



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

A summary of Burma-related issues in the British Parliament

NOV
2014

Answers to Written Parliamentary Questions

Rohingya

25 November Dr Matthew Offord: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what guidance his Department has issued on the use of the word Rohingya in communications with the government of Burma.

Hugo Swire: No guidance has been issued and it is a word that we continue to use in communications with the government of Burma. The history of the word Rohingya is contested in Burma, but whatever the history we believe in the right of minorities to choose the name by which they are identified. I and other British Ministers are on record using the word Rohingya.

25 November 2014 Dr Matthew Offord: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what discussions his Department has had with his Burmese counterpart on the Rohingya in Burma forming a political party in that country.

Hugo Swire: Our Embassy in Rangoon have raised our strong concerns. We were disappointed about the recent passing of legislation by the Burmese Parliament that will deny holders of temporary registration cards the ability to form and join political parties. This affects a majority of the Rohingya and some 400,000 members of other minorities. We are also particularly concerned by an expected draft Bill that would deny these individuals the right to vote in next year's elections.

British Ministers and officials continue to raise our wider concerns about the treatment of the Rohingya with Burmese counterparts. I did so in October with the Minister of Immigration and the new chief Minister of Rohingya State.

Political Prisoners

11 November 2014 Valerie Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what recent discussions he has had with his Burmese counterpart on the release of Mr Brang Yung and Mr Lahpai Gam; and what steps he is taking to ensure that all political prisoners in Burma are released unconditionally.

Hugo Swire: I have raised specific political prisoner cases, but not these two individuals. Nevertheless, the cause of political prisoners has long been one the UK has championed, and it is one that we continue to raise at the highest levels. Most recently I raised our concerns with Deputy Foreign Minister Thant Kyaw in June, and both the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) and the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) discussed political prisoners with President Thein Sein during his visit to London last year.

We welcome the release of thousands of political prisoners under the current Burmese government. However, we remain very concerned by the continued arrests, detentions and sentencing of political activists and we continue to lobby for the unconditional release of all political prisoners. I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 28 October 2014, Official Report, Column 168, in which I stated clearly that "One Political Prisoner is one too many".

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UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

24 November 2014 Meg Munn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, when he plans to publish the implementation plan for the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

James Duddridge: Although we have committed to develop and publish the UK's first Implementation Plan by the end of 2014, we in fact hope to publish the document before then.

The Implementation Plan will include indicators and baseline data and will build on the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security. It will be used to assess the impact of UK efforts on Women, Peace and Security throughout the life of this NAP. The Implementation Plan will focus on Afghanistan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Somalia and Syria; all countries facing very different situations but where more can be done to protect women; to involve them in building long-term security; and where the UK can make a real difference.

2015 Elections

18 November 2014 Douglas Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what representations the Government is making to the Burmese government on ensuring that elections in that country in 2015 are open, free and fair.

18 November 2014 Philip Hammond: The 2015 parliamentary elections will be a watershed for Burma's road to democracy. We have made clear to the Burmese government that we want to see inclusive and credible elections, underpinned by freedom of expression and respect for human rights. The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire) most recently discussed the elections with the Minister for Immigration in October, the Minister for Electric Power in July and the Deputy Foreign Minister in June.

The Department for International Development has allocated around £25m over five years to strengthen democratic governance, including support to the elections. UK funding will support the provision of technical advice to the Burmese election commission, voter education and monitoring and observation of the electoral process.

International Convention on Civil and Political Rights

5 November 2014 Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what recent representations he has made to his Burmese counterparts on ratification of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights.

Mr Hugo Swire: We have had a number of discussions with the Burmese government on the importance of Burma ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). I personally raised the importance of adhering to international human rights standards and encouraged the ratification of key human rights treaties with Burma's Deputy Foreign Minister when we met in June. At the request of the Burmese government the British Embassy in Rangoon recently funded an experts' visit to Burma to identify steps that would need to be taken and issues that would need to be considered to ratify the ICCPR.

Religious conversion law

5 November 2014 Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what assessment he has made of the draft religious conversion law proposed by the government of Burma.

Mr Hugo Swire: The Government has voiced our strong concerns over proposed legislation on religious conversion, both with members of the Burmese government and with Burmese parliamentarians. If enacted, this law would harm religious tolerance and respect for diversity in Burma, and contravene international standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. During my visit in January, I delivered a speech in which I called for greater religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. We continue to make clear that respect for freedom of religion and belief must be guaranteed.

