



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

MAY
2013

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Rohingya

13 May 2013 Lindsay Roy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate his Department has made of the number of refugees who have left Burma as a result of the recent violence against the Muslim community in that country.

Mr Swire: On 19 April the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that since June last year 27,800 people—the majority of them believed to be from Rakhine state—have made the dangerous journey across the Bay of Bengal to various countries in the region. However, the total number of refugees that have left Burma because of the recent violence is difficult to calculate given the clandestine nature of that kind of migration and the fact that many of them do not leave for one reason alone.

Religious Freedom

15 May 2013 Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government is taking to urge the government of Burma to address rising religious intolerance in that country.

Mr Swire: We are extremely concerned about the recent violence directed at Muslim communities that has affected parts of Burma, and about reports showing a rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Christian propaganda in the country. We are actively monitoring these issues. On 21 March, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), issued a statement on behalf of the British Government, condemning the violence in Meiktila and urging the Burmese Government to take all necessary action to protect civilians and to work with communities to tackle the underlying hostility.

We note the speech by President Thein Sein on 7 May, in which he stressed the importance to Burma's future of diversity and tolerance. The British Government currently funds organisations that deliver interfaith dialogue projects. We have also lobbied the Burmese Government to ask them to issue an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur to visit the country.

15 May 2013 Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the government of Burma regarding anti-Muslim violence.

Mr Swire: The Senior Minister of State, my noble Friend the right hon. Baroness Warsi, on 15 April, and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), on 16 April, raised the issue of anti-Muslim violence with a delegation of senior Burmese Ministers on their visit to London, calling for accountability of those responsible and for action to bring communities together.

British officials have continued to raise the issue of anti-Muslim violence with the Burmese Government, since the inter-communal unrest in Rakhine State in 2012 and the incidents in Meiktila from 20-25 March. Her Majesty's Ambassador to Burma discussed these issues with senior advisors to the Burmese President on 1 May, in the aftermath of the most recent violence against Muslim communities, in Oak Kan. The Ambassador used this occasion to call on the Burmese Government to do all it could to prevent further attacks.

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15 May 2013 Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to urge the government of Burma to address the culture of impunity in that country.

Mr Swire: We regularly raise specific allegations of human rights abuses with the Burmese Government at the most senior levels. We are clear that all those who are guilty of instigating, inciting or carrying out violence in Burma need to be held accountable for their crimes. This should be done through a clear and transparent investigative and prosecutorial process.

During a meeting on 15 April, the Senior Minister of State, my noble Friend the right hon. Baroness Warsi pressed Aung Min, Minister for Burmese President's Office, to follow up on the commitment made by President Thein Sein to open an office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), reiterated this point during his meeting with Aung Min on 16 April. We continue to make clear that an OHCHR office in Burma would be beneficial in assisting the Burmese Government to address some of the serious human rights concerns outlined by the international community.

ANSWERS TO SPOKEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Burma (Human Rights) Adjournment Debate

8th May 2013 Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a privilege to have secured the first end-of-day debate of the new Session of Parliament.

I would suggest to those hon. Members present for this important debate that the most memorable occasion during the previous Parliament—it will live long in my memory for many Parliaments to come—was when Aung San Suu Kyi addressed both Houses of Parliament. Her brave and long fight for freedom and democracy represents our strong and vibrant hope for the future of Burma. Today's state opening has shown that Parliament does pageantry well, but Aung San Suu Kyi spoke of how Parliament is also a beacon for freedom and democracy. It is, therefore, appropriate that this first end-of-day debate will shine a light on the human rights situation in Burma.

Ministers have been diligent in pressing the Burmese Government to improve their human rights record. We must recognise the importance of the United Kingdom's approach to a country that is far from these shores: the light that we shine has an influence in Burma. The Kachin Peace-talk Creation Group said recently that the UK's role in Burma's progress is crucial. We are one of the most influential countries in Burma, so this debate is important.

The Government can act in four areas. First, they must urge the Burmese Government to pursue full rights and recognition for the Rohingya people and other religious and ethnic minorities. That has to include reforming citizenship laws, allowing the United Nations and aid organisations to work freely in the neediest nations, inviting the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and signing and ratifying the international covenant on civil and political rights.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Last week I visited Burma, including Rakhine state, where 140,000 Rohingya Muslims have been displaced, along with Kaman Muslims, and I also saw Rakhines in camps. I saw first-hand what is happening and I concur with the hon. Gentleman that one of the fundamental issues for humanitarian access, or the lack of it, is the question of citizenship. The way things are practised and the reality of people's everyday lives is like apartheid. As well as the need to address the catastrophic humanitarian situation, especially ahead of the rainy season, the Government need to apply much greater pressure on the Burmese Government to resolve the question of citizenship as soon as possible.

Mr Burrowes: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and to the other hon. Members present who have raised this issue and spoken about the Rohingya people in particular. Arakan state, which she visited, with its predominantly Rohingya population, has been one of the most persecuted areas. It is striking that Médecins sans Frontières describes the Rohingya as one of the 10 people groups in the world most at risk of extinction. When one considers that there are approximately 1 million Rohingya in Burma, that is a chilling statistic. We must all take heed of that warning.

As the hon. Lady said, aid is an important responsibility of the UK Government. We must pay tribute to their record on aid. We are the major donor country for internally displaced people and are very much at the top of the tree in that regard. However, we must ensure that the aid gets to the right places. I therefore call on the UK Government to work alongside the Burmese Government and non-governmental organisations to continue to provide that aid and to ensure that there is an increase in the emergency aid for the tens of thousands of people who have been displaced in the Arakan and Kachin states.

