



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

A summary of Burma-related issues
in the British Parliament

OCT
2015

Answers to Written Parliamentary Questions

Elections

19 October 2015 Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what discussions his Department has had with the government of Burma on the possible postponement of elections in that country.

Mr Hugo Swire: None. Burma's Union Election Commission consulted the main political parties on 13 October over the possibility of a postponement to the 8 November general election because of flooding, but decided against such a postponement shortly thereafter.

Rohingya

21 October 2015 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made about the levels of sectarian attacks on Rohingya Muslims.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: British Government Ministers take every appropriate opportunity to raise the plight of the Rohingya community with their Burmese counterparts. Most recently, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), did so with the Burmese Foreign Minister in New York on 29 September. During his visit to Burma in July, Mr Swire travelled to Rakhine State to see the situation there at first hand, and raised the situation of the Rohingya at senior level both in Rakhine and with Burmese central government ministers.

Whilst there have not been any new incidents of major inter-communal violence towards the Rohingya Muslims, the situation remains tense and many root causes are unresolved. We are keeping the situation in Rakhine State under close review as the 8 November general elections approach. Within the last month, teams from our Embassy in Rangoon have visited both north and south Rakhine to assess the situation.

Political Prisoners

29 October 2015 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government what action has been taken, and will be taken, to secure the release of Phil Blackwood and his colleagues; and what representations have been made to the authorities in Burma.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: Mr Blackwood entered Burma on his New Zealand passport. For consular purposes, the Burmese authorities therefore consider him to be a national of New Zealand, and the New Zealand authorities have taken the lead on Mr Blackwood's case and keeping his immediate family in New Zealand updated. We are working closely with the New Zealand government and await the outcome of Mr Blackwood's appeal. We cannot interfere in the legal process of another country, however, our Ambassador in Burma raised the case in December last year with the Minister for the Presidency. My Rt Hon Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire) met Mr Blackwood's cousin on 19 October and we will make further representations as appropriate.

Rape and sexual violence

29 October 2015 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the UN regarding the establishment of a UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate the evidence of sexual violence against women in Burma.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: We have not made any such recommendations to the UN. We recognise that sexual violence in Burma remains a significant problem and remain focused on practical action to tackle it, including pressing the Burmese government to live up to the commitments they made when they endorsed the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict at the London Global Summit in June 2014.

During his visit to Burma in July, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right Hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), pressed the Burmese government at Senior Minister level on the issue, and launched the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence. The UK was instrumental in facilitating the visit to Burma this summer of Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Angelina Jolie Pitt. We also continue to press the agenda at international fora, including through the UN resolutions on Burma at the General Assembly and Human Rights Council, which we co-sponsor.

Human rights abuses

27 October 2015 Jim Shannon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Burmese government on the persecution of Myanmar civilians.

Mr Hugo Swire: Ministers regularly raise a broad range of human rights concerns with our Burmese counterparts. Most recently I did so during my visit to Burma in July, and again when I met the Burmese Foreign Minister at the UN General Assembly on 29 September, and at the UN Secretary General's Burma Partnership Group meeting the same day.

30 October 2015 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of the discrimination and abuse experienced by LGBT people in Burma and of any action being taken to address it.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: We are aware of cases of discrimination and abuse against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Burma and the use of legislation, such as the 1945 Police Act, to restrict the fundamental rights of the LGBT community, and the 1860 Penal Code which criminalises consensual same-sex relations. Together with partners in the international community, we continue to press Burma to improve its human rights performance, including on LGBT rights, through Resolutions at the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council, and the Universal Period Review process.

Military engagement

22 October 2015 Mr Andrew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, in which countries UK defence attachés are posted.

The answer lists 77 countries including Burma. There is Non-Resident Accreditation for a further 82 countries.

Adjournment debate on upcoming elections in Burma in the House of Commons

Valerie Vaz: I am very pleased to see you in the Chair, Mr Speaker, as the parliamentarian who has done so much to further the cause of Burma and her people. I also thank the Minister for coming to the House to respond to the debate. He has had a busy day. He must be the first Minister to respond to both an urgent question and an Adjournment debate on the same day.