Civil Servants: Languages

3 November 2014 Baroness Coussins: To ask Her Majesty's Government how many diplomatic staff and civil servants from each department or government agency have received or are receiving language training at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Language School.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: Since the Language Centre opened on 19th September 2013 a total of 45 different languages have been studied there either full or part-time by 813 students. Of those students, 779 are Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) staff and 34 are from other government departments (OGDs) (including staff from the following departments: Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office, the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, Home Office, Ministry of Justice, UK Trade and Investment, the Department for International Development, HM Revenue and Customs, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and the House of Commons). An additional 60 FCO staff have trained at the Institut Francais. Staff across the Civil Service can also access the FCO Language Centre library to continue to develop their own language skills outside formal study and 58 OGD staff have taken advantage of this offer so far.

It is important to note that when more appropriate, staff from OGDs also receive language training outside of the FCO Language Centre through use of the Civil Service-wide contract with Language Services Direct (the company that run the FCO Language Centre) or at the Institut Francais if French is required. Since September 2014, 113 OGD students have received language training on their own premises via the FCO contract.

The table below provides a breakdown of the languages that have been taught at the FCO Language Centre :

(...)
Burmese 1
(...)

For full list, see: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2014-10-23/HL2339/>

5 November 2014 Baroness Coussins: To ask Her Majesty's Government which languages have been studied by civil servants and diplomatic staff at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Language School; and how many civil servants and diplomatic staff have studied each language.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: Since the Language Centre opened on 19th September 2013 a total of 45 different languages have been studied there either full or part-time by 813 students. Of those students, 779 are Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) staff and 34 are from other government departments (OGDs) (including staff from the following departments: Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office, the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, Home Office, Ministry of Justice, UK Trade and Investment, the Department for International Development, HM Revenue and Customs, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and the House of Commons). An additional 60 FCO staff have trained at the Institut Francais. Staff across the Civil Service can also access the FCO Language Centre library to continue to develop their own language skills outside formal study and 58 OGD staff have taken advantage of this offer so far.

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Meetings with ASEAN Ambassadors

20 November 2014 Graham Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, on what dates he or his predecessors met the Ambassadors to the UK of the ASEAN countries in the last five years.

Hugo Swire: The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond) and his predecessor, the former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) have met ASEAN Ambassadors to the UK a number of times in the last five years. The full information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

In the last year, the Foreign Secretary met the Singapore High Commissioner on the 21 October during the State Visit by the President of Singapore. The former Foreign Secretary met the Indonesian Ambassador to the UK during his visit to Indonesia on 28-29 January 2014 and the Philippine Ambassador to the UK during his visit to the Philippines on 29-30 January 2014.

As the Minister responsible for our relations with Asia, I have held meetings in the past year with: the Philippine Ambassador on 10 December 2013; the Burmese Ambassador on 7 April 2014; the Bruneian High Commissioner and the Cambodian Ambassador on 14 July 2014; the Lao Ambassador on 5 August 2014; the Singapore High Commissioner on 9 October 2014; the Thai Charge D'Affaires on 13 October 2014; and the Vietnamese Ambassador on 12 November 2014. I have also met a number of the ASEAN Ambassadors at events throughout the year and with visiting delegations.

It is worth noting that, with the opening of the Lao Embassy in London on 6 November every ASEAN country is now represented in the UK, as is the UK in every ASEAN country.

Answers to Oral Parliamentary Questions

International conference on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons

17 November 2014 Angus Robertson: (...) A majority of G20 members, including the United States of America, have now committed to attending the international conference on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons which will take place in a few weeks in Vienna. I ask the Prime Minister to confirm: will the UK be attending—yes or no?

17 November 2014 The Prime Minister: First, I am very happy to congratulate Nicola Sturgeon on her election and appointment. One thing I noticed about the G20 was that almost every country made a point of saying how pleased it was that the UK had stayed together. It was a theme of unity, whether in discussions with the President of Burma or the President of the USA. On the Vienna conference, I will have to consider the hon. Gentleman's question and get back to him.