Thirdly, I urge the Government to encourage the Burmese Government to establish initiatives to promote the important inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation. Fourthly, Burma should be included in the Foreign Secretary's pioneering preventing sexual violence initiative. We all commend that important initiative, but we have not yet heard that Burma will be included.

I sought to have this debate two weeks ago when the European Union lifted sanctions on Burma in recognition of its recent progress. We must recognise the work that has been done by the Burmese Government to overcome the deep divisions in parts of Burmese society, but we must also be honest and recognise the great obstacles that are yet to be overcome. We must look at the benchmarks that were set before the decision was made to suspend economic sanctions.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for securing the first Adjournment debate of the new Session on this important subject. Some of us in this House are very interested in Burma and have deep concerns about it. He is right that Burma has made progress, but I think we all recognise that it has to make further progress. Does he agree that the Burmese Government should allow the UN special rapporteur to conduct an independent investigation into the abuses in Rakhine state? Burma is setting up its own inquiry, but there needs to be a separate independent inquiry led by the UN. Mr Burrowes: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He secured an important Adjournment debate on the Rohingya people. It is important that we raise the concerns of Burma in every way we can.

As I said earlier, we should encourage Burma to offer an invitation to the UN special rapporteur. There should be witnesses to what is happening there. Many of us have raised the importance of witnesses and independent investigations in relation to conflicts in other parts of the world, not least in Sri Lanka.

However, those points need to be balanced with the need to encourage Burma along the way of democracy and recognising the rule of law. It must increasingly have its own robust, independent investigations. We must work alongside and in partnership with Burma. There should be an invitation for the UN special rapporteur, but we must also encourage Burma to step up. The early steps along the road to democracy must include the bringing to account of the perpetrators of the horrendous acts that I will go into in some detail.

When the decision was taken on economic sanctions, the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union set out several benchmarks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Burrowes: I will get to the benchmarks shortly, but first I will give way again.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being generous in giving way, as always. He has brought an important issue to the Floor of the House.

Does the hon. Gentleman feel that there has to be an embargo on the military equipment that the Burmese army is using against ethnic groups, and in particular against Christian groups? Does he agree that that would be one way of trying to address the cruel and violent activities of the Burmese army? My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) has been involved in some talks with the Burmese Government and with groups out there, and I believe he has some knowledge of ways to address the issue.

Mr Burrowes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. We will hear from the Minister about the sanctions that still apply to military equipment. That embargo continues, whereas economic sanctions have been lifted. We still need to be rigorous about military hardware, particularly given the responsibility shared by the military for acts of omission, not always of commission.

The benchmarks for the lifting of sanctions included “the unconditional release of remaining political prisoners and the removal of all restrictions placed on those already released”, an end to conflict in the country, “substantially improved access for humanitarian assistance” and “addressing the status and improving the welfare of the Rohingyas.”

It is therefore important that the Minister informs us whether, to the best of his knowledge—I recognise that it is not his primary responsibility in the Department—those criteria have been properly met. Does he also know why there was no reference in the EU Council conclusions to the situation in Kachin state? That is an interesting question.

Over the past year, Burmese minorities have suffered extraordinary attacks and human rights violations. Some of the most disturbing came when the Burmese army launched air strikes against Kachin Independence Army troops in Kachin state in December. The strikes lasted nearly a month. More than 100,000 Kachin civilians were internally displaced, and human rights organisations report cases of rape, torture, forced labour and killing of civilians.

The attacks followed an 18-month offensive by the Burma army, which broke a 17-year ceasefire with the KIA. In that offensive, human rights violations increased significantly, and 100,000 people fled their homes and remain displaced. Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which I commend along with other organisations for highlighting the extent of the abuse, discovered horrific incidents of human rights being breached. One man told of how his wife was raped by Burmese soldiers and is assumed dead, but the Supreme Court in Naypyidaw dismissed all charges against the Burmese military, reinforcing the sense of many that the Burmese military have effective impunity. Other stories tell of children shot, a grandmother gang-raped and homes and churches destroyed and looted.

The marginalisation of Muslims takes its fullest and most monstrous form in a majority Rohingya area such as Arakan, but it is not limited to those areas. That is why we need to challenge the Burmese Government, and Burma in general, about how systemic the discrimination and abuse of human rights are. Even in the more progressive cities, Muslims are no strangers to discrimination. The 969 campaign, for example, attempts to ban Muslims from any non-Muslim shops. The fact that that is occurring in the cities is a symptom of the divisions that sadly run deep through Burmese society. The feelings that are manifested in segregated shops in Yangon are manifested in banning the sale of food to Rohingyas in Arakan state. There, many Arakanese block the Rohingya’s food supply. One Rohingya man was reportedly told, “We will stop all food for you, and do you know why? We’ll do it so you’ll leave here quickly and permanently.”

Rushanara Ali: I thank the hon. Gentleman for generously giving way again. The Rakhine commission reported last week and was not even willing to accept the term “Rohingya” as an ethnic group. The Rohingya Muslim population were referred to as “Bengalis” to deny them their Burmese and ethnic citizenship rights, which go back hundreds and hundreds of years—they would say to the seventh century, not to 1826 and the British period. Some may mistakenly think that this is about recent migration. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the British Government ought to produce a response to the Rakhine commission setting out our concerns about what seems like a whitewash, and requiring international attention and independent scrutiny of what is happening?

Mr Burrowes: I am sure the Minister will respond to that point, but in addition, in July the monks’ association in Mrauk U released a statement saying that the Rohingya “want to destroy the land of Arakan... and plan to exterminate Arakanese people and use their money to buy weapons to kill Arakanese people... from today, no Arakanese should sell any goods to Bengalis, hire Bengalis as workers, provide any food to Bengalis and have any dealings with them, as they are cruel by nature.”

