



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

SEPT
2012

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Rohingya / Rakhine State

03 September 2012 Mr Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he raised the situation of the Rohingya people with Aung San Suu Kyi (a) on her recent visit to London and (b) subsequently.

Mr Jeremy Browne: Both the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) and the Prime Minister, raised the plight of the Rohingya community with Aung San Suu Kyi during her recent visit to the UK in June. During their meetings Ministers made clear their concern about the issues affecting the Rohingya, including their rights to nationality.

Embassy officials remain in regular contact with Aung San Suu Kyi, and continue to express to her the UK's concern about the situation in Rakhine state. We have repeatedly called for the Burmese Government to put an end to the violence, to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the areas affected, to resolve the issue of nationality and to grant the full respect for human rights to all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

Aung San Suu Kyi was recently named as the chair of a new "Parliamentary Committee on the Rule of Law, Peace and Stability". Its mandate will give her an opportunity to play a more active role in addressing the issues affecting Burma's ethnic communities.

20 August 2012 Baroness Cox: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will make representations to the Government of Burma about protecting the human rights of the Rohingya community in Arakan State.

Lord Howell of Guildford: The UK continues to be active in raising the issues affecting the Rohingya community in Rakhine (Arakan) State and has repeatedly called on all parties to end the violence in western Burma and on the Burmese authorities to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the area, to resolve the issue of nationality and to protect the human rights of all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

Our ambassador to Burma raised these points directly with the Burmese Vice-President during a meeting with him on 14 July. On 17 July we raised the Rohingya issue with our EU partners in Brussels. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right honourable friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) also raised the issues affecting the Rohingya with the Bangladeshi Prime Minister during their meeting on 28 July. We continue raise the Rohingya with international partners and in international organisations such as the United Nations.

20 August 2012 Lord Ahmed: To ask Her Majesty's Government what recent discussions they have had with the Government of Burma regarding the treatment of the Rohingya Muslim community.

Lord Howell of Guildford: The UK continues to be active in raising the issues affecting the Rohingya community and has repeatedly called on all parties to end the violence in western Burma and on the Burmese authorities to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the area, to resolve the issue of nationality and to protect the human rights of all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

Our ambassador to Burma raised these points directly with the Burmese Vice-President during a meeting with him on 14 July. On 17 July we raised the Rohingya issue with our EU partners in Brussels. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right honourable friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) also raised the issues affecting the Rohingya with the Bangladeshi Prime Minister during their meeting on 28 July. We continue raise the Rohingya with international partners and in international organisations such as the United Nations.

04 September 2012 Jeremy Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Government of Burma on relations between Muslims and Buddhist communities; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Jeremy Browne: The UK remains concerned by the outbreak of inter-communal violence between Rohingya Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist communities in Burma's Rakhine (Arakan) state.

The UK is one of the most active and vocal members of the international community in raising these concerns with the Burmese authorities. We will continue to be so. Through our embassy in Rangoon and through ministerial statements we have repeatedly called for the Burmese Government to put an end to the violence, to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the areas affected, to resolve the issue of nationality and to grant the full respect for human rights to all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

The Government of Burma has announced that it will establish an independent Investigative Commission to probe the violence in Rakhine state. In a statement released on 20 August, we welcomed this development, but made clear that for the Commission to be credible, it needed to involve a consultative process with all of the affected communities, including the predominantly Muslim Rohingya people.

07 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what official communication his Department has had with representatives of the Burmese government on the Muslim Rohingya in the last six months.

Mr Swire: Following the recent outbreak of violence, the then Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Mr Browne), issued a statement on 10 June which expressed our deep concern about the situation and urged all groups to open a dialogue to end the violence. On 12 June our ambassador met Burmese President Thein Sein and urged him to make every effort to resolve the situation peacefully. We have continued to raise our concerns with senior members of the Burmese Government at every opportunity.

On 1 August, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Director for Asia Pacific met the Burmese ambassador to discuss the situation, and again repeated our concerns, including the need to resolve the issue of nationality.

07 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with Burmese officials during his recent visit to Rangoon on the Muslim Rohingya.

Mr Swire: On 16 January 2012, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), issued a written ministerial statement to update the House regarding his visit to Burma on 5-6 January, Official Report, columns 27-28WS.

During the visit the Secretary of State raised with the Foreign Minister the discrimination suffered by the Rohingya community, who have been denied citizenship and access to basic services and rights.

The Secretary of State also met a range of representatives from ethnic communities, including the Kachin, Rohingya, Shan, Rakhine, Chin, Mon, Karen and Karenni to hear more about their concerns and aspirations.

07 September 2012 Jeremy Lefroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Burma on the situation in Arakan State.

Mr Swire: Ministers continue to raise their concerns about the lack of respect for human rights in Burma at every opportunity, most recently during the Prime Minister's visit to Burma in April, which included the need to release all remaining political prisoners and to establish a credible process of reconciliation with all ethnic groups in Burma. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials in Rangoon and in London have raised our concerns with senior members of the Burmese Government, and with our international partners.

Ministers have also issued three separate public statements on the situation in Rakhine (Arakan) State since the violence began in June.

10 September 2012 Mr Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the government of Burma on the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities in that country; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Swire: The UK remains deeply concerned over reported human rights abuses in ethnic border areas, particularly in Kachin and Shan states, as a result of fighting between the Burmese army and armed militia, and the recent inter-communal violence between the largely Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine communities. We remain one of the most active and vocal members of the international community in raising these concerns with the Burmese authorities and continue to condemn all instances where individuals face persecution or discrimination because of their faith or beliefs, wherever they happen and whatever the religion of the individual or group concerned.

We have repeatedly called for the Burmese Government to put an end to the recent inter-communal violence in Rakhine state, to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the areas affected and a resumption of humanitarian work provided by the international community upon which many hundreds of thousands of Rohingya are dependent, to resolve the issue of nationality and to grant the full respect for human rights to all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

During his visit to Burma in January of this year, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), met the President, the Foreign Minister and the Speaker of the Lower House. The Prime Minister, during his visit to Burma in April, met with the Burmese President. During these meetings, both the Prime Minister and Secretary of State, respectively, set out clearly the steps which would be needed before a more fundamental shift in our relationship could take place, which included establishing a clear process of reconciliation with Burma's ethnic groups. Both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State met a range of representatives from ethnic communities, including the Kachin, Rohingya, Shan, Rakhine, Chin, Mon, Karen and Karenni to hear more about their concerns and aspirations. We continue to stay close to these and other ethnic groups to ensure we remain seized of the issues they face. We are cautiously optimistic about the progress the Burmese Government has made since the Secretary of State's visit in trying to rebuild trust with ethnic groups, including signing initial ceasefire agreements with some groups. We recognise that this process remains fragile and we continue to urge all parties to work towards a peaceful future for all of Burma's people.