House of Commons debate on Human Rights in Burma

19 November 2014 Mr David Burrowes: It is a pleasure to have secured this debate, which follows my visit to Burma last month. Since then there have been much more notable visits, not least last week by President Obama and the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who were in the country for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations east Asia summit. President Obama delivered a clear and unequivocal message of concern that Burma's reform process, which began three years ago with such hope and was welcomed by Members in all parts of the House, has sadly stalled and in some respects gone into reverse. That is why the debate is particularly timely—it means that we can hear from the Government about their concern. I suggest that they will join the chorus of disapproval about the lack of progress on the reforms. The previous week, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi delivered the same message. I know that the Government listen carefully to her, and we need to respond accordingly.

At the same time, Harvard law school has published a report accusing the Burmese army of war crimes and crimes against humanity, following not just a fly-by look but a four-year investigation. I ask the Minister for his response to the suggestion that reforms have stalled and, in some respects, slid backwards. Do the Government agree with Harvard law school's conclusions that the military in Burma have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity? That backs up other human rights reports that we have brought to the House's attention over a number of years—it is good to see a number of friends of Burma in the Chamber. What Government action should follow?

I visited Burma just over a month ago courtesy of the human rights organisation Christian Solidarity Worldwide. We visited Rangoon and Myitkyina, the capital of war-torn Kachin state in the north of the country. I left with mixed feelings. One has to recognise that significant and welcome changes have occurred in Burma in the past three years. I had the privilege of delivering three public lectures focused on the relationship between parliamentary democracy, human rights and civil society. They were given to three distinct audiences: to the British Council in Rangoon, where I understand the Minister also spoke; to civil society and religious leaders in Kachin state, organised by a remarkable organisation called the Humanity Institute; and to at least 150 people from a range of political, ethnic and religious backgrounds, who in many ways represented the future of Burma—diversity in unity. They showed us the thirst for democracy and human rights. That meeting was organised by young activists from Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, in the restaurant that was previously the office of the father of democracy in Burma, the independence leader General Aung San.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for letting me intervene; I asked his permission beforehand. When the Nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010, many of us thought it was a move towards real democracy.

Unfortunately, as the hon. Gentleman said, more recently there has been persecution of Christians to such an extent that Burma is now 23rd on the world watch list in that respect. That indicates how much has happened. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about the persecution of Christians who are being brutally abused, attacked and killed and having their churches damaged as a result of their beliefs?

Mr Burrowes: I do, and one focus of my visit was to meet a number of Church leaders across Burma who are expressing the same concern. Although for some reason there is not quite the same visible outright discrimination, it is going on and people are not able to build churches. The army may leave, pagodas are put up, and Christian communities are displaced. I will go on to address concerns about religious liberty, not just for the Christian community but for the Muslim community, which is being severely persecuted.

I was accompanied on my visit by Ben Rogers of Christian Solidarity Worldwide. He is a remarkable young man whom many of us know well. He is a champion of democracy for Burma, and perhaps one symbol of progress was when we learned that his book "Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma's Tyrant" has, without his knowledge, been translated into Burmese and is being sold on street corners in its thousands. That is a good example of unstoppable momentum, and the thirst for freedom and democracy is shown by that distribution. The opportunities that I experienced when I visited would have been inconceivable three years ago.

It is right to welcome the fact that Burma has taken a significant step along the road to reform and democracy, but this House, with the particular responsibilities of this country, must highlight the serious concerns of and challenges facing the people of Burma. According to the Free Burma Rangers, which is a humanitarian organisation working in Burma's ethnic areas—it is very much in these areas that we see the worst situations—so far this year there have been 168 clashes between the Burmese army and armed ethnic resistance forces. That is at a time when the Government, the army and ethnic nationalities are engaged in ceasefire talks, and the Government promise a peace process. During that process, however, rape, torture and the killing of civilians continue, and a significant military offensive has continued in Shan state since June.

Valerie Vaz: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his trip with Ben Rogers to Burma. Does he agree that there are still concerns about the census? Britain gave £10 million towards the census, and the Rohingya have been excluded. Ahead of President Obama's visit, although 3,000 prisoners were released, I do not think any were political prisoners. Are we taking a step back in terms of constitutional change?

Mr Burrowes: I shall address a number of those points in my remarks, but yes, Britain has responsibility and involvement, and it supported the census, which in principle is a good approach. However, it has also brought into sharp relief the state of the Rohingya people, who are stateless. They are the most persecuted of peoples, not just in Burma but around the world, and their lack of full citizenship is a real litmus test for Burma.