Such incitement infects people’s view of the Rohingya. Many Arakan believe that the Rohingya are determined to destroy Burma and that mosques double as weapons stores, and sadly such beliefs permeate supposedly decent society. Indeed, such terms were mentioned in the recent report by Human Rights Watch, published—ironically—in the week sanctions were lifted. A statement released by the monks of one sangha proclaimed: “The ‘Arakan Ethnic Cleansing Program’ of bad pagans...taking advantage of our kindness to them, is revealed today.”

It is important to hear from those who are suffering—sadly—at the hands of Buddhist monks who are

forcing the Arakanese population to isolate Rohingya communities, teaching them that the Rohingya plan to exterminate them. One man was killed for selling rice to Rohingya, and sadly, public statements and pamphlets urging ethnic cleansing are common. The Arakanese are provoked to attack Muslim communities and mosques, believing that all Rohingya are terrorists. The police rarely step in, often watching the carnage unfold. One Muslim in Arakan told how his neighbour's house was burned down one early evening, although 15 police were watching outside.

In its compelling report last month, Human Rights Watch found that following the violence and abuses last June, some security forces in Arakan state were destroying mosques and Muslim homes. A Rohingya woman from Sittwe said: "Many houses were left standing but they were destroyed by the Government, not the Arakanese. There was nothing wrong with our house. It was still there" after the violence. In Sittwe, the local government is reported to have destroyed five structurally sound mosques, saying they were "not good to look at."

It is little wonder that one Rohingya said: "The police are Arakanese, too. They hate us."

Following hostilities, the police and army arrested many Rohingya, some as young as eight, and transferred them to unknown locations. One UN official reported "torture, humiliating torture. They are kept without food, water, clothes...beatings can start immediately, even in the street...people die from beatings." Even United Nations and non-governmental organisation staff have been imprisoned on trumped-up charges and denied their basic rights.

Perhaps the most haunting stories are those from the days following the atrocities as mass graves are dug and filled. One man spoke of seeing "trucks full of dead bodies...The smell was terrible."

As mentioned previously in the House, one Arakanese attack in October resulted in the deaths of 70 or more Rohingya in one village. Two days later, villagers began digging individual graves for Rohingya killed in the massacre, but police and army officials made them dig mass graves so that the bodies would be buried quicker. A Rohingya man said that they buried 30 children who had been stabbed to death.

Such stories evoke uncomfortable memories of other areas of cleansing and indeed genocide, and that is before we consider the persecution of Christians in Chin state, which has been previously raised in the House, or the recent violence in Shan state, Oakkon, Meikhtila and Rakhine state. The horrors of people squeezing into small boats and trying to flee across the bay of Bengal is another tragedy that could take up a debate of its own.

As I said, this debate was originally scheduled for two weeks ago, yet even since then, severe crimes have been perpetrated. Last Tuesday at 10 am in Oakkon township, a Muslim lady had an accident with a young novice monk and broke his monk's begging bowl. She apologised and offered compensation, but what did the police do? They charged her with blasphemy. A mob of hundreds of people surrounded the police station, demanding she be handed over to them. At 1 pm, mobs looted 200 Muslim properties, destroyed two mosques and burned down an Islamic school in the township. At 4 pm, three other villages were arson attacked—three mosques and hundreds of Muslim houses were burned down. When the mobs heard that the army was coming, they left and burned down six other Muslim villages for good measure on their way. That was all in one day, last week.

I therefore urge the Government to do everything possible in their power to continue to seek the protection and recognition of Burmese minorities such as the Rohingya. The British Government took the lead in pushing for EU sanctions to be imposed. Now that the sanctions have been lifted, they should take the lead to ensure they have not been lifted in vain, and that there is no further relaxation of pressure until those issues are addressed. We recognise that with freedom comes responsibility. The encouragement of greater economic freedom must be matched by the greater responsibility of taking human rights abuses seriously. The House must recognise that the solution to the divisions in Burma will be found not only by the actions of the Burmese Government. Nevertheless, they must take a lead on helping to reconcile communities. They cannot encourage respect and reconciliation while failing to recognise the citizenship rights of the Rohingya and other minorities. I therefore welcome the recent condemnation of the attacks on the Rohingya people by President Thein Sein, but now is the time for actions rather than just words.

The Burmese Government can give minorities back their rights by reforming the 1982 citizenship law. Then we can point to real progress in both treatment and attitude. The test of the new democracy in Burma will be how it treats its minorities, as it is in any democracy—that is the test that we seek to apply in this country and in all nations. If the Burmese minorities continue to be classified as less than citizens, Burma will have failed what we can call the Rohingya human rights test, by which we can judge how Burma’s democracy is functioning.

Let me ask the Minister to respond on the four actions that we can expect at the very least. We should urge full rights for all minorities, and continued and focused aid. We must support Government initiatives to promote inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue, and Burma must be included in the preventing sexual violence initiative.

I conclude not with my words, but with the recent words of Archbishop Charles Maung Bo, who has warned that “our fragile freedom...that...is just beginning to emerge could be snatched from our hands and Myanmar could descend into a vicious cycle of hatred, violence and turmoil”.

He has urged people to “promote inter-religious dialogue, peace and harmony, and work together to rebuild not only the physical structures of our country, but the hearts and minds of our people.”

As you well know, Mr Speaker, Burma is in a new dawn of democratic Government, but the light is yet to reach far too many people. I urge the Minister and all in the House not to let the Rohingya and other Burmese minorities be left forgotten in the shadows.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on introducing the debate. I rise to echo many of the sentiments he has expressed in such an eloquent and heartfelt manner.

