderly, as they suffer the acute deprivations of life in hiding in the jungle. Unable to build shelters or light fires for fear of being seen by SPDC soldiers, they are constantly wet in the rainy season and suffer from severe cold at night. They live in constant fear of capture and abuse. A 17-year-old girl from Central Shan State told us:

“SPDC military troops would often come to my village. One day they caught my father, beat him and forced him to work for them as a porter. My dad never came home again. My mother was pregnant. We were forced to leave the village and my mum only lived for five days, then she died. I was on my own”. I have recorded literally hundreds of such tragic stories, but in this centenary year of International Women's Day, it is important also to appreciate responses by women with initiatives to alleviate suffering and to remedy root causes.

One example of such a response is the excellent organisation SWAN, the Shan Women's Action Network, which undertakes advocacy and provides aid. For example, SWAN published Licence to Rape, a well researched document that exposed the SPDC's policy of the use of rape as a weapon of war. SWAN has established several programmes to provide help for women, including crisis support and maternal and child health programmes. We visited some of its programmes, which we are privileged to support, and we are always deeply impressed by the dedication, courage and professionalism of the very committed women who give their lives-and indeed often risk their lives-to help women suffering in so many ways from the inhuman policies of the Burmese military junta.

I congratulate the Secretary of State for International Development on the recent reviews. In so doing, I

express appreciation of DfID's funding for SWAN and the retention of Burma as a country that DfID will continue to support. Will DfID also continue to support cross-border aid for displaced people suffering inside Burma? The previous reassurance on this issue gave great comfort to the thousands of people suffering inside that tragic land, and such help is still greatly needed as SPDC offensives continue and even more civilians will be driven from their villages to become exiles in their own land or to flee into foreign lands. This example of the challenges for women in Burma today is just one illustration of the perennial and continuing problems for many women in so many conflict zones in today's world. The inspirational work of SWAN is just one example of the many responses by women for women that it is appropriate to acknowledge and celebrate in this centenary year of International Women's Day.

Baroness Verma : On DfID spending, we are proud to say that we have supported what was an agreement in all three main political parties to make sure that 0.7 per cent is enshrined in law. We are determined to keep women and girls at the heart of all the work that we do internationally and at home. Some of the questions asked through the bilateral and multilateral reviews were because we genuinely want to focus on programmes that are working well and want to make sure that we strengthen those programmes. We hope to give other donor countries a blueprint to work from.

I have been told that I have to sit down, so I shall say this quickly. I have pledged to write to noble Lords whose questions I have not answered. In conclusion, it has been an extremely informative and well supported debate. This is one of the most enjoyable debates we have and it is one to which noble Lords always contribute so well.

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

Early Day Motion 112: Human Rights in Burma

John Pugh

30.05.2010

Signed by 151 MPs

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

Early Day Motion 787: Aung San Suu Kyi and Elections in Burma

Valerie Vaz

11.10.2010

Signed by 42 MPs

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

Early Day Motion 788: BBC World Service and Human Rights

11.10.2010

Valerie Vaz

Signed by 56 MPs

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

Early Day Motion 989: Elections in Burma and Advance Voting

11.11.2010

Valerie Vaz

Signed by 27 MPs

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

Early Day Motion 1014: Release of Aung San Suu Kyi

16.11.2010

Valerie Vaz

Signed by 48 MPs

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

Early Day Motion 1034 : Imprisonment of Zarganar by Burmese Authorities

17.11.2010

Tom Harris

Signed by 58 MPs

That this House condemns the treatment by the Burmese regime of the actor, director and comedian, Zarganar, who in 2006 was banned from any public performance and who in 2008, after speaking out on behalf of millions of Burmese citizens left homeless by a cyclone, was convicted of public order offences and sentenced to 59 years imprisonment, this sentence being reduced on appeal to 35 years; believes that Zarganar has suffered a grievous miscarriage of justice; and calls on the Burmese government to release him at the earliest possible opportunity.

Early Day Motion 1125 : RELEASE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI (No. 2)

02.12.2010

Ritchie, Margaret

Signed by 23 MPs

That this House welcomes the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and calls for the release of her fellow pro-democracy campaigners Htay Kywe, Mie Mie and Zaw Htet Ko Ko, who have all been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment away from their families; and urges the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to keep their plight to the fore of any discussions he has with the Burmese Ambassador and Burmese government officials.

Early Day Motion 1649 : BURMA AND THE EU

23.03.2011

Vaz, Valerie

Signed by 27 MPs

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

Early Day Motion 1659 : BURMA EARTHQUAKE

28.03.2011

Vaz, Valerie

Signed by 24 MPs

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

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**for Human Rights, Democracy
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