We are actively supporting the reconciliation process. The Prime Minister announced the allocation of an additional £5 million during Aung San Suu Kyi's recent visit to the UK for immediate peace-building activities. Our embassy in Rangoon also hosted a visit of UK experts in July with experience of trust-building and peace-building between communities in Northern Ireland. We intend to continue to draw on UK expertise in this area in order to support the continuation of the reconciliation process.

12 September 2012 Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has discussed the situation of the Rohingya people in Burma with his counterpart in the Government of Burma.

Mr Swire: During his visit to Burma from 5-6 January this year, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), raised with the Foreign Minister the discrimination suffered by the Rohingya community, who have been denied citizenship and access to basic services and rights. The Secretary of State also met a range of representatives from ethnic communities, including the Kachin, Rohingya, Shan, Rakhine, Chin, Mon, Karen and Karenni to hear more about their concerns and aspirations. As I set out in the Westminster Hall debate of 11

September 2012, Official Report, columns 20-24WH, on the treatment of Rohingya, Ministers continue to raise their concerns about the lack of respect for human rights with the Burmese Government at every opportunity. During his visit to Burma in April, the Prime Minister welcomed the changes already introduced while highlighting the areas where further progress was needed including political prisoners and ethnic reconciliation. The Prime Minister also met with representatives from the Rohingya community during this visit. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials in Rangoon and in London continue to raise our concerns with senior members and representatives of the Burmese Government and with our international partners.

07 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government is taking to prevent the persecution of Muslim Rohingya in Burma.

Mr Swire: We have repeatedly called for the Burmese Government to take measures to put an end to the recent inter-communal violence in Rakhine State, to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the areas affected and a resumption of humanitarian work provided by the international community upon which many hundreds of thousands of Rohingya are dependent, to resolve the issue of nationality and to grant the full respect for human rights to all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

Since the statement of 10 June, in which the then Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Mr Browne), expressed our deep concern about the hostilities in Rakhine state, Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials in Rangoon and in London have raised our concerns with senior members of the Burmese Government and with our international partners. Ministers also discussed the issues affecting the Rohingya with the Bangladeshi Prime Minister during their meetings in late July following reports that refugees fleeing the violence were being turned away when attempting to cross the border from Burma into Bangladesh.

In a statement released on 13 August, following the visit to Burma of the UN Special Rapporteur for Burma, Mr Tomas Quintana, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), highlighted our concerns and stated that the UK stood ready to assist the Government of Burma in its efforts to develop Rakhine state as Burma continues on its path to democracy.

In the wake of the Secretary of State's statement, the Government of Burma announced that it would establish an independent Investigative Commission to probe the violence in Rakhine. The Burmese Government also released a number of UN and NGO staff detained in connection with the violence. In a statement released on 20 August, we welcomed this development, but made clear that for the Commission to be credible, it needed to involve a consultative process with all of the affected communities, including the Rohingya.

07 September 2012 Jeremy Lefroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to urge the government of Burma to recognise the citizenship of Rohingya people whose families have lived in Burma for generations.

Mr Swire: For many years the British Government has been a strong supporter of those in Burma pursuing democracy and respect for human rights. We have consistently called for discrimination against the Rohingya to end and for their rights to be recognised.

The United Kingdom has long been one of the most active and vocal members of the international community in raising these concerns with the Burmese authorities. We have also continued to raise the issue in international institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council where, in March of this year, we strongly supported a resolution, which made clear to the Burmese Government the urgent need to resolve the issue of nationality for the Rohingya community.

07 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the findings of the report by Human Rights Watch, *The Government Could Have Stopped This: Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State*; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Swire: We are familiar with the detailed, thorough and informative report by Human Rights Watch,

entitled 'The Government Could Have Stopped This: Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State'. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials met a representative from Human Rights Watch on 21 August to discuss the content of the report.

We continue to draw on credible reporting from a range of sources to support our own assessment of the troubling and complex situation in Rakhine State. An official from the British embassy in Rangoon visited the state as part of a government-organised tour for the diplomatic corps on 31 July-1 August. I refer the right hon. Member to my answer given today to PQ 118697.

13 September 2012 Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received that ethnic Rohingya are being forced out of the town of Sittwe in Burma.

Mr Swire: We continue to receive reports from a range of sources that suggest that people from both Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine communities, though mainly Rohingya, were removed from Sittwe into temporary shelters in recent months.

An official from our embassy in Rangoon visited Sittwe and Rakhine State as part of a government-organised tour for the diplomatic corps on 31 July/1 August and saw some of the aftermath of the violence in Sittwe. We understand that violence has mostly subsided though tensions remain high and that the response to the humanitarian situation is ongoing.

We continue to monitor the situation in Rakhine State closely and press Burmese authorities to put in place a long-term solution to the problem, which does not leave communities permanently displaced.

13 September 2012 Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether the Government is assisting the Government of Burma with technical and other assistance on repealing and replacing that country's 1982 citizenship law.

Mr Swire: The Burmese Government have not initiated any action in regards to repealing or replacing its 1982 citizenship law.

As I set out in the Westminster Hall Debate of 11 September 2012, Official Report, 20-24WH, on the treatment of Rohingya communities in Burma, the United Kingdom has long been one of the most active and vocal members of the international community in raising the issues affecting the Rohingya with the Burmese authorities and has consistently called for discrimination against the Rohingya to end and for their rights to be recognised.

We continue to raise these concerns in international institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, where in March of this year we strongly supported a resolution which made clear to the Burmese Government the urgent need to resolve the issue of nationality for the Rohingya community.

We continue to urge the Burmese Government to respond to the international community's calls to address the issues affecting the Rohingya, including a permanent and inclusive solution to the issue of their citizenship.

07 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what official communication his Department has had with representatives of the Bangladesh Government on the Muslim Rohingya in the last six months.

Alistair Burt: The High Commission in Dhaka raises the Rohingya issue regularly with senior interlocutors in the Bangladesh Government. The high commissioner, Robert Gibson, wrote to the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office about this issue on 15 August. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), also raised this issue during a meeting with the Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, on 28 July, and the former Secretary of State for the Department for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), raised it in a meeting with her on 12 August.

We have also raised the issue of Rohingya refugees with the Government of Bangladesh as part of a recent EU démarche.