It is right to welcome the positive changes that are taking place in Burma, including the increased space for civil society, media and democratic political actors; improvements in freedom of expression; the release of some political prisoners; and the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy in the parliamentary process. It is also right to recognise and encourage the efforts of reformers. However, as my hon. Friend has so graphically expressed, grave human rights violations continue and, as has been mentioned, none of the EU’s benchmarks have been fully met. Given the EU’s decision to lift sanctions, I urge the Minister to press the EU to spell out new ways in which it will prioritise, protect and promote human rights in Burma, and to send a strong message to the Government of Burma that, although sanctions have been lifted, the EU will not turn a blind eye to the continuing widespread violations of human rights there.

We can be encouraged by the Burmese Government’s intentions, such as those expressed by the Deputy Minister for Education and his emphasis on reform in the education system, including proposals to establish school councils consisting of outstanding students, designed, he said, “to enable students to be involved in school administration and to build up leadership skills”.

He emphasised human rights and peace education, citizenship responsibilities and ethnic harmony as part of the curriculum. On the subject of ethnic diversity, he said: “It is very important that there is peace, friendship and harmony. We do not want to live separately, we want to live side by side with the ethnic nationalities.” He also emphasised English language teaching and encouraged the idea of bringing in native English speakers to improve English language standards. I hope that is something that this country will actively encourage.

I hope too that we will actively encourage reform of the public sector. A conversation I had only the week before last with a leading representative of an NGO highlighted how almost two generations of the civil service, the police and the public sector need proper training and education in how to act professionally in those organisations.

In light of the recent grave disturbances, it is critical that the Government of Burma, all political leaders, religious leaders from all communities, civil society, the international community and NGOs work together to promote religious harmony and peace, national reconciliation, law and order, freedom of religion and belief, and wider human rights for all the people of Burma, and to take clear and immediate action to bring the

perpetrators of violence and hatred to justice and to counter hate speech and extremist propaganda of all kinds.

If concrete action is taken, the expression of good intent is converted into such action and political reforms develop from the current fragile change in atmosphere into a more substantive change of system, Burma has a real opportunity to achieve peace, freedom and democracy. I hope that this country will play its part. The international community must invest in urging the Government of Burma to address those grave violations of human rights that we have heard about this evening; in promoting inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation; in establishing a genuine peace process involving political dialogue—

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we should not see an amnesty for those who perpetrate sexual violence as a weapon of war and ethnic cleansing?

Fiona Bruce: I agree with my hon. Friend. If justice is to mean anything, it means bringing the perpetrators to rights.

The international community must avoid premature euphoria and remain vigilant in promoting human rights for all the people of Burma. As Aung San Suu Kyi has said, some countries “are going overboard with optimism, making the Government think that it is getting everything right”.

International policy towards Burma should be recalibrated to ensure that, while the reforms implemented so far are acknowledged, welcomed and encouraged, a strategy is adopted that combines pressure and critical constructive engagement, focusing on ending the grave violations of human rights, responding to the urgent humanitarian needs of the people, and countering religious and racial hatred and violence.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate and others to ask the Minister what he will propose to the EU in terms of additional pressure for improvements in human rights in Burma. I ask him to urge that the Government of Burma consider the immediate and unconditional release of all remaining political prisoners; action to end the use of torture and other violations of human rights in prisons and other detention facilities; the review and amending of the constitution in consultation with all political parties and ethnic nationalities; immediate and urgent action to tackle religious hatred and violence, to ensure adequate protection for all religious and ethnic communities and bring the perpetrators of religiously motivated violence and those who are complicit in such violence to justice, and to promote inter-religious dialogue, reconciliation and harmony; reform of the curriculum for religious education in schools to ensure that children are taught a basic understanding of all major religions and promote understanding and respect for all religions in Burma—

Fiona Bruce: I ask the Minister to ensure that the EU urges the Government of Burma to announce a nationwide ceasefire and establish a nationwide peace process with all ethnic armed resistance organisations, involving a genuine political dialogue in search of a political solution to decades of civil war; to immediately end all military offensives in Kachin state and northern Shan state, and establish a genuine peace process with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), involving a political dialogue; and to immediately end all violations of the ceasefire in Shan state. The EU should also urge the Government of Burma to allow unhindered and regular access for international and national humanitarian organisations to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to internally displaced peoples in Kachin state and Arakan state; to end violations of freedom of religion or belief and ensure protection of freedom of religion or belief, as defined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, in all parts of the country; to invite the UN special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief to visit Burma at the earliest opportunity—as has already been proposed by the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth)—with unrestricted access to all parts of the country, particularly to Muslim communities affected by recent violence; to sign and ratify the international covenant on civil and political rights without reservation; and lastly, again joining with my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate, to urgently review and amend or repeal the 1982 citizenship law, in accordance with international norms. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alistair Burt): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on securing this timely and important debate on the issues facing Burma. I thank him for his usual courtesy in giving us sight of his

speech so that I am able to refer to a number of the issues he raised. I also thank Members for attending the debate, a larger number than is usual for a late-night Adjournment debate, and for their obvious interest. There is no doubt that their interest in Burma, expressed over a lengthy period by their visits and interest in human rights issues—not least by yourself, Mr Speaker—has been supported by a number of their constituents. Allow me to set out the background to some changes before dealing with some of the issues raised by colleagues in their remarks.