I shall deal later with the constitutional issue, but the hon. Lady's point about political prisoners was well made. One does not have to look just at the visit of President Obama—when President Thein Sein came to this country, it was made clear that all political prisoners would be released. The Prime Minister welcomed that, as did we, but it has not come to fruition. People are playing about with what we mean by political prisoner, but in reality that crucial commitment has not been honoured.

Mr David Ward: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Does he have anything to report on Rakhine state action plan and the proposed resettlement of a large number of Rohingya out of their own area?

Mr Burrowes: When I was in Burma, leaked documents were in the public domain, and the issue is causing real concern. In the words of Human Rights Watch, if the plan was followed through it would be “a blueprint for permanent segregation and statelessness.”

The plan would involve the construction of temporary camps for those who refuse to abandon the name Rohingya, with a view to relocating them to third countries. That is abhorrent, and they would be forced or obliged to identify themselves as Bengali in order to be considered for citizenship. That plan certainly needs to be condemned and I hope the Minister will be able to do that.

Last week, the United States called for a new plan to be developed. I hope the Government can support that call. The UN Secretary-General called for the rights of the Rohingya people to be respected. This is a good opportunity for the Minister to make it abundantly clear, as he has done previously, that any plan that involves such segregation into camps and forces Rohingya to identify as Bengali is totally and utterly unacceptable.

Margot James: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I share his acknowledgement of the progress that Burma has made in the area of greater political freedoms, but when I visited Burma at the beginning of the year the apparatus of a police state was still in evidence. Citizens spoke to me in hushed tones, fearful of being overheard, about the oppression of the Rohingya Muslim minority, among other matters.

Mr Burrowes: That is right. It is easy for us, from afar, to see the obvious discrimination against the Rohingya people. Even those who are on the side of democracy and reform are challenged by the issue. We can see clearly that, in the long term, for there to be a truly democratic free state there have to be equal rights, including for the Rohingya people. The abuse of the Rohingya people continues. Fortify Rights has documented such abuses showing that Government authorities have been involved in trafficking Rohingya out of the country and profiting from it. I encourage the Minister to raise this subject directly with the Government of Burma.

I invite the Minister to give an assessment of the peace process and the steps our Government are taking to urge the Government of Burma and their military to observe ceasefires, stop further offences and stop the further militarisation that I saw and heard about, particularly in Kachin state. I was in Myitkyina and visited a camp for internally displaced Kachin people.

They were surviving in very basic conditions. Access to medical care and education was frankly woeful. They had fled their villages following attacks by the Burmese army. Their plea was genuine: “We want to go back to our villages but the army are still there and we do not feel secure. Our request is for genuine peace.”

We met the Kachin Independence Organisation, which is involved in negotiations. It saw a particular role for the United Kingdom:

“We Kachin are longing for the involvement of the United Kingdom as a strong advocate for peace.”
I invite the Minister to respond to that call.

While in Kachin state, I was particularly moved by meeting the wives of Kachin men who had been arbitrarily arrested, imprisoned and tortured. One told me how her husband’s torturers heated a knife in a fire and then sliced his skin, rubbed bamboo poles up and down his shins, subjected him to water torture and stamped on him. A man described being forced to kneel on very sharp stones with his arms outstretched as if on a cross, a physically painful position to be in for a long time but also a deliberate mockery of his Christian faith. A hand grenade was placed in his mouth. Others claimed that male prisoners were forced to engage in sex, and to beat each other with sticks.

I met another man, Brang Shawng, who, after reporting the rape—victimisation is going on; we are not just talking about historical abuse—and murder of his own daughter Ja Seng Ing by Burmese army soldiers, found that he was the one on trial, charged with defamation. That is unacceptable. There is a continuing catalogue of human rights abuses taking place. This is not just historical. Justice is not only being delayed but denied. No one is being called to account and we need to see that happening. Various institutions of government and the application of the rule of law are in their infancy, but the scale of human rights abuse and the lack of justice need proper attention.

The Humanity Institute told me that on the issue of sexual violence, on which our Government have rightly taken a lead with the preventing sexual violence initiative, Burma is, thankfully, on the list. It needs to be a priority case. The institute told me that there have been 12 cases of sexual violence in the past six months of 2014 in northern Shan state alone. In just that one part of Burma, there has been that much sexual violence, with the youngest victim reported to be three and the oldest 40.