The Secretary of State issued a statement on 13 August, which expressed deep concern at the ongoing violence in Rakhine State in Burma. It called on all parties to act with restraint, and urged the authorities and community leaders to open discussions to end the violence and protect all members of the local population.

12 September 2012 Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has raised the situation of the Rohingya people in Burma with his European counterparts; and when he next plans to do so.

Mr Swire: Burma is due to be discussed by EU Foreign Ministers at the Foreign Affairs Council in October and the situation in Rakhine state is likely to feature prominently in these discussions. The situation in Rakhine state was also discussed by senior EU member state officials in Brussels in July at the UK's initiative. They will do so again in September. Our embassy in Rangoon is in close touch with all EU missions and as local EU presidency, is leading the EU response. We will continue to work urgently with our international partners, and through the UN and EU, to highlight the plight of the Rohingya.

20 August 2012 Lord Ahmed: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will raise the issue of torture, abuse of human rights and burning of Rohingya children at the next United Nations Security Council.

Lord Howell of Guildford: We are deeply concerned about reports of human rights abuses being committed in Rakhine (Arakan) State.

We remain in regular contact with non-governmental organisations on the ground in Rakhine (Arakan) State. Tensions between different communities remain and this presents risks to local volunteers. This is not only hampering the provision of humanitarian assistance but is also making verification of reports of human right abuses problematic.

We continue to raise the situation in Burma, including the ongoing ethnic conflict in Rakhine (Arakan) State, in all relevant parts of the United Nations. At the UK's request, the United Nations (UN) Security Council has had three separate briefings in the last eight months from the UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Burma, Mr Vijay Nambiar. The most recent briefing on 20 June, where the intercommunal violence in Rakhine (Arakan) State and the continued discrimination against the Rohingya people was discussed, followed a visit to Burma by Nambiar on 11 to 14 June.

The UK strongly supported a UN Human Rights Council resolution on Burma in March, which called on the Government of Burma to recognise the rights of members of the Rohingya to nationality and for the Government to protect all of their human rights. During the Human Rights Council's July session, the UK issued a statement that expressed our alarm at the outbreaks of violence in Rakhine State and the continued discrimination of the Rohingya community.

03 September 2012 Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to bring the situation in Arakan State, Burma, to the attention of the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Secretary-General.

Mr Jeremy Browne: The UK remains one of the most active and vocal members of the international community in raising our concerns about the situation in Burma's Rakhine (Arakan) state with the Burmese authorities, and we will continue to do so. We have repeatedly called for the Government to put an end to the violence, to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the areas affected, to resolve the issue of nationality and to grant the full respect for human rights to all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

The UK continues to raise the situation in Burma at the UN Security Council. At our request, we have had three separate briefings in the last eight months from Mr Vijay Nambiar, the UN Secretary-General's special Adviser on Burma. We have also strongly supported a UN Human Rights Council resolution on Burma this year, which included an extension to the mandate of the UN's Special Rapporteur for Burma, Mr Tomas Quintana.

Our attention is now focused on the upcoming UN General Assembly session in the autumn. We continue to stress to the Burmese Government that unless they resolve the many outstanding issues, including the serious situation in Rakhine state, we will press for a UN resolution which highlights the strength of our concerns.

06 August 2012 Lord Steel of Aikwood: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether staff of the Department for International Development have been able to visit Maungdaw in Rhakhine State, Burma.

Baroness Northover: No staff from DfID have been able to visit Maungdaw in Rhakhine State. DfID monitors the situation through its links with the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) and through the regular UN OCHA Situation Reports.

07 September 2012 Jeremy Lefroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to urge the Government of Burma to allow unhindered access for the UN and international humanitarian aid agencies and human rights organisations to all areas of Arakan State to assess the situation and monitor the distribution of humanitarian aid on the basis of need and without discrimination.

Mr Swire: Through both our bilateral relations and through international forums, such as the United Nations, have called repeatedly for the Burmese Government to take measures to put an end to the recent inter-communal violence in Rakhine (Arakan) State and to allow unhindered humanitarian access to the areas affected.

The UK has long provided humanitarian assistance to Rohingya communities in both Burma's Rakhine State and Bangladesh through core support to the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Department and United Nations agencies, as well as to all communities across Rakhine State through our major investments in health, education and livelihoods.

31 July 2012 Lord Hollick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of reports that international aid agencies are being obstructed from delivering aid to Rohingya people displaced by recent violence in Burma.

Baroness Northover: The UK is concerned by both the scale and nature of the violence in Rakhine State and its humanitarian impact. Ministers and officials continue to be active in raising the issues affecting the Rohingya community, and have called repeatedly and at the highest levels for the government to resolve the issue of nationality, and to grant the full respect for human rights to all the people of Burma, notably the Rohingya.

For security reasons, United Nations agencies and non-government organisations withdrew their staff from many of the areas affected by the violence. This has impeded the delivery of emergency aid and we have called on all sides to respect fundamental humanitarian access. The UN has since been able to provide some food and non-food aid to affected communities. The UK provides support to affected communities through core contributions to the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and United Nations agencies.

03 September 2012 Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether his Department plans to provide funding and expertise for conflict prevention, inter-racial and inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation between Rakhine, Burman and Rohingya communities in Burma.

Mr Duncan: DFID provided humanitarian assistance to address the impact of the violence in Rakhine state through our core contributions to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children Fund and the World Food programme; the focus of which is on addressing the immediate needs.

We are working with other donors through the UN in relation to the needs in Rakhine State and await the needs assessment based on the findings of OCHA and aid agency partners. The British ambassador has repeatedly raised concerns with Ministers and directly with the President about the humanitarian and political situation in Arakan and called on all sides to allow unrestricted humanitarian access for international and local aid agencies to the affected communities.

05 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation in Arakan State, Burma, since 1 June 2012; and if she will make a statement.

Mr Duncan: According to the Rakhine (Arakan) State Government there are now a total of 69,551 Internally Displaced People in Sittwe, Maungdaw and Kyauktaw. At the request of the Government, humanitarian agencies are providing assistance and operating in line with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Priority sectors agreed upon by United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations include shelter, food, water and sanitation, health and nutrition, and protection.

05 September 2012 Jeremy Lefroy: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she plans to take to ensure that victims of violence in Arakan State, Burma, from Rohingya and Rakhine communities receive humanitarian assistance without discrimination and that all those in need receive assistance.

Mr Duncan: The UK Government has repeatedly called for the Government of Burma to allow unhindered humanitarian access to all of the areas affected. Humanitarian agencies, including those which receive core funding from the United Kingdom, are now able to provide aid to some of the affected areas in line with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence—but this falls short of what is needed. We continue to monitor the situation and humanitarian response closely.