The decision a year ago to suspend economic sanctions against Burma was a key step in encouraging the regime to continue down the road of democratic reform. The decision on 22 April by EU Foreign Ministers to lift those sanctions, except the arms embargo, recognises the significant progress that has been made. By-elections a year ago gave Aung San Suu Kyi and her party 42 seats in Burma's Parliament. Ceasefire agreements have been signed with 10 out of the 11 ethnic armed groups. We have seen many hundreds of political prisoners released. Daily newspapers are now sold on the streets of Rangoon, free from censorship. Those are real benefits to ordinary Burmese people who want to live, work and raise their families free from fear. As Aung San Suu Kyi herself said, "It is time we let these sanctions go...we can't go on relying on sanctions for ever to aid the democracy movement."

While it is right that we acknowledge the strides Burma has made towards reform since President Thein Sein took office in 2010, it is also right that we continue to express our concerns and take action. That same balance has been echoed by those who have spoken in the debate. Human rights remain at the heart of UK policy and our discussions with the Burmese Government. By lifting EU sanctions, we have paved the way for deeper engagement on issues of concern. Our engagement has, to date, yielded progress in a number of areas. The United Kingdom is supporting peace negotiations and reconciliation to turn ceasefires with ethnic armed groups into political dialogue. In Kachin state, we are cautiously optimistic about early engagement between the Burmese Government and the Kachin Independence Organisation. We recognise that a ceasefire agreement will require time and effort.

The language of the EU Council conclusions—referred to by a number of Members—which accompanied the lifting of sanctions highlights the need for action to address the conflict in Kachin state. The EU will not be short of determination to exert pressure in that regard, and we will not be short of determination to press our EU partners. We have said to both sides that we stand ready to support the process in any way we can. On 15 April, the Burmese Minister for the President's office, Aung Min, led a delegation to London, where they met the Foreign Secretary and other political figures before travelling to Northern Ireland to learn from our experiences there. Once again, people were given an opportunity to learn about reconciliation from the pain and difficulty experienced in Northern Ireland, and also from the political leadership that it has provided in recent years.

Hundreds of political prisoners have been released, and are now being reintegrated into society. On 23 April, the Burmese Government announced the further release of more than 50. We are delighted that prominent members of the "88 Generation" of former political prisoners will visit the UK in June. However, about 200 remain in prison. We will continue to put pressure on the Burmese Government to ensure that their political prisoner review mechanism is comprehensive and transparent, leading to the release of all political prisoners, which was one of the requests listed by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce).

Britain is Burma's largest bilateral aid donor. We are providing £187 million between 2011 and 2015 to support education, health care and governance. Despite its massive development potential, Burma remains one of the poorest countries in south-east Asia. Lasting prosperity for the Burmese people will also come from responsible business investment, which will create much-needed jobs and opportunities for training and education. That is why, last month, G8 Foreign Ministers, under British chairmanship, endorsed the Burmese Government's calls for responsible investment in Burma.

Responding to a request from Aung San Suu Kyi, we are supporting the development of Burma's Parliament and strengthening democratic accountability. Last month, three Burmese Members of Parliament visited the UK to learn about budget scrutiny. That work will grow and continue.

Jonathan Ashworth: May I ask a question about bilateral aid? Will the Minister tell us—or otherwise arrange for a letter to be placed in the Library, or write to hon. Members—about the financial and technical

assistance that we are offering to the various United Nations and humanitarian agencies, particularly those that are working in Rakhine state? Will he also tell us whether we are offering similar support to agencies which are working with refugees and asylum seekers who are in Bangladesh, having fled from Burma?

Alistair Burt: We are offering such support, but I probably could provide more detail by placing a letter in the Library. I do not want merely to come out with the obvious platitudes and say that we are engaged in that respect, because of course we are.

Rushanara Ali: Is the Minister aware that the non-governmental organisations that have been working to support Rakhine refugees in Chittagong do not have access to the camps, and that the position is getting worse? Will he ensure that his colleagues in the Department for International Development apply pressure on the Government of Bangladesh to ensure that access is provided? We are a major donor to Bangladesh, and it is not clear why we are not applying such pressure. Bangladesh does not even accept the existence of an informal camp.

There is also the question of humanitarian access, involving the international multilateral institutions that we support. The World Health Organisation has not been doing enough work to get assistance to people who desperately need health care, and there is a major issue of segregation in the hospitals. That is costing lives. Will the Minister make further representations?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Warsi takes these matters extremely seriously, and she has, indeed, pressed Bangladesh on this issue. She has taken this issue directly to the Bangladeshis. It is not a matter on which the United Kingdom can give a guarantee, of course, but I assure the hon. Lady that the UK takes very seriously the issues of access and recognition for refugees that are facing Bangladesh.

Jim Shannon: The Minister will be aware that Human Rights Watch produced a report that agreed that ethnic cleansing had taken place. Has he applied any pressure either through our Government or Europe to ensure that that report's findings are made known and action is taken?

Alistair Burt: The Human Rights Watch report contained a number of disturbing and specific allegations, which we believe are backed up by comprehensive evidence. We are following up on them with the Burmese Government. If serious crimes have been committed, those who perpetrated them must be held accountable for their actions. We, too, take that report as extremely credible.

I had just reached the "but" point in my remarks about Burma. While recognising that some progress has been made, and having responded to that sense from colleagues, there is a "but", and, as colleagues know, it is a big "but".

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made abundantly clear: "The work of the EU in Burma is not remotely finished."

There are many significant challenges facing the Burmese people, particularly on human rights and ethnic reconciliation. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate and other colleagues who have spoken for again bringing to the attention of the House the many extremely concerning examples of human rights violations, and for further highlighting the urgent action that the Burmese Government, with the support of the international community, must take. I also thank the non-governmental organisations and others who are engaged in this difficult work, including some friends of ours, such as Ben Rogers.