It has been two years since our visit to Burma and there are just 17 days to one of the most eagerly anticipated elections in Burma. I want to raise the growing concerns that the elections must be free and fair by international standards. They are being held against a background of increasing sectarian and racial tension. I hope the Minister will reassure us that he considers the elections to be free and fair, alongside the fact that we have trade agreements with the Burmese Government.

I want to deal with three main areas—the political prisoners who are still in jail, the disfranchisement of the Rohingya and breaches of election law—as well as human rights, which underpin them all. There is not universal suffrage as we know it. Some 25% of the current quasi-civilian Government are military and will not be taking part in the elections. We have already had some compromise. There has been no constitutional change, even though it was called for, to allow everyone of Burmese descent, or who was born in Burma, to stand in the presidential elections.

On political prisoners, the United Nations says journalists are being jailed again. Amnesty International has put the number of political prisoners at 91, but says the figure could be higher. Burma Campaign UK, which has people on the ground, says the figure has risen to 157, with 1,500 activists and peaceful protesters awaiting trial, some on charges linked to previous protests—for example, detained student leader Phyo Phyo Aung and more than 100 other peaceful student protesters are facing charges. Naw Ohn Hla, a peaceful human rights protester, was charged, six years after supporting farmers and others in land disputes, with causing a religious disturbance for saying a prayer at the Shwedagon pagoda. Mr Speaker, you will remember we rang the bell of peace at that pagoda. All she did was say a prayer. Naw Ohn Hla has been found guilty and is now in jail.

Mr David Burrowes: I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Is it not important that promises of releasing prisoners of conscience be kept and that committees such as the Burma prisoners of conscience affairs committee and the human rights commission involve more than just posturing? They need to be independent, have teeth and do the job of releasing prisoners of conscience and actively promoting human rights.

Valerie Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is a well-known activist lawyer, so he knows it is not sufficient just to have people there on a committee; they have to actually do something. It is simple. The Burmese have to hear these cases and let them out, but, as I have said, some people are being charged with things that happened some time ago—six years, in some cases. Htin Lin Oo, a writer who criticised groups that used religion to stir up discrimination, is in jail. Trade unionists are in jail. People in Burma are saying that the authorities are targeting activists and journalists by taking them off the streets instead of allowing their voices to be heard and using them in election monitoring.

I wish to raise the case of Philip Blackwood, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and now an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, as well as that of his two Burmese colleagues, Tun Thurein and Htut Ko Ko Lwin, who were given two and a half years' hard labour in March 2015 for “insulting Buddhism”. Have the Government asked for Philip Blackwood's release, or just raised the case with the Burmese Government? There is also the case of another British citizen, Niranjana Rasalingam. Will the Minister respond to that? Has he raised the issue of the release of all these political prisoners or prisoners of conscience?

On the Rohingya, the Minister, one of the first Ministers to visit the camp, will know that 140,000 Rohingya people have fled their homes, are living in temporary camps and have therefore been disfranchised. They were not counted in the recent controversial census, and they have had their white cards removed, meaning they cannot vote, even though some of them have lived in Rakhine state for more than a century. Out of 6,200 candidates, only 11 are Muslim.

Fiona Bruce: I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate and her tireless campaigning for the people of Burma. Does she share my concern that more than 10% of the Burmese people will not be able to vote in the election, not only because the Rohingya have had their temporary citizenship cards revoked, but because internally displaced people, migrant workers and refugees cannot vote either?

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She was part of Mr Speaker's delegation to Burma and saw for herself the difficulties there. It is a cause of serious concern that we do not have universal suffrage.

There are cases of people not being given the vote.

Cardinal Charles Bo, on his way to Rome for the synod on the family, was asked not to use the term “Rohingya”, but he did. Pope Francis is one of the few world leaders who has used it and that is how they define themselves.