07 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department plans to take to ensure that humanitarian assistance is provided to refugees and internally displaced peoples along the Bangladesh-Burma border.

Mr Duncan: The UK Government has repeatedly called for the Government of Burma to allow unhindered humanitarian access to all of the areas affected. Humanitarian agencies, including those receiving core funding from the United Kingdom, are now able to provide aid to some of the affected areas, in line with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence - but this falls short of what is needed. In August the then Secretary of State for International Development, the right hon. Andrew Mitchell met with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and raised directly with her our concerns about the level of access being allowed to humanitarian non-governmental organisations supporting Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. We continue to monitor the situation and humanitarian response on both sides of the border closely.

Kachin

20 August 2012 Baroness Cox: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they will make representations to the Government of Burma about ending conflict in Kachin State, and ensuring humanitarian access to internally displaced people.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Howell of Guildford): On 15 July, our ambassador met senior figures in the Burmese Government, including the Vice-President, to raise the importance of bringing the conflict in Kachin State to an end. The meetings were organised as part of a visit by UK experts focusing on intercommunal trust building and peace processes.

We continue to press regularly for unrestricted humanitarian access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) across Burma, particularly in Kachin State and Rakhine (Arakan) State.

Human Rights

13 September 2012 Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of how many people have been internally displaced by conflict and human rights abuses in Burma since Thein Sein became President of that country.

Mr Swire: The two most notable outbreaks of violence in Burma since President Thein Sein was inaugurated in April 2011 are the conflict in Kachin State, which erupted in June of that year and the

recent outbreak of inter-communal violence in Rakhine State. Human Rights Watch estimates that 75,000 people were displaced as a result of conflict in Kachin State and the UN estimates that 90,000 have been displaced in Rakhine State. Given the restricted access to the areas affected, and that displaced persons have often fled into bordering countries for safety, it is difficult to verify these numbers with certainty.

We continue to call for unrestricted humanitarian access to all areas affected by conflict in Burma. The UK, through the Department for International Development's bilateral programme, is committed to assisting 155,000 people affected by conflict by 2014.

10 September 2012 Simon Kirby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent steps his Department has taken to put human rights at the heart of UK foreign policy.

Mr Lidington: Human rights are essential to and indivisible for the UK's foreign policy priorities. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) produces an annual human rights report: www.fco.gov.uk/hrdreport which highlights the UK's global human rights achievements and sets out the challenges that remain. It also includes countries where we have the most serious wide ranging concerns on human rights.

We recently launched an initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations with the aim of strengthening international efforts and co-ordination to prevent and respond to these atrocities and to erode the existing culture of impunity. We are looking to use the opportunity offered during the UK G8 presidency to develop and agree international action. We have recently committed £750,000 to support work worldwide on business and human rights, including a project in Burma to ensure that companies investing there do so with respect for the human rights situation of that country and of those affected by their operations.

On Syria, we have trained over 60 Syrian activists to document human rights violations and abuses to assist in any future accountability process. We are also supporting initiatives to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court. In response to events of the Arab spring, the £110 million Arab Partnership Fund is enabling us to help build more open and accountable societies in the middle east and north Africa, including through empowering women, and promoting greater transparency and the rule of law.

Political Prisoners

06 August 2012 Lord Hollick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what discussions they have had with the Government of Burma on the formation of a joint domestic and international board with the involvement of the United Kingdom to investigate the number of political prisoners in Burma.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Howell of Guildford): We continue to press the Burmese Government on a regular basis to release all remaining political prisoners. This issue was raised most recently in a meeting between our ambassador and the Burmese Attorney-General in Naypyidaw on 23 July 2012.

In line with the recommendations of UN Special Representative for Human Rights Quintana, we raised with the Government the possibility of establishing an independent investigative mechanism to look into remaining cases. We have not made specific representations regarding the make-up of such a body. We continue to meet with local and international human rights groups, civil society organisations and released political prisoners in Burma to discuss this matter.

06 August 2012 Lord Hollick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what discussions they have had with the Government of Burma about allowing recently released political activists to be given passports.

Lord Howell of Guildford: Officials from our embassy have made representations on several occasions to Burmese Government Ministers, most recently on 27 July, about issuing passports for released political prisoners. We will continue to raise this matter until the situation is addressed. The European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Catherine Ashton, also raised the matter with President Thein Sein during her recent visit.

Aid to Burma

05 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid her Department provides to the Burmese government; and if she will make a statement.

Mr Duncan: DFID does not provide aid directly to the central Government of Burma. UK aid in Burma goes only through United Nations organisations and trusted international and local non-governmental organisations. Where circumstances allow, some of these funds go through township authorities for basic service delivery.

11 September 2012 Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether her Department is funding any programmes promoting inter-faith and religious tolerance in Burma.

Mr Duncan: DFID does not have any specific programmes which promote inter-faith and religious tolerance in Burma. We are working with a range of partners, including faith-based organisations, to support peace and reconciliation in Burma.

31 July 2012 Lord Hollick: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the Secretary of State for International Development discussed funding for refugees from Burma with Aung San Suu Kyi when she visited the United Kingdom.

Baroness Northover: The Secretary of State for International Development met Aung San Suu Kyi when she visited the Department for International Development (DfID) on 21 June. At the meeting they discussed a range of issues which included the importance of donor co-ordination, work on anti-corruption, improving transparency, responsible investment, and the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) which is visiting Burma this month. Discussions did not focus specifically on refugees but DfID continues to provide support and keeps this under review.

31 July 2012 Lord Hollick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what financial support is being given to (1) the Mae Tao Clinic and (2) Shan Women's Action Network for their projects in Burma and in Thailand.

Baroness Northover: DfID allocated £400,000 for the Shan Women's Action Network between 2009 and 2012 to deliver assistance in the areas of education, health, capacity building and women's empowerment for Shan communities affected by conflict, displacement and violence in Burma. DfID allocated £532,000 for Mae Tao Clinic between 2009 and 2012 to assist refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) along the Thailand-Burma border. This aid finances the purchase of pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies which benefit people affected by conflict in eastern Burma. DfID is currently finalising its future programme of assistance to communities affected by conflict in Burma.

06 August 2012 Lord Steel of Aikwood: To ask Her Majesty's Government how many representations the Department for International Development has received in 2012 to date for increased funding for refugees from and displaced persons in Burma.