The UK was one of the leading voices behind this year's UN Human Rights Council resolution on Burma. The resolution recognised progress had been made, but highlighted Burma as a country of concern to the international community and extended the mandate of the UN special rapporteur for a further 12 months. It called on the Burmese Government to adhere to a number of pledges, including opening an in-country office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights and signing up to the international covenant on civil and political rights, which my hon. Friend rightly highlighted in his speech.

During a visit to Burma in December, the Minister for Asia, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), pressed senior Government Ministers there to make progress on both these points, as

well as on the convention against torture and its optional protocol. We will continue to lobby the Burmese Government to ensure that they make progress against these and all their human rights commitments.

We continue to raise our concerns about human rights abuses in Kachin state. During the visit of my right hon. Friend the Member for Asia, he pressed the Burmese Government—[Interruption.] I should have said the Minister for Asia; my right hon. Friend's constituency may be large, but it is not that large. He pressed the Burmese Government to ensure humanitarian access to all conflict-affected populations in Kachin state. The Department for International Development has allocated £3.5 million to support humanitarian needs in Kachin, making the UK the largest bilateral donor there. This aid is helping meet food security, shelter, water, sanitation, health, and bedding needs, and it is reaching conflict-affected areas. We continue to call for unhindered humanitarian access at every opportunity.

Sexual violence, which my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate also rightly raised, is an issue that the Foreign Secretary has made a key priority. The British Government proactively lobby the Burmese Government on the rights of women, particularly the need to take measures to prevent sexual violence against women in conflict areas. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia raised this issue with Burmese Ministers during his visit in December.

We are also taking a number of targeted actions. We provide support to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement to fulfil the Burmese Government's obligations under the convention for the elimination of discrimination against women, to which they are a signatory. We support legal assistance centres in Burmese refugee camps in Thailand, which can help support victims of rape to secure access to justice, and we work closely with the UN in Rakhine state to strengthen its work to prevent, and respond to, sexual violence there. Our embassy in Rangoon is exploring options to increase our engagement on this concerning issue.

Mr Burrowes: I am grateful for the Minister's comments about the work to prevent sexual violence. May I take it that Burma is included in the prevention of sexual violence initiative, in which the Foreign Secretary is taking a key lead? Is Burma one of the countries included in the initiative?

Alistair Burt: I do not believe that Burma is technically included at present, but not all the countries in which we consider sexual violence to be a matter are necessarily included in the initiative at this stage. The point I was making is that this area is of significance to the Government and the Foreign Secretary, and if somewhere is not technically included in an initiative, that should not be taken as indicating a lack of interest or engagement. The points will still be made, and my right hon. Friend will have taken the point made by my hon. Friend.

The United Kingdom has been one of the most vocal members of the international community in calling for action in Rakhine state, and we continue to lobby on the issue internationally. The UK requested the recent briefing in April of the UN Security Council by the UN special envoy, and the Minister for Asia was the first EU Minister to visit in the aftermath of the violence last year. We note the release of the Rakhine commission report on 29 April into the causes of last year's violence, and we are examining its many detailed recommendations—that deals with the point about our response made by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). We have consistently called on the Burmese Government to take action to meet humanitarian needs, ensure security and accountability, and to address the rights of the Rohingya people to citizenship. We are of course deeply concerned by Human Rights Watch's most recent report, which contained a number of disturbing allegations. We regularly raise specific allegations of human rights abuses with the Burmese Government at the most senior levels, and we will continue to do so.

Some 140,000 internally displaced people, mostly Rohingya, are living in overcrowded camps vulnerable to flooding. When my right hon. Friend Baroness Warsi met the Minister responsible for Rakhine state on 15 April, he pledged to ensure that all those at risk would be moved to safe areas. Lobbying alongside the UN, the United States, Australia and the EU, we have also strongly reinforced the message—as I indicated a moment ago—that NGOs operating in Rakhine state must be granted the freedom to operate, free from bureaucratic constraints. We gave £2 million over the past financial year to support humanitarian efforts in Rakhine state, and we are considering new plans to contribute to efforts to support and protect the displaced this year.

Further violence will be averted only through security and the establishment of the rule of law, and we again call on the Burmese Government to uphold those. All those guilty of having instigated, incited or carried out violence in Rakhine state need to be held accountable for those crimes. This should be done through a just, clear and transparent process, but it must be done.

The plight of the Rohingya, a people who have lived in Burma for many centuries, will not be resolved until the long-term issue of their citizenship is addressed. It is essential that the Burmese Government uphold the rights of all individuals, including the right of the Rohingya to nationality and freedom of movement. We note the Rakhine commission report's recommendations in that regard and we will push to ensure that the solution meets the criteria I have set out.

As Members have indicated this evening, we are also extremely concerned about the violence directed against Muslim communities in other parts of Burma. The attacks against Muslims in central Burma in March and in Oakkan, near Rangoon, just last week point to a highly worrying new trend. We continue to make our concerns very clear. More work needs to be done by the Burmese Government to bring the organisers and perpetrators of violence to account. Both Baroness Warsi and the Foreign Secretary raised our concerns with senior Burmese Ministers on 15 and 16 April. Along with the EU, in response to a request from the Government and Aung San Suu Kyi, we are reviewing what steps we might take to assist with police and security reform.

As well as upholding the rule of law and ensuring accountability, the Burmese Government must tackle the hostility underlying the recent attacks. President Thein Sein's speech earlier this week, in which he called on Burmese citizens to stand up against hatred and to reach out to those of different beliefs and backgrounds, will be an important starting point. We have provided funds for inter-faith dialogue in Burma, and will continue to do so, in order to build trust between communities. We have encouraged the Burmese Government to issue a formal invitation to the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit Burma and assess the situation.