There have already been complaints under election law. Thant Zin Tun, who is standing for the National League for Democracy, has made a complaint against his opponent, Zaw Weit, a central committee member of the Union Solidarity and Development party. The complaint alleges that Zaw Weit delivered defamatory pamphlets handed out at events hosted by a group called Ma Ba Tha, whose members have warned the electorate that a vote for the NLD would leave Buddhism vulnerable, pointing out that the NLD opposed a controversial set of laws promulgated by Ma Ba Tha on restricting interfaith marriage, birth rates, polygamy and religious conversion. In another pamphlet, it wrote:

“If you vote for the party based only on the fact that the leader is the daughter of General Aung San, the country, race and religion will be under unimaginable harm.”

None of these cases has been investigated. There are other similar cases, all reported to the electoral commission, but this state of affairs is not surprising because the chair of the electoral commission is a member of the USDP.

The Minister will know that there is support from the British Government for the Burmese army. He has acknowledged that in replying to a written or oral question, but can he look again at the Government policy of supporting the Burmese army, and ensure that this Government’s own preventing sexual violence initiative is fully implemented in Burma?

I want to raise the sad case of two teachers, which has apparently not had much publicity around the world. Two volunteer teachers—their names are Tangbau Hkawn Nan Tsin and Maran Lu Ra—were raped and murdered in Shan state in January this year. I say their names in this House in their memory, so that people in Burma will know that we will not forget them and that they are not forgotten by this Parliament. It is alleged that they were raped and murdered by the Burmese army. There has been no response from the Government; no one is taking responsibility for these murders. The Kachin Women’s Association in Thailand has worked with the Kachin Baptist Convention for which the two teachers worked, and after taking some advice, wrote to the President three times—but has not received a response. It suggested a 17-member truth-seeking committee with legal experts to carry out its own investigation, but it cannot get access to get witness statements or even look at documents. Does that not make a mockery of the Burmese Government’s signing last year of the declaration of their commitment to ending sexual violence in conflict?

The human rights record of Burma will be reviewed by United Nations member states at the 23rd working group session in Geneva on 6 November 2015—two days before the election. The Burmese Government, however, have failed to ratify core international human rights treaties—any of them—since 2011. The case of Khin Kyaw, who faces up to six months in prison and revocation of her legal licence, should be considered. She acted for 58 protesters, and she filed a motion to hold police officials responsible for a violent crackdown. The motion was dismissed, but in the interim, Khin Kyaw was charged with disrupting the court.

We were stunned to hear that the elections were almost postponed because of the floods; in fact, the waters were receding, and this was turned around some eight hours later. Another issue is the signing of the limited ceasefire agreement, the national ceasefire agreement. This is nothing new; the eight groups who had signed it had already been involved, and there are still seven others who have not signed it. Is the Minister aware of whether there are independent election observers, and could there be a role here for the elders—people such as Mary Robinson—who could visit Burma during the election?

Many independent organisations—Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Amnesty International, even the United Nations and Human Rights Watch—are involved in what goes on in Burma. I do not know whether you saw the sign outside yesterday, Mr Speaker, of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s words, saying “If you have liberty, then make sure that we have ours”. That is why we get involved in other countries in places such as Burma—to

uphold human rights. The British people who want to help Burma are not spies.

You will remember, Mr Speaker, that we visited the legal rights clinic and the school when we saw those children. We were followed and photographed until you had to send them away. We are probably on a file somewhere in Burma! There has been a great support from this House through your offices, ensuring that expertise from this Parliament has gone across to support the Burmese Parliament. We have seconded staff—they put their lives on hold—helping to train staff with research and development, tabling questions and even setting up Select Committee hearings. All that is why we must be involved in what happens in free and fair elections in Burma.