Baroness Northover: To date, in 2012, DfID has received 15 letters regarding increased funding for refugees and displaced persons in Burma. Most of these refer to Early Day Motion (EDM) 2719 which calls on the Government to increase aid to populations displaced by conflict in Burma. EDM 2719, tabled in 2012, has 66 signatures. DfID has received a number of parliamentary Questions in 2012 relating to funding for refugees from and displaced persons in Burma: two of these ask specifically about increases in funding; details are available in the parliamentary archives.

DfID Ministers and staff have met a range of people with a specific interest in our work for refugees from and displaced persons in Burma this year. The question of increased funding is sometimes raised in these meetings, although it is not possible to say exactly in how many of them.

06 August 2012 Baroness Cox : To ask Her Majesty's Government what support they are providing to women's empowerment projects in Burma; and which specific women's organisations in Burma receive British aid.

Baroness Northover: In Burma, UK aid supports the empowerment of women and girls in all of its programmes and partnerships. Through UK aid in Burma, by 2015, 110,000 women will have more access to financial services, 113,000 more girls will be helped to access and complete primary education, and at least 549,000 women will participate in cash for work activities. DfID's Burma programme provides support to the following women's organisations: the Gender Equality Network, which includes more than 30 women's organisations; the Gender and Development Initiative; and the Shan Women's Action Network.

Trade and Investment

11 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what recent assessment he has made of trade relations between the UK and Burma; and if he will make a statement.

Michael Fallon: There has been significant interest in Burma from UK businesses since our policy of discouraging trade was lifted earlier this year in recognition of progress made in Burma. We strongly believe that responsible trade and investment can aid Burma's transition to democracy.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is funding a project which will provide advice on the implementation of the United Nations (UN's) Guiding Principles and will establish a resource centre within Burma to provide advice to embassies and companies on doing business responsibly. UKTI now has a presence in the market and is able to provide a range of services to UK businesses, including tailored market research to help them plan how to sustainably invest in the market.

10 September 2012 Simon Kirby: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department has taken to encourage British companies to operate responsibly overseas.

Mr Lidington: The Government urges all British companies to promote the highest standards of corporate governance and social and environmental responsibility, including adherence to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights and the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

In line with the framework set out in the UN Guiding Principles, we expect companies to behave with respect for human rights wherever they operate.

We have this year committed £750,000 in project funding to support work worldwide on business and human rights. This includes a commitment we have made to fund a project in Burma where the Institute for Human Rights and Business are establishing a resource centre to provide advice to companies, governments and civil society on implementation of the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

UK policy on Burma

07 September 2012 Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the state of bilateral relations with Burma; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Swire: Given the significant political reform taking place in Burma, our policy has shifted from isolation, to cautious engagement. This is because we believe that the goal of achieving lasting change in Burma stands more chance of being realised if we and the international community engage with all parties in Burma to help embed reform.

We have not forgotten the many other issues that remain unresolved in Burma. As well as the ongoing ethnic conflicts, a significant number of political detainees remain in prison and legislative reform in a number of areas is necessary and pressing. We believe that should President Thein Sein accept the Prime Minister's invitation to visit to the UK, it will be a valuable opportunity to continue the Prime Minister's dialogue with the President and to stress the need to resolve the many issues outstanding.

ANSWERS TO SPOKEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

House of Commons

Rohingya

04 September 2012 Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): Will the Secretary of State provide the latest information on the situation facing the Rohingyas in Burma, and would he be prepared to meet a group of Rohingyas who live in my constituency and have appalling tales of atrocities to tell about the situation in both Burma and, indeed, Bangladesh?

Mr Hague: These people are in a very difficult and often desperate situation in Burma and in neighbouring countries. This is a subject that both I and the International Development Secretary have raised in recent times with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, and with Burmese leaders, including the Opposition and Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as the Burmese Government, so we are constantly engaged on the issue and wish Burmese leaders to address it. Certainly, one or other of the ministerial team would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it.

Burma issue included in Human Rights Violations debate at Westminster Hall

12 September 2012 Mr Robert Buckland: In the ongoing and historic ethnic conflicts in Burma, attacks by the Burmese army on clinics and medical professionals are well documented.

For more information about the debate, please see:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm120912/halltext/120912h0001.htm#12091222000001>

Westminster Hall Debate on Rohingya Communities

11 September 2012 9.30 am Jonathan Ashworth: It is a privilege to open this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams.

This is an issue of human rights, justice and desperate humanitarian need, to which we must respond. It is also one that has caused considerable concern to many of my constituents in Leicester South in recent weeks. Indeed, we had a public meeting there on this issue just last Friday evening. I was pleased that there were representatives from all the major faiths in Leicester—Christian, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim—which brings home the fact that this is a matter of human rights. While I have the opportunity, I want to thank Leicester's Federation of Muslim Organisations and the Leicester Sikh Alliance, which have been doing a lot of work on this matter.

May I put on the record my gratitude for the opportunity to debate this matter in Parliament? Fairly or unfairly, there has been a perception—certainly, it was strongly expressed to me on Friday night in my constituency—that this humanitarian catastrophe has so far not received the attention that it deserves and that it has not received the exposure in the media that it demands. I commend the media outlets that have focused on it, particularly Channel 4, which produced a very moving report during the summer. I acknowledge and pay tribute to all the hon. Members here who have worked hard to raise awareness of the issue, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), as well as the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward), who is also in his place. However, there is a perception that the issue is not being talked about enough.

I acknowledge the statement made during the summer by the Foreign Secretary:

“The UK remains committed to the people of Burma, and has never wavered in its calls for the granting of full human rights to all of its people, including the Rohingya.”

Notwithstanding that statement, I have to say that there is a perception that not enough is being done. I warmly welcome the Minister to his new posting in the Foreign Office, but I hope that this debate will afford him a chance to outline in detail the Government's stance, taken in the strongest possible terms. I am sure that we are all looking forward to his response.

As the UN has stated, the Rohingya people are among the most persecuted on earth. They are a people who are denied citizenship and whose human rights have been abused. I am sure that hon. Members are familiar with the events during the summer, but I shall run through them quickly. This summer, deeply ugly sectarian violence broke out between the Buddhist Rakhine community and the Muslim Rohingya people. The trigger for the violence was the allegation in late May that three Muslim men had raped and killed a Buddhist woman. A provocative pamphlet, reporting the crime, was soon produced and circulated, and on 3 June a large mob attacked a bus and killed 10 Muslim passengers. Reports suggest that the local police stood by and watched the killing take place without intervening.