After almost half a century of repression, the last two years have seen Burma make progress towards the goal of being a freer and more democratic nation, but as the House indicates, and as my remarks have set out, there is still much to do to achieve greater democracy. To make progress, Burma must deal with the ethnic conflict it faces and tackle discrimination against minority groups. As colleagues know, this is not my normal area within the portfolio, although I have spoken on Burma before and, as a practising Christian, it pains me to see how religion is used, and faith is abused, to separate people and inflict cruelty and wickedness on others. We see that time and again in too many other places. We need religious leaders of all faiths to speak out against such actions constantly, so that faith is not abused in the way we have heard described tonight.

We will continue to engage with the Burmese Government to shape the process of reform. We want the United Kingdom to contribute with meaningful and targeted assistance, whether in reforming the economy or supporting Burma's nascent institutions. Above all, we will ensure that human rights and ethnic reconciliation remain high on the agenda.

This is just the beginning of a process which could transform the lives of millions of people. It will not be completed overnight; it will take time. The British Government and the European Union will continue to be a constructive, supportive and critical partner, committed to support reform moves under the President and Aung San Suu Kyi, in order to see a stable, prosperous, more democratic Burma, where the human rights of all people will be respected. The House, and those we represent, will accept nothing less.

Discussion on Burma in Queen's Speech Debate (5th Day), House of Lords

15 May 2013

Baroness Northover: The fifth area is the UK's work in Burma, where we continue to shape the reform process. The past two years have seen the release of political prisoners, credible by-elections, initial ceasefire agreements and steps towards increasing humanitarian access to conflict areas. However, Burma needs to bring all ethnic groups into the process. We will continue our important work with Burma, including

on inter-faith issues, and we are reviewing how we might assist with police reform.

Baroness Cox: My Lords, I wish to offer first-hand accounts of causes of deep concern in three countries I have visited this year. The first concerns Burma where there are welcome reforms but many problems remain, including severe violations of human rights affecting ethnic and religious minorities such as the predominantly Muslim Rohingya, the Christian Kachin and the Buddhist Shan peoples.

The Rohingya people have suffered horrifying waves of violence, displacing at least 130,000, with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of deaths. Moreover, security forces have often failed to prevent the killing of civilians and destruction of Muslim homes, shops and other property. Those forced to flee to camps are living in conditions of appalling squalor, many dying from disease without medical care.

May I ask the Minister what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken to press the Burmese Government to ensure that security forces act swiftly to protect vulnerable communities, arrest and prosecute perpetrators of violence, prevent the spread of anti-Muslim propaganda and hate speech, and end impunity? May I also ask whether Her Majesty's Government have raised with the Burmese Government the denial of citizenship for the Rohingya people, who, despite living in Burma for generations, exist as a stateless people?

I turn briefly to the plight of the Kachin people. In June 2011, the Burmese Army broke a long-standing ceasefire with Kachin state and fighting continues. I visited Kachin state in February and saw the dire predicament of at least 100,000 people displaced from their homes by military offensives and human rights violations by the Burmese Army, with killing of civilians, arbitrary arrests, torture, rape and destruction of villages. At least 66 churches have been destroyed in the past year. May I ask what efforts Her Majesty's Government are making to press the Burmese Government to end these military offensives and engage in a meaningful peace process with the Kachin and other ethnic nationalities?

Persistent violations of ceasefires also continue in Shan state, where the Burmese army continues to attack Shan people and to commit grave human rights abuses. May I ask whether Her Majesty's Government will press the Burmese Government to ensure unhindered access for humanitarian assistance to all conflict-affected states, and what humanitarian assistance Her Majesty's Government are providing? As the monsoon season approaches, the current dire humanitarian situation could become catastrophic.

The ethnic national peoples of Burma fear that the warm welcome given by the international community to the reforms will result in massive investment, which the Burmese Government will use for more exploitation of the resource-rich lands of the ethnic national peoples, with further expropriation and displacement. As one of the Shan leaders said to us with deep concern, "When the lights went on in Rangoon, all the world rushed there and no one stopped to see us in the darkness". Given the decision to lift EU sanctions on Burma, may I ask the Minister what measures the EU, including the United Kingdom, will use to pressure the Burmese Government to stop these human rights violations, ensure genuine constitutional change, which includes a just political settlement for the ethnic nationalities, and bring an end to these decades of war and oppression?

Our friends in Burma, Sudan and South Sudan passionately hope that we will hear more substantive promises from the Minister—if not tonight, in due course—to bring encouragement to people who have suffered too much for too long at the hands of Governments who continue to kill and inflict suffering on so many of their own people in Burma and Sudan with virtual impunity.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence (Lord Astor of Haver): My noble friend Lord Avebury and the noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, flagged up Pakistan. The new Pakistani Government will have an important responsibility to implement urgently needed economic and tax reforms. DfID works extensively on tax reforms in developing countries. In South Sudan, I can tell the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, that DfID has allocated £40 million to help with humanitarian aid in 2013. In Burma we have provided £2 million for humanitarian support, with a focus on water, sanitation and nutrition. The Foreign Secretary and Aung San Suu Kyi agreed two weeks ago that it was time for the EU to move beyond sanctions.