Cardinal Charles Bo said that Burma is at the crossroads of hope and despair. We all want to see the Burmese people fulfil their potential and their destiny. We have seen how religion can be used to divide people, and this is far removed from the Buddhist ideals of “Karuna”, universal compassion, and “Metta” or mercy. At a meeting of the ambassador’s residence, we met the leaders of all the religions, and they were very keen to ensure that Burma and all her diversity—in religion and otherwise—moves forward. All those ideals are embodied in those religions.

Let me mention a few more issues that I hope the Minister will be able to help and influence. Will he ensure that the growing issue of child soldiers is raised with the Burmese Government? Does he know whether the United Nations office, which was agreed on quite a few years ago, has now been established? It would provide a useful monitoring presence, ensuring, for instance, that access to humanitarian aid reaches places such as Rakhine state. What immediate steps will he take if the army steps in, as it has done previously in order to overturn an election result that it has not liked?

Imran Hussain: As always, my hon. Friend is making an eloquent and purposeful contribution to a very important debate. Under the current constitution, 25% of the seats in the Burmese Parliament automatically go to the army, and the army dictates the composition of key offices such as the Foreign Office and the Home Office. Does my hon. Friend believe that there is any possibility of a free and fair election without a fundamental change in the constitution?

Valerie Vaz: We must wait for the election result and its outcome before we can move to some sort of change in the constitution. As I said earlier, however, we stand ready here—in the British Parliament, and in Britain generally—to help the Burmese Government, and whatever new Government there may be after the election, to ensure that there is proper constitutional change, and that every Member of the Burmese Parliament stands for election.

We urge Burma to step out from behind the faded, divisive politics of the past. I know that the whole House wants to let the Burmese people know that we support them in their journey towards peace, justice and prosperity. I hope that they grasp this opportunity.

Paul Scully: I congratulate the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) on securing the debate, and on speaking so eloquently and passionately about the human rights situation in Burma. She made some fantastic points, and I offer my support in regard to, in particular, the cases that she raised.

I do not feel that, at this stage, I can add anything to what the hon. Lady said about human rights, but I want to make a couple of brief points about the election on 8 November. As many Members will know—because I have spoken about the issue a few times—I am, I believe, the first Member of the British Parliament to be of Burmese heritage. I am greatly looking forward to going to Burma early next year, and, although I may be too optimistic, I hope very much to be able to engage with a number of Burmese parliamentarians. It would be good to know that both a British parliamentarian and a Burmese parliamentarian had been elected in a free and fair manner.

Although we shall all take an earnest interest in what goes on during the Burmese election, it is obviously not for us to influence the will of the people, who will decide in their own way. However, it is important for the candidates who are going about their business, and the authorities of the day, to ensure not only that the election is as free and fair as possible, but that it is seen to be so. It is also important for the Burmese people themselves to take an interest. We heard from the hon. Lady about a number of barriers to some potential voters in Burma, one of which is the registration system. Because of the difficulty of registering an

interest in voting, a number of people have still not done so. We do not want significant disfranchisement on the day itself.

I say to the people of Burma—should Hansard be read that far away—that the campaign that I have observed so far has been vibrant and interesting. Although some people in Burma may worry about the fact that the election may not be free and fair, it is important for them to become involved if they want their voice to be heard. They must register their vote, and they must vote for their favoured candidate. As we see in this House, we do not always agree and we do not always get the results we want, but it is only by people registering their vote and making it count that their voice will be heard. I greatly look forward to seeing what I find post-election next February when I visit.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) on securing this debate and I thank the other Members for their contributions.

We believe 2015 could be the most significant year in Burma's modern history. The elections on 8 November are a litmus test for the reform process that started in 2011 and the most important democratic opportunity Burma has had in more than 50 years. Successful, credible elections would represent a huge step in consolidating an historic transition from dictatorship. They would bring an enormous amount of good will from the international community, and would be a true legacy for all those whose efforts have taken the country this far.

That is not to say that we should make any presumptions about them. We do still have serious concerns. As the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) reminded us, the constitution guarantees the military 25% of seats in Parliament and bars Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from standing for the presidency.