In a few days, deep religious hatred that had been simmering for decades erupted. Social media spread anti-Muslim propaganda and stoked the tensions, and further horrific sectarian violence and rioting quickly unfolded. According to various reports, mobs—from both communities—armed with swords, sticks, knives and iron rods, stormed villages on a spree of killing, burning homes and shops and desecrating places of worship. It is difficult to get an entirely accurate picture, because of the restrictions, but some estimates have suggested that hundreds have been killed and that 100,000 people have been displaced.

I want to make it entirely clear that we condemn the violence on both sides and against both communities—it is clear that the security forces have failed to provide security to both the sides in the conflict—but, overall, it seems that the Rohingya people have been the main victims. Almost all the Rohingya people in Sittwe were driven out of their homes as mobs burned down 10,000 houses, and as Human Rights Watch has reported, the police and other paramilitary forces opened fire on them with live ammunition as they tried to put out the flames and save their homes.

Reports suggest that, in the north of the state, security services have also been directly engaged in violence towards the Rohingya, with allegations of mass killings, mass arrests and looting. Days after the violence started, security forces targeting predominantly Muslim areas arrested many Rohingya men and boys who have not been heard of since.

The tensions were exacerbated by the suggestion, made by the President of Burma at the height of the crisis, about handing over the Rohingya community to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees until they could be settled in some third country. In response, the UN has called for an independent inquiry into the violence. Sadly, the Burmese Government have ignored such calls, but it would be churlish not at least to welcome the commission that they have set up to investigate the violence. However, for that commission to command international confidence, it must, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting has recently argued, have some UN or independent involvement and treat the Rohingya community fairly throughout its investigation. For example, there are already concerns that no one on the inquiry represents the Rohingya community.

More broadly, the Burmese Government must commit themselves to prosecuting those who are found guilty of horrific violence. Of course, the displaced Rohingya community must be allowed back into their homes, without fear of reprisals, and given the necessary support to rebuild their lives. Will the Minister outline what representations the FCO has made on those points?

As I said earlier, estimates suggest that up 100,000 people have been displaced, with many of those who fled the violence ending up in makeshift camps, where many of them do not have adequate shelter. It is estimated that 30,000 people are without access to clean drinking water and that the majority are without access to latrines.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. Has he heard, as I have, that one problem is that those who have fled from their home areas have not been able to cross into Bangladesh, which has made their position worse than it might have been had such an escape been possible?

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend quite rightly makes an incredibly important point, and I hope to touch on that later. I also hope that the Minister will say something about Bangladesh and its response to this crisis.

Malnutrition in the camps is a particular concern, with very high levels of severe acute malnutrition among

children, especially those from the Rohingya community. It is clear that there is a desperate need for humanitarian assistance for both the Rohingya community and, indeed, the Rakhine community in the camps. However, the response has been hampered by restrictions on access, by threats and intimidation and by the arrest of some UN and aid agency staff. I would therefore be grateful to the Minister if he made a commitment to increase the diplomatic pressure on the Burmese regime to enable full humanitarian access to all the people of Rakhine, including the Rohingya community.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): May I add my thanks to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate? Some of my constituents in Bedford will be pleased that parliamentarians are debating this issue.

The hon. Gentleman rightly draws our attention to the difference between the British Government's representations and their requirements. As we are all encouraging Burma to move towards democracy, will he comment on—perhaps he is coming on to this—what the real requirements are for us as a Parliament and for the British Government in relation to putting to the Burmese Government about what must be done for the Rohingya community if Burma is to achieve its full status in the democratic family of nations?

Jonathan Ashworth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for how he put his question. I hope to touch on such issues in my speech, but this debate is a chance for the UK Government to take a stance in the strongest possible terms. I hope that they will continue to make representations, but I am also keen to hear from the Minister how much further they can go.

I would be grateful, too, for an update from the Minister on the amount of aid funding that has been made available for such humanitarian assistance. Will he tell us whether the Government have any plans to increase the humanitarian aid in the future? I appreciate that he comes from the Foreign Office rather than the Department for International Development, but if he could perhaps spell out the Government's thinking on that, I am sure that we would all be grateful.

On the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), many of the Rohingya have sought help in neighbouring Bangladesh, yet that country has refused to allow them to cross the border. There are heartbreaking stories of boats containing men, women and children arriving in Bangladesh being pushed back into sea during the rough monsoon rains. Human Rights Watch says that about 1,300 Rohingya refugees have been pushed back into the sea. There is no estimate yet of how many of them have lost their lives.

In Bangladesh, some 30,000 Rohingya refugees have already lived for two decades in two of the world's most squalid camps, with estimates that a further 40,000 live in informal camps. Again, the conditions in those camps are characterised by overcrowding, widespread malnutrition, especially among children, and the lack of clean water and sanitation. Many say that the conditions are among the worst in any refugee camp in the world.

Sadly, humanitarian agencies' access has been restricted, with some even being expelled for fear that they will act as magnets for further refugees. At the public meeting in Leicester on Friday night, an aid worker told me how he had raised money for aid and medical supplies for the region, but was forbidden from delivering them when he arrived at Cox's Bazar and was told to return home. Again, this is another desperate humanitarian situation.

In replying, will the Minister update us on the latest discussions that the UK Government have had with Bangladesh? In particular, will he tell us what pressure the Government are exerting on the country to demand immediate access for the non-governmental organisations to provide assistance to Rohingya refugees? What discussions has he had had with Indonesia, Thailand and other countries in the region to ensure the protection of Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution?

At the heart of the conflict is the underlying issue of citizenship. The 1982 citizenship law recognises 135 national races in Burma, but excludes the Rohingya. Despite living in Burma for generations, the 800,000-strong Rohingya population's right to citizenship was removed. The Burmese regime regularly describes the Rohingya as illegal immigrants and has forced travel restrictions on them. The Rohingya have been denied land and property rights and have even had marriage and reproduction restrictions imposed on them.

The horrific violence of the summer has brought the outrageous citizenship law into sharp focus. Surely now is the time for greater international pressure to be put on the Burmese Government to repeal that law and to replace it with a new settlement based on human rights, which recognises and respects the equal rights of all the Burmese people and is in accordance with international standards. In particular, a new settlement absolutely must comply with the universal declaration of human rights, which states:

“Everyone has the right to a nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality”.

The Minister will be aware that 31 international NGOs have called for a repeal of the citizenship law. I hope that in his response he will condemn that discriminatory law and detail what pressure the Foreign Office, along with its international counterparts, is putting on the Burmese regime to repeal it.