**Press Release - Rushanara Ali MP, Shadow Minister for International Development, reports back on her visit to Burma with Refugee International
21 May 2013**

Following the violence that erupted between Muslim and Buddhist communities in Rakhine State in June and October 2012, Shadow Minister for International Development, Rushanara Ali MP, reported back from a trip to Burma where she visited Rohingya, Kaman and Rakhine camps in Rakhine State and met with NGOs, UN agencies and Rohingya activists. She said:

“I am grateful to Refugees International and Burma Campaign UK for giving me the unique opportunity to witness firsthand the catastrophic humanitarian situation that is unfolding in Rakhine State. Nearly a year since inter-communal violence first broke out, which overwhelmingly targeted the Rohingya population, tens of thousands of people are living in makeshift camps lacking food, water, sanitation, adequate shelter and access to healthcare. The violence has not only caused massive internal displacement, but also a tragic loss of life, livelihoods and property. Muslim and Buddhist communities that previously lived side-by-side remain deeply divided with violence spreading, including against Muslims in other parts of the country.

“During my visit, I had the opportunity to meet many internally displaced people who have lost their homes and are living in dire makeshift camps and informal settlements, cut off from healthcare, clean water and basic necessities. A group of internally displaced women living in a camp in Pauktaw Township told me that many women had died in their camp since the October violence began because they could not access adequate maternal healthcare or travel to the nearest hospital due to restrictions on their movements and hospitals refusing to accept Muslim patients.

“Burma is prone to cyclones and flooding during the rainy season. With the monsoon rapidly approaching, there are serious concerns that flooding will exacerbate the humanitarian situation and increase the risk of water-borne diseases. Most of the shelters I saw were made of tarpaulin and rice bags that cannot withstand even moderate rains. With no formal plans or any sign of action from the Burmese authorities to move these camps or provide an alternative solution to address shelter needs, one Rohingya man told me that displaced people, particularly those living near the coast, were growing fearful for their lives ahead of the upcoming rainy season.

“Displaced people are living in constant fear of violence, abuse and harassment both from the security services and from fears of a further attack from sections of the Rakhine population. One of the recurring themes that came up in my discussions was the threat to their security and personal safety, which is one of the main factors preventing them from returning to their places of origin. At the heart of this humanitarian crisis lies the question of citizenship. The Rohingya population are referred to as “Bengalis” by the authorities denying them their Burmese and ethnic citizenship rights. An urgent resolution is needed to the Rohingya’s human rights and citizenship status.”

At an event chaired by Baroness Kinnock and jointly organised by the APPG Burma and the APPG Human Rights, a video documenting Rushanara’s trip was screened. Rushanara highlighted the need for:

- The UK government and the international community to press the Burmese authorities to facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access to Rakhine State and other parts of Burma.
- The UK government and the international community to make urgent shelter arrangements ahead of the rainy season and make healthcare and sanitation urgent priorities.
- The Burmese authorities must take steps to address the culture of marginalisation and discrimination of the Rohingya community in Burma, review and reform the 1982 Citizenship Law which renders the Rohingya stateless, denying them basic human rights.

**Press release – Department for International Development
Wednesday 15th May 2013**

BRITISH SUPPORT FOR BURMA’S DISPLACED PEOPLE

BRITAIN has pledged emergency food, drinking water and shelter to help people displaced in Rakhine State in western Burma.

Minister for International Development Alan Duncan and Foreign Office Minister for South East Asia Hugo Swire today announced a £4.4 million package of humanitarian support for people displaced by violence and facing the additional threats of the rainy season and approaching storms.

Britain's package of emergency assistance will provide:

- nearly 80,000 people with access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation facilities;
- malnourished children aged 0-59 months with treatment for acute malnutrition in rural camps; and
- hygiene kits to nearly 40,000 people.

Minister of State for International Development Alan Duncan said:

"Thousands of people displaced by violence in Rakhine State are currently extremely vulnerable. With the first tropical storm of the cyclone season due to hit the area this week, it is imperative that we respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

"British support will not only meet the immediate food, water and medical needs of the displaced, but give people protection from the elements for the future. The plight of the people of Rakhine State must not be ignored."

Foreign Office Minister for South East Asia Hugo Swire said:

"The UK has consistently led the way in providing aid to Rakhine State providing over £2 million in humanitarian aid since the unrest in the state last year. When I visited Rakhine in December 2012 I called for action from the Burmese government and the international community. There has been some progress but 140,000 people still live in temporary shelter that will be unable to withstand the oncoming rainy season. The Burmese government and the international community through the UN must step up to the plate.

"The UK recognises that other problems remain and will not be resolved overnight. The recent Human Rights Watch report outlines some horrific accounts of violence and intimidation; we have consistently said to the Burmese government that there can be no impunity for those guilty of acts of violence."

Notes to editors

1. Inter-communal violence between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State in western Burma in early June, and attacks on Muslim communities in late October, led to widespread displacement.
2. Following the second cycle of violence, the number of displaced persons increased from 70,000 to an estimated 140,000 across 89 locations, including both camps and host villages.

All Party Parliamentary Group for Democracy in Burma

On 21st May 2013, APPG Burma & APPG Human Rights Group jointly organised a meeting with Rushanara Ali MP, Shadow Minister for International Development and David Mepham, UK Director of Human Rights Watch.

At this meeting, Rushanara Ali MP discussed her recent trip to Burma where she visited Rohingya, Kaman and Rakhine camps in Rakhine State and met with various organisations and politicians, political activists, representatives from ethnic and religious organisations and civil society to witness firsthand the humanitarian crisis situation that is unfolding in Rakhine State.

David Mepham presented a recent report by Human Rights Watch "All you can do is Pray: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Rakhine State", which documents the role of the Burmese government and local authorities in the forcible displacement of more than 125,000 Rohingya and other Muslims, and the on-going humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State.

There was a short film screening, documenting Rushanara Ali MP's visit to IDP camps with Refugees International in Rakhine State.

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

ROHINGYA MUSLIM PERSECUTION IN MYANMAR

Date tabled: 20.05.2013

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

Total Signatures: 8

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