There is a rising trend of Buddhist nationalist rhetoric, which the hon. Member for Walsall South referred to and which has been used for party political purposes. There is the disqualification of parliamentary candidates from Burma's Muslim minority and the disenfranchisement of the Rohingya community, despite our strong protests. There are the arrests of activists and candidates for engaging in peaceful protests and social media posts, for example Patrick Kum Jaa Lee and Chaw Sandi Tun, which raise particular concerns about freedom of expression. There are also reports of inaccuracies and omissions in the voters list, as well as problems relating to advance voting.

The British Government have worked very hard to make the election process as robust as possible. We have funded the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' work with Burma's election commission, we are providing £1.5 million to train 5,000 national election observers, and we are contributing towards a substantial EU election observation mission. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and the hon. Lady asked about independent observers and particularly the role of elders such as Mary Robinson. We are supporting the EU observation mission and there are already various other international observers either there or scheduled to be there, not least from the Carter centre, which I believe is involving Mary Robinson as part of its observation mission.

As I have repeatedly made clear to the House, the elections will not be straightforward, and the vote itself will not be "perfect". Ultimately, it is for the people of Burma, and their political representatives, to decide whether the elections are credible. We will look to them, as well as local and international observers, in assessing the credibility of the vote.

The world is rightly watching these elections intently, but I also personally remain extremely concerned, as do many Members on both sides of the House, by the appalling situation of the Rohingya. I was determined to return to Rakhine during my third visit to Burma in July. As the monsoon rains began to fall, I saw how desperate the situation remains for so many. Indeed, I was struck that for some of those housed in what were after all supposed to be temporary camps the situation has appreciably worsened since my last visit in 2012. I sensed some of the desperation which led increased numbers to attempt the extremely dangerous journey from the Bay of Bengal earlier this year, and I saw yesterday's tragic report by Amnesty, and no one could fail to have been moved by the harrowing images in today's Times, which are a reminder of the risks of this happening again. We have pressed the Burmese Government repeatedly on the question of the basic needs of the Rohingya: security, humanitarian access, freedom of movement and a pathway to

citizenship. I set out our concerns again in September in New York with Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin.

The hon. Lady asked about the United Nations monitoring mission in Rakhine. There will be another UN resolution in New York this autumn, and we will again support a strong resolution to extend the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Burma. I also attended the UN Secretary General's partnership group on Burma, which was once again chaired by Ban Ki-moon.

We must of course remain conscious that tackling Rakhine will be one of the biggest, most complex and sensitive challenges facing Burma's next Government. We already provide significant practical assistance to all people in Rakhine state, including more than £18 million of aid since the violence of 2012, and that will remain a priority for us. The Minister of State, Department for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Mr Swayne) has been closely involved in that, and I am pleased to see him in the Chamber this evening.

On the issue of human rights, we are clear that many serious issues remain to be addressed and that, in some areas, the human rights environment has deteriorated over the past 12 months. We welcome the release of thousands of political prisoners under the current Government, but we remain concerned by the continued arrest, detention and sentencing of political activists. We are also concerned by the estimate of a minimum 180 people remaining behind bars at the end of August 2015, with 450 more being detained under repressive laws and awaiting trial following arrests throughout 2014 and early 2015. I raised these issues with the Minister for the President's Office, Aung Min, when I was in Burma in July.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of Phil Blackwood in the context of human rights. Mr Blackwood travelled to Burma on a New Zealand passport, so this is rightly a New Zealand lead, and it is they who are discussing case handling directly with him. However, I met Mr Blackwood's cousin on Monday, along with the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who is in his place. Our ambassador has raised the case directly with the President's office and I have committed to doing so again at the appropriate moment. That would also provide me with an opportunity to raise the case of the other gentleman the hon. Lady mentioned, Mr Niranjan Rasalingam.