There are clearly human rights abuses and a humanitarian crisis in the region. Many people feel, perhaps unfairly, that the UK Government could take a stronger public stance. The Minister should use this opportunity today to reassure those who feel that the issue has been neglected. I hope that he will confirm that the UK Government’s policy is to continue to press the Burmese regime for immediate, unhindered access for humanitarian organisations to all affected areas.

I hope, too, that the Minister will confirm that the UK Government will do all that they can to ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered to the displaced and to those whose homes and property have been destroyed, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. That should be done without discrimination and on the basis of need.

The Foreign Secretary confirmed to Parliament last week that he has discussed these matters with Aung San Suu Kyi and opposition leaders. Will the Minister confirm that the UK Government will continue to have those discussions, particularly given Aung San Suu Kyi’s new role as the chair of the rule of law, peace and stability committee?

Will the Minister tell us what stance the UK will take at the UN General Assembly? Will he commit to ensuring that the wording in any forthcoming annual UN Assembly resolution references the violations of international law, recommends repeal of the 1982 citizenship law and strongly condemns the sectarian violence? In the event of there being no moves to repeal the citizenship law, to allow humanitarian access and to end the abuses of human rights, what would be the Government’s attitude to the President of Burma’s invitation to visit the UK?

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I am sure that the meeting that he had in Leicester is one that could be reproduced in cities throughout the United Kingdom. There is great anger and a sense of outrage in my Newport constituency about what is happening to the Rohingya people. Does he think that there will be any progress in influencing the Government in Malaysia, who have, as I understand it, taken in about 20,000 Rohingya people? The present regime in Burma is seeking more international approval than at any time in decades. Could we not use that opportunity to ensure that it introduces policies that are far more humane to their minorities?

Jonathan Ashworth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments about Leicester. While I have the opportunity, I should tell him that he has featured prominently in the Leicester Mercury recently because of his biography of the late David Taylor, which we are all looking forward to reading. On his substantive point on Malaysia, I entirely agree with him and hope that the Minister will pick it up in his response.

This year should have been one of hope for Burma. We all know that 2011 has seen a degree of transition from military regime to civilian Government. I have no doubt that we all welcome the small tentative steps that Burma is taking to democracy and that we were all thrilled at the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, so it would be deeply wrong of us not to commend Burma for the progress that has been made. Equally, however, we should be in no doubt that, for Burma to become truly democratic, it must celebrate the diversity of its people, and that must include the Rohingya.

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) for initiating this debate. I know that it is customary to say that in such debates, but can it ever have been better deserved? There is a continuous need to remind people of that persecuted minority, the Rohingya, because news of it seldom reaches the national press. There is little international recognition of the

atrocities that it faces. I am pleased that Burma and Bangladesh are part of this debate. I suspect that many people who know about the current situation only do so because of recent events in Burma, but, of course, it goes back much further than that. I also thank the local Rohingya community, Nijam and the Rohingya youth organisation in Burma for providing the information, some of which is pretty appalling.

I apologise to all Members here because I will have to leave this debate early to attend the Education Committee. I thank Mr Williams for calling me to speak early and, while it is not my customary practice, I will have to leave after my speech and so will not be here for the summing up. The Select Committee is discussing the GCSE issue, which is important across the country.

We are here because of the atrocities that took place in early June. No doubt we have all had those awful nightmares from which we wake up in a cold sweat and then we come out of the nightmare, but of course for many of the Rohingya living in Burma and indeed in Bangladesh there is no waking up; for them, every single day is a nightmare. What is worst of all is that there are pretty powerful allegations that the very people that we rely on in these situations for protection—the security forces—are not only standing idly by but in many cases perpetrating some of the atrocities themselves.

We know that this situation does not just go back to 3 June and the murders on the bus. It goes back much further than that and it really stems from the view held by far too many people in Burma that the Rohingya are not true Burmese. The Rohingya in Burma were denied citizenship in 1982 and that stateless position has caused them not only problems in Burma itself but, of course, in Bangladesh, and it has resulted in a policy of—there is no other phrase to describe it—ethnic cleansing that has taken place over a long period of time. There is no other way of describing a deliberate policy of trying to rid a country of a group of people from within that country.

It has already been said that up to 100,000 people have been displaced. The worrying thing is that, although that situation has now provoked outrage, people knew about what was going on long before now. Brad Adams, the Asian director of Human Rights Watch, has said:

“If the atrocities in Arakan had happened before the government’s reform process started, the international reaction would have been swift and strong. But the international community appears to be blinded by a romantic narrative of sweeping change in Burma, signing new trade deals and lifting sanctions even while the abuses continue.” People knew about what was happening in Burma long before 3 June and the west—the international community—did very little to deal with that situation.

I have known about the Rohingya from about three or four years ago, when some of those who were in registered Bangladeshi camps—of course, only a minority of the Rohingya in Bangladesh are in registered camps—and who were consequently part of the United Nations gateway programme came to Bradford. We were very happy to welcome them and they have settled in very well. Three cohorts—three groups—have now come to Bradford, and they have not only settled in very well but have been made to feel very welcome. However, their arrival has brought home to all of us in Bradford a problem that was happening thousands of miles away that many people were completely unaware of. I wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 10 August following representations that I had received from my local Rohingya community and I was pleased to see him make a statement—I think that it was made on 13 August—outlining the Government’s position. However, we all know what the demands we ought to make should be. First, clear, effective and lawful steps need to be taken to prevent further violence in Burma. Secondly, as has already been mentioned, full and unhindered humanitarian access needs to be granted, because even the non-governmental organisations are being denied access to the Rohingya. We need access to all of the areas that are affected. Thirdly, we need to ensure that members of the affected communities can safely return to their homes—and they are their homes. We need to support the restitution of their property, and reparations should be made to them for the damage that has been done. However, more than anything else we need a long-term solution to the problems that the Rohingya face and we need to recognise the human rights abuses that have been conducted against them for more than 30 years.

I have a final message. The hon. Member for Leicester South covered so many areas that he has enabled me to make a shorter speech than I had planned. However, the real reason that I am here in Westminster Hall today is not because of headlines in newspapers in June, July and August, but because of the situation that this persecuted group of people has faced for more than 30 years. And we should remember not only

the 100,000 people who have been displaced in recent months but the 250,000 and more Rohingya who have been displaced as a consequence of the persecution in Burma during the past 30 years and who are living in atrocious conditions in the Bangladesh camps. We must not forget all those people.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on securing the debate about this ongoing tragedy. As he said, we are here today to speak about an issue that many people in Britain may be unaware of but that deserves our attention—the treatment of the Rohingya communities in Burma and Bangladesh. It affects many thousands of people and it goes to the heart of our belief in ourselves in Britain as strong advocates of respect for human rights, who speak up for those who do not have a voice and support those in need.