Will the Minister reaffirm the Government’s commitment to urge the Burmese Government to stop the torture, the rape and the impunity and, crucially, to ensure that perpetrators are held to account? Will he also encourage my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, whom I have forewarned of this request, in his capacity as the Prime Minister’s special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict, to prioritise and visit Burma to address issues of sexual violence there? I hope that the commitment made will continue beyond the election. Burma is one place we need to visit if we are to tackle the perpetual use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

I met a representative of Burma’s Rohingya Muslims, whom I have referred to already and who, as others have pointed out, are among the most persecuted peoples in the world. Despite having lived in Burma for generations, they have been stripped of their citizenship and rendered stateless, and two years ago they suffered appalling violence that resulted in thousands living in dire conditions in camps. I visited a camp for internally displaced people that was in poor condition, and I understand from reports that the condition of these camps is absolutely shocking. The Rohingya continue to experience segregation and further dehumanisation. I ask the Minister, particularly in the light of the leaked action plan, to respond to these concerns.

Beyond the particular issue of the Rohingya people, wider religious intolerance against Muslims in Burma is causing serious concern. In the past two years, a wave of violence and hatred has swept the country. Aung San Suu Kyi, whom I had the privilege to meet, expressed concern about religious intolerance and said that some were using religion for political purposes. Will the Minister press the Burmese Government to hold to account all those inciting violence or hatred and to ensure inter-religious harmony? This is an opportunity for Burma, with its melting pot of religions, to show that freedom of religion is a foundation of true democracy.

The proposed legislation restricting inter-religious marriage and religious conversion, about which there is great concern, must be abandoned as soon as possible. Ultimately, however, the most significant test of Burma’s democratic reforms are the elections in 2015. During my visit, some were concerned that they would be postponed and that the Government were playing games, but I understand that the election commission in Burma has confirmed they will go ahead next October or November. However, Aung San Suu Kyi’s clear message to us was that they had to be fair, free and on time. Without amendments to the constitution enabling her to stand for the presidency; without international monitors in place some months before—Britain could play a role in that—to assess the climate in which the campaign is held; without

further legislative reform to end the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of activists and protesters; and without the release of all remaining prisoners, it is difficult to see how the elections can be free and fair. What pressure is being brought to bear on the Burmese Government to amend the constitution?

Britain and the international community must be vigilant and heed the words not only of Aung San Suu Kyi but of those I met from the different ethnic nationalities, civil society and so on, all of whom, without exception, told me that reforms had stalled. We need to ensure that further religious strife does not get in the way of true freedom and democracy.

Despite the gloom and despair over the lack of reform, I was most impressed by those who expressed the greatest determination and commitment to the pathway of democratic reform. I am talking about those who have the most reason to feel bitter and negative and to give up, the former political prisoners, who instead spoke to me about the culture of dialogue, about which they were still positive. It is the duty of this House and this Government to be on their side and to help ensure that society in Burma is free and fair.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on securing this debate, and I welcome his insights following his recent visit to Burma. I also pay tribute to his continuing work and indeed that of many right hon. and hon. Members across the House in supporting human rights and democracy in that country. As the House will know, I, too, take a close personal interest, and visited Rakhine state in 2012 and Kachin state earlier this year—the first western Minister to travel to the former and first British Minister to visit the latter since Burma's independence. In common with my hon. Friend, I visited camps for internally displaced people in both places, and I agree with him on the dire conditions that they face.

The British Government unapologetically support Burma's transition. Unlike some, we have always seen the need to encourage the green shoots of reform where they exist, but I can assure the House that human rights remain firmly at the heart of our engagement, even if those who do not share our approach are determined to find ways sometimes to suggest otherwise. Being a true friend to Burma has meant being an honest and sometimes a critical friend, and we have been honest that much more needs to be done. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward), my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate, raised the plight of the Rohingya, which is one of the greatest challenges Burma faces. The UK is giving £12 million in humanitarian support to Rakhine state and a further £4.5 million towards projects that support livelihoods. Some of the Burmese Government's steps to address the complex and inter-related challenges in Rakhine state are to be welcomed, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate rightly points out, parts of the Rakhine action plan would, if implemented, undermine the prospects for peaceful co-existence and stability across Rakhine state.