During my visit in July, and again in New York in September, I pressed the Burmese Government on a number of human rights issues in addition to the elections and to Rakhine. On the issue of preventing sexual violence—the hon. Lady recounted some harrowing stories in that context—I was delighted to launch the international protocol on preventing sexual violence in conflict when I was last in Rangoon. I made it clear at that time that real progress was critical.

The hon. Lady raised again the issue of our engagement with the military, which has been raised in several debates in the past few months and years. Our focus is to encourage it to take its rightful place as a modern military in a democratic system. We are not providing any combat support or training. Yes, we use our engagement to raise our real concerns about issues such as sexual violence and child soldiers. I raised the issue of child soldiers with both the northern commander and the commander-in-chief. If we want the military to play its part in the reform process, it would be a mistake to think that we can achieve that simply by isolating and criticising it. Aung San Suu Kyi, who has visited some of the courses we have run, is of the same mind.

We welcome the signature last week of the nationwide ceasefire agreement by the Government and eight of the ethnic armed groups. A huge amount of effort and compromise from all sides has gone into that. Further work will be needed to ensure that the remaining groups sign up to the agreement and begin the comprehensive political process to turn it into a lasting settlement. We remain very supportive of this work. It will continue right through to the other side of the election, and it will confront whoever wins the election.

We must not forget that, despite such reverses and the continuing open sore of Rakhine, Burma is in a very different place from where it was at the start of the reform process in 2011. I firmly believe that engagement remains the best way to encourage the forces of moderation. Although the reforms are neither perfect nor complete, they have improved the lives of millions of ordinary Burmese. It is clear, with the forthcoming elections, that Burma is at a crossroads. This is the time for us to hold our nerve and to hope that, through the elections, Burma can set itself on a path to a better future. I thank the hon. Lady for the opportunity to

set out the Government's view once again. Let us all hope that the events of the coming weeks work out in favour of the Burmese people.

Burma mentioned in Westminster Hall Debate on Child Suicide Bombers

13 October Jim Shannon: (...) The use of children in wars is nothing new; it is a tactic adopted by many in conflict. We can all conjure up the dreadful images of the child fighters used in Sierra Leone not so long ago, in other parts of Africa and in Burma, to name but a few. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151013/halltext/151013h0001.htm#1510134000001>

Burma mentioned in Westminster Hall Debate on Immigration

19 October 2015 Paul Scully: (...) My own background is one of the big drivers for me when I think about immigration. As many Members know, my father was born in Rangoon in Burma. My grandfather worked as a port commissioner and was in charge of scuttling the docks in Rangoon before the Japanese came in. During that time, my grandmother and my two aunts were refugees at a camp in India and, by chance, they managed to find my grandfather in a fort in India.

My father came over here when he was 18. He finished his apprenticeship on the Glasgow docks. The docks, either in Rangoon or in Glasgow, gave him the welcoming present of asbestos inhalation, which unfortunately killed him 25 years ago. None the less, when my father came here, he made a real success of himself. He came with no money but with a great education from a Jesuit school in Amritsar. He worked incredibly hard, instilling in me the importance of a good education, and the need for hard work and family, which set me in good stead. When I look at my Burmese family, I see the support network that they have built around them. They do not look to the state to look after their own. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151019/halltext/151019h0001.htm#15101914000001>

Burma mentioned in Urgent Question on China and Human Rights

22 Oct 2015 Mr Swire: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does in this area. We work closely together in relation to other countries. This evening's Adjournment debate is on Burma, and she will no doubt take part in it. (...)

For full debate, see:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151022/debtext/151022-0001.htm#15102229000002>

Burma mentioned in Westminster Hall Debate on Pakistan

27 October 2015 Yasmin Qureshi: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about human rights issues and blasphemy laws. Does he agree that our Government should also look at human rights issues in the rest of south Asia? For example, in India there has been a surge of sectarian violence in the past year or two, which has often been linked with the rise of Hindu nationalism or fascism—whatever we want to call it. In Burma, there have been killings of Rohingya Muslims. Does he think it appropriate for our Government to look at those countries and their human rights records as well?