I made our concerns very clear again when I met the Burmese Minister for Immigration and the Rakhine Chief Minister during their visit to London in October. I also repeated our concern that the Rohingya had been unable to self-designate their ethnicity during the census.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate mentioned Kachin in particular. We welcome the continuing peace talks between the Burmese Government and all the ethnic armed groups, and agreement was reached to work towards a national ceasefire and a political dialogue. I have serious concerns, however, about the continued fighting in Kachin state and northern Shan state, as well as about continued reports of human rights violations. I raised these concerns directly with the northern commander in Kachin during my visit in January. During that visit, I, too, was able to meet the Christian Baptist convention and the Shan ethnic minority group to hear about the human rights abuses they have suffered.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of the trafficking of the Rohingya across the region, and I share his concern. As is well known, this Government have a strong track record of opposing trafficking wherever it is to be found. We have regularly raised the issue with the Burmese Government, and I discussed it with the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister when I met him in the Asia-Europe meeting in Milan in October. My hon. Friend raised, too, the proposed legislation on inter-faith marriage and religious conversion. We have made clear to Burmese parliamentarians and Ministers that, if enacted, these laws would contravene international standards and treaties to which Burma is a signatory.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue—he always does in these and other debates, and quite rightly, too—of violence against Christians. Foreign Office officials regularly meet representatives of all Burmese faiths, here and in Burma, to discuss these matters, which are of great concern to us.

Sexual violence was another significant and important issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate. I raised this directly with the Minister for Immigration in October, and with the President's office, the commander in chief and the northern commander during my visit in January. Notwithstanding the horrific stories that my hon. Friend has related to us, I welcome, as he would and did, the Burmese Government's endorsement of the declaration, following considerable lobbying from the UK, by attending the global summit in June, to which he alluded. However, I will continue to encourage the Burmese Government to follow up their commitments with concrete action. It is of course for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—who, I am sure, follows our proceedings closely, and will read the report of the debate in Hansard tomorrow morning—to decide whether to pursue the matter.

I share my hon. Friend's deep concern about the extremely serious findings of the Harvard law school report. A judgment on whether war crimes have been committed—an issue that has often raised in the House, although I do not think that it has been raised by the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz)—is, of course, a matter for the courts. However—this is in response to my hon. Friend's points about accountability—we have made it absolutely clear to the Burmese Government that any allegations of human rights abuses, including these, must be dealt with by a clear, independent and transparent judicial process that meets international standards.

Both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Walsall South raised the issue of political prisoners. In March 2011, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported that 2,073 political prisoners were being held in Burma. In October 2014, it reported that 75 were being held. During the intervening time, some 2,000 political prisoners had been released.

I am well aware that arrests and sentencing of political activists continue, and that some of those activists have been released and re-arrested several times. As I said in response to a question from the hon. Member for Colchester (Sir Bob Russell) in the most recent session of Foreign Office questions, “one political prisoner...is one too many”.—[Official Report, 28 October 2014; Vol. 587, c. 168.]

We will continue to lobby until all political prisoners in Burma have been released unconditionally. My hon. Friend asked what pressure we are putting on the Burmese Government to amend the constitution and hold credible elections. The Prime Minister raised both issues with President Thein Sein earlier this month at the G20 summit in Brisbane, and I have raised them with Ministers several times. Inclusive and credible elections are obviously critical for Burma's future, and the international community is watching very closely during the months that lead up to those elections.

Mr Burrowes: What about the suggestion that international monitors should be present for the lead-up to the elections?

Mr Swire: We would certainly want to consider that. Ultimately, it is for the Burmese Government to decide whether to accept international monitors, but the international community would be reassured that the elections were fair, transparent and credible—all the things that we are calling for—if they could be independently and internationally observed. I always think that, by default, elections should be observed by international figures other than those who are benefiting from or taking part in them. I think that that is manifestly a good thing and that we should encourage it—not just in elections in Burma, the United Kingdom or any other country, but in any elections—in order to ensure that things are done properly and in accordance with norms and, of course, the law.

We know that much more needs to be done in Burma, and, as we approach the elections, we also know that progress, as we see it, is not necessarily guaranteed. We remain in close contact with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who has made it clear that the reform process is going through a difficult phase and that reforms have stalled in some areas. We are by no means complacent. We also recognise the significant steps that the Burmese Government have taken, and we are realistic. A transition from a dictatorship was never going to be easy. As President Obama said during his visit to Burma last week, “change is hard and it doesn't always move in a straight line”.