Rehman Chishti: (...) Whether the issue is China or the Rohingya community in Burma, human rights should be a key part of our foreign policy wherever abuses occur, as I made clear to the shadow Foreign Secretary in a Queen's Speech debate on foreign policy. As I said to the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), everyone's human rights, wherever they are, should be respected by all, and we should do everything we can to ensure that countries respect basic human rights and religious freedoms. (...)

For full debate, see:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151027/halltext/151027h0001.htm#15102735000001>

Burma mentioned in Westminster Hall Debate on Tropical Diseases

27 October 2015 Jeremy Lefroy: (...) On top of that, we face two forms of serious resistance: by the malaria parasite to artemisinin-based combination therapies in the Mekong region in south-east Asia, from where resistance to both chloroquine and sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine started and spread to sub-Saharan Africa, which is why it is vital to get on top of this; and by mosquitoes to the insecticides on bed nets, which are becoming resistant to pyrethroids. We also see serious outbreaks where bed net distribution has failed and health systems are weak. I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) is going to describe one such instance later in this debate.

The UK is heavily involved in work to counter both those threats, through the Department for International Development's work and the global fund supported by DFID in Myanmar, working alongside the Government there, and through the work of the Innovative Vector Control Consortium, based in the Liverpool school, in searching for and testing new insecticides for bed nets. The UK has therefore been at the forefront in so many different ways, whether through funding or research—from the London school, the Liverpool school, Dundee, York, Imperial, Keele and other universities, or from business, NGOs, or, above all, people. There are so many I would like to mention, but I will not because of time constraints, but the UK has fantastic scientists in this field at all levels. (...)

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151027/halltext/151027h0001.htm#15102733000001>

Burma mentioned in House of Lords debate on Universal Declaration on Human Rights: Article 18

22 October 2015 Lord Alton of Liverpool: (...) In September, after visiting Burmese refugee camps I went to the detention centre in Bangkok, a city which the UNHCR says more than 11,900 Pakistani Christians have fled to. (...)

The Lord Bishop of Coventry: My Lords, I, too, am very grateful for this debate. I will focus my comments on the interface between religion and national identity, and the theological and political dangers of too close an alignment between them. Too often, the abuse of religious freedom arises from a false collusion between religion and national loyalty. We saw it once in our own land and, yes, in my own church. We see it now in the “gozinesh” criterion for state employment in Iran, in the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar, and in the actions of the so-called Orthodox Army in the Donbass region of Ukraine. (...)

For full debate, see:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldhansrd/text/151022-gc0001.htm#15102254000559>

Burma mentioned in House of Lords debate on Arbitration and Mediation Services

23 October 2015 Lord Anderson of Swansea (Lab): My Lords, like the noble Lord, Lord Cormack, I join the consensus of concern. I agree with my noble friend Lady Donaghy that this is essentially a women's issue. I join, too, with the noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, in praising the noble Baroness, Lady Cox. I have long admired her tenacity and the way in which she has fought for human rights abroad in an even-handed way, be it for Muslims in Burma or Christians in South Sudan. She is no less keen in promoting human rights at home, as is shown by her persistence in bringing forward this Bill after the failure in 2012. (...)

For full debate, see: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldhansrd/text/151023-0001.htm#15102333000414>

Burma mentioned in International Development Committee's Oral Evidence on Independent Commission for Aid Impact's reports

20 October 2015 Stephen Twigg: Can I probe a bit further? The report from ICAI gives us an example, and perhaps Beverley is best to respond to this, of the report on DFID's health programmes in Burma. ICAI say they did not fully reflect some of the challenges in implementation, such as the proposed baseline

survey. Can you respond to that and talk to us about what the follow up has been from DFID on that specific proposal?

Beverley Warmington: Yes, of course. Nick was talking about the tracking, and we were asked how we track, but responsibility for the delivery will obviously lie with the head of the business unit that has been assessed. If it is particularly a Burma issue, then it will be the head of the Burma office's responsibility for the delivery, and, as director, ultimately I am then responsible to ensure it has been done.

The particular issue on the health programme was that we were looking to do a consultation. What we decided to do was, with the change in approach from the Government, which we were quite pleased about, that we should try and work with Government. We decided to join up with Government on this piece of work on local consultation, and so obviously it got slightly delayed because we wanted to work closely with Government. We are now moving forward. It just got delayed a bit while we waited for Government to get their systems in order as well, so we are now doing this in conjunction with Government, and it will be completed soon.

We wanted to delay it to make it a more comprehensive piece of work and a bigger piece of work that was done with the Government, which was an opportunity we thought we should take up. We are not ignoring it; we are delivering it. There has just been a slight delay in the time of doing that.

For full evidence, see:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/international-development-committee/independent-commission-for-aid-impact-annual-report/oral/23560.html>

Early Day Motions

ACCESS FOR HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES TO RAKHINE STATE IN BURMA (Early Day Motion 58)

Date tabled: 01.06.2015

Signatures: 55

That this House expresses its concern at the number of Rohingya Muslims from Burma and Bangladesh who have fled their countries since the start of the year, risking their lives in order to reach Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand; calls on the Government to make clear to the Burmese government the need to address the reasons that people feel forced to do so; and further calls on the Government to ask the UN Secretary-General to take a personal lead in negotiating with the Burmese government to allow access for humanitarian agencies to Rakhine State.

TREATMENT OF THE ROHINGYA IN BURMA (Early Day Motion 121)

Date tabled: 15.06.2015

Signatures: 42

That this House notes that the continuing persecution of the Rohingya people in Burma has caused and continues to create a humanitarian disaster in the area; further notes that the Muslim Rohingya minority have been described as the most persecuted people in the world; further notes that they are subject to violence, murder, displacement and as a result many of them are forced to flee; further notes that the Burmese government's refusal to accept the Rohingya as full citizens alongside its failure to stop the toxic anti-Muslim rhetoric and propaganda has led to a situation that can only be described as ethnic cleansing; and further notes that this government along with the regional governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Bangladesh must act decisively to force the Burmese authorities to take action to defend the Rohingya people and restore their basic human rights and freedoms as a matter of the utmost urgency.

RESTRICTIONS ON JOURNALISTS IN BURMA (Early Day Motion 57)

Date tabled: 01.06.2015

Signatures: 51

That this House deplores the restrictions recently imposed on journalists in reporting proceedings in the Burmese parliament, the Assembly of the Union; notes that the restrictions have now been lifted; believes that the reporting of parliamentary proceedings is vital for public information and to hold Members

accountable; further notes the importance of the fight by John Wilkes to secure reporting of Parliament in the development of the UK's own democracy; further notes the latest report on Burma in 2015 by Human Rights Watch that highlights increasing intimidation of the media over the past year, including new restrictions on both foreign and domestic journalists; further notes the current imprisonment of 13 journalists and the shooting in October 2014 of the freelance reporter, Ko Par Gyi, by the army whilst held in custody; and calls on the Government to raise concerns about the restrictions on parliamentary reporting in Burma and to express its determination to monitor developments in media freedom in Burma in the future.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN BURMA (Early day motion 510)

Date tabled: 13.10.2015

Signatures: 24

That this House calls on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to request that the Burmese government reviews the recently published series of bills that would restrict freedom of religion or belief for Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and other people; expresses concern on the effect of that legislation on the forthcoming general election on 8 November 2015; and urges the FCO to call on the Burmese government to ensure full participation in the election and equal development in Myanmar and to remove such problematic laws and policies.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy in Burma

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy in Burma met on 21st October to listen to David Mepham, UK Director of Human Rights Watch, who had recently visited Burma. David talked about the situation in Rakhine State for the Rohingya and the dire humanitarian situation there, as well as how the upcoming elections in Burma will not change things for the Rohingya. David also talked more broadly of the situation in Burma generally ahead of the elections.

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