It is now vital that we do not stand back and simply say that it is all too difficult. Throughout the United Kingdom there is a deep well of support for Burma's efforts to fulfil its enormous potential. We therefore need to maintain Britain's full-blooded engagement with all parts of Burma's society—which will include the valuable contribution of our parliamentarians—and to do everything possible to maintain the momentum on this difficult road to democracy.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate for the opportunity to set out, yet again, the Government's position on Burma.

Burma mentioned in Public Bill Committee debate on International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Bill

11 November 2014 Fiona Bruce: (...) I have a few points on the body of expertise and the learning curve that ICAI has gone through since 2011, which is so valuable. The International Development Committee called the commissioner of ICAI as a witness for expert opinion on its investigation into Burma and democracy there. In fact, the IDC does not just meet ICAI informally when it produces its reports, but, as of December last year, all our Committee hearings are held in public and broadcast. We have formal witness sessions, which are proving increasingly effective in connecting with the public and the wider development world. It is interesting that ICAI took note of the IDC suggestion to have thematic reviews, not just reviews of work on individual countries, although they have been effective. (...)

For full debate see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmpublic/internationaldevelopment/141111/am/141111s01.htm>

Burma mentioned in House of Lords debate on Modern Slavery Bill

17 November 2014 Lord Tunncliffe: (...) It is also key that we look at the role that the regulatory framework and the UK industry have to play. We have all heard calls for stronger action on supply chains. Noble Lords will, like me, have been shocked by stories of men trafficked from Burma and Cambodia and forced to work 20 hours a day for no pay, fishing for prawns for UK shops; and by the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory, where 1,200 people making clothes lost their lives. We need stronger legislation to prevent this happening; other countries are doing it and it has the support of 82% of the British public. (...)

Baroness Cox: (...) In my humanitarian work with victims of oppression I have been involved with the redemption of hundreds of slaves in Sudan, abducted by the regime in Khartoum; I have met victims of sexual slavery and forced labour in Burma; children and teenagers abducted by the notorious Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, who were subjected to indescribable brutality; and devadasi, or temple prostitutes, in India. I have heard, too often, their anguished, heart-wrenching stories. Their experiences also highlight the need for appropriate aftercare, which is currently inadequate in this country, but which is sadly all too often completely lacking for victims in other countries. (...)

Lord Alton of Liverpool: (...) People trafficking had become the fastest growing facet of organised crime, generating around £4.3 billion a year—the third largest source of profit for organised crime after the trafficking of drugs and firearms. In 2002 I told the story of how an Albanian woman, kidnapped, raped and believing she had been rescued, was brought to London only to be forced into prostitution—an issue mentioned by the right reverend Prelate—by her trafficker.

A year later, I described Saw Naing Gae, an eight year-old Burmese child whose parents were shot dead by the Burmese military. He was then trafficked across the border and sold to a Thai family. Those are two cases among hundreds of thousands, cases which demonstrate that this is a global issue demanding global solutions. I entirely agree with what was said earlier by my noble friend Lady Cox, who described the situation in places such as Burma and Sudan, and indeed in North Korea—which I visited with her on three occasions. (...)

For full debate, see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/141117-0001.htm#1411179000440>

Burma mentioned in Westminster Hall Debate on Development and Disability

26 November 2014 Desmond Swayne: (...) The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton is right. Of the world's 1 billion disabled people, 80% live in developing countries. One in seven of the world's poorest people are disabled. She quoted the figure from Sightsavers for extreme poverty, which is one in five, although I am not sure whether the figure is even higher. The unemployment figure for Burma is 3.5% among the population at large, but 80% of disabled people have no means of providing for themselves. I do not believe that there is any prospect of a reduction in the number of disabled people. Indeed, the thrust seems to be in the opposite direction, and with increasing disasters, more violence, particularly targeting civilians, and ageing populations, we need to take more cognisance of the needs of the disabled. (...)

For full debate see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm141126/halltext/141126h0001.htm#14112636000001>

Early Day Motions

BURMA (Early Day Motion 182)

Date tabled: 25.06.2014

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

Signatures: 21

70th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BURMA CAMPAIGN (Early Day Motion 285)

Date tabled: 22.07.2014

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

Signatures: 64

All Party Parliamentary Group for Democracy in Burma

On 4th November, the All Party Parliamentary Group For Democracy in Burma held a meeting with Tin Htar Swe, Editor of the BBC Burmese Service, who talked about the situation for the media in Burma leading up to next year's election.

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Thank you.

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& Development in Burma**