Britain has a long history of being an advocate for change in Burma and, as colleagues have said, we have seen substantial progress in Burma in the past few years. Pro-democracy candidates such as Aung San Suu Kyi have been elected to Parliament. That is progress, even if there are still serious concerns about the validity of elections in which a quarter of seats are reserved for the military. As hon. Members know, hundreds of political prisoners have been released, media restrictions have been eased and the process of political reconciliation with many ethnic minorities has begun.

Those reforms have encouraged the international community, including our own country, to strengthen its ties with a country that was previously one of the most isolated in the world. That process has included the suspension of sanctions. However, the continuing suspension of sanctions must be conditional on how much progress is made in respect of human rights and the transition to democracy, which has been slow and difficult.

From a development perspective, Burma remains one of the poorest countries in Asia, with widespread poverty and a vulnerability to shocks or crises. Much of the population lack the means to meet their basic needs and deal with their major health problems. In addition, there remain concerns about the extent of the power that the military still exerts. Hundreds of political prisoners remain in prison and, of course, there is the continuing conflict with some ethnic minority communities.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South and the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) have already pointed out, civilians in provinces such as Kachin and Arakan talk about systematic human rights abuses, including forced labour and displacement, torture and extra-judicial killings. There are approximately 800,000 to 1 million Rohingya living in the province of Arakan, where many of them have lived for generations. However, they have faced a long history of marginalisation and discrimination. As my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman also said, that marginalisation and discrimination was made concrete in law in the form of the 1982 citizenship law, which rendered Rohingya in Burma non-citizens and virtually stateless.

When violence erupted between the Rohingya Muslim community and the Buddhist Rakhine community in June, both sides committed atrocious acts of violence and abuse. The Burmese Government interceded, but they did not simply put an end to the violence; instead, they helped perpetuate a cycle of sectarian and state-sponsored violence against the Rohingya.

As has been said, there are serious allegations against the Burmese Government forces—of killings, torture, rape, mass arrests and forced displacement—from both local people and human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The UN special rapporteur on human rights visited the province of Arakan in August and reported seeing burned villages, which meant that many people had been left without homes or shelter. Estimates place the number of people who were displaced at around 100,000, the majority of whom were Rohingya. The conflict has left many people without homes to return to, or made them too scared even to return home.

According to some of the few aid agencies that have managed to see those people, those who have been displaced or have fled have often been forced into camps that are little better than prisons. The camps are in squalid places with little or no access to basic services such as health care, sanitation, food and education. However, instead of seeking peace and reconciliation, the Burmese Government have asked the UN for assistance in trying to remove all Rohingya from Burma and place them in third countries. If they are serious about reform, they should instead eliminate the discriminatory laws that validate that kind of violence.

The violence and persecution by the Burmese Government has forced many aid workers to flee and has made it difficult to deliver aid. Tens of thousands of people are in need of support, but getting to them is still difficult. So that the disaster does not worsen, the Burmese Government need to allow immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access, not just to the camps, but to all areas of Arakan state, where the violence has impacted on everyone's lives, whether they be Muslim or Buddhist, Rohingya or Rakhine.

Alongside immediate access, there needs to be a truly independent and impartial inquiry—as has already been mentioned—to look closely at the human rights abuses, and punishment must be applied to the perpetrators. It must be an inquiry that can establish the truth and start the process of reconciliation, hopefully to avoid this happening again. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South mentioned, the British Government should continue to use all the public and private levers they have to ensure that that happens, and encourage our international partners to do the same. As we continue to strengthen our relationship with the Burmese Government, including through the suspension of sanctions, we must expect progress on reform, particularly regarding such human rights abuses and state-sponsored violence.

I want to turn to the situation in Bangladesh. Violence has been an all-too-common feature in the life of Rohingya communities in Burma, and in the '80s and '90s it forced hundreds of thousands to flee to Bangladesh. Many ended up along Bangladesh's border with Burma, where they have been stuck in camps for a long time. Since 1992, however, Bangladesh has refused to allow them to be registered as refugees, leaving them yet again without rights and support. All but 30,000 are denied refugee status, leaving 200,000 without access to refugee rights, or help such as food rations from the World Food Programme or health care and education provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Alongside that, the Government of Bangladesh have a policy of reducing the so-called attractiveness of the camps, refusing help to improve the squalid and overcrowded conditions. That is likely to cause a further humanitarian disaster, and it is in direct contravention of international law, which requires the Government to recognise the human rights of everyone within their borders. At the very least, that must mean allowing organisations such as the UN to provide basic humanitarian support. As the situation worsens, with reports that at least 1,300 Rohingya, including children, trying to flee the violence were turned back at the border, with many international organisations estimating that the numbers could be higher, we need to act immediately.

In early 2011, during the visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh to the UK, my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party and I raised directly with her the plight of Rohingya refugees in her country. It is incredibly disappointing that the position of the Government of Bangladesh has not changed. Bangladesh benefited from the generosity of its neighbours during the 1971 war of independence, when hundreds of thousands of people—potentially more—were made refugees. I call on the Government of Bangladesh to reconsider the issue, and I hope that the Minister will put pressure on them to act humanely and step up to their responsibilities.

The international community should follow the lead of the US Government in shining a light on the decisions that the Government of Bangladesh make and pushing for them to live up to their moral and legal responsibilities. As the largest bilateral donor to Bangladesh, it is crucial that the UK Government apply further pressure on the Government of Bangladesh to fulfil their responsibilities to the Rohingya communities that have sought refuge in that country.

The level of violence in Arakan state has fallen, but there remains a serious humanitarian crisis that needs urgent attention if we are to stem the cycle of violence and killing. We have a chance right now, while there are opportunities in Burma, to help encourage the kinds of changes that are needed to see the process of reform and reconciliation in Burma flourish. That is essential if we are to ensure the protection not just of the Rohingya community in Burma, but of the many other communities that still face oppression and discrimination. The UK is building strong links with the Government of Burma, but we must use those links to put pressure on the Government to respect human rights and to ensure that they are serious about the issues, particularly when lives are being lost and violence is being perpetrated, and that the state genuinely is not taking sides but acting as a neutral, honest broker. The British Government must publicly hold the Government of Burma to account for how they relate to the sanctions, and we must work with our international partners to exert pressure in requiring, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South said, an independent inquiry into what has happened in Arakan state.

This is an important time for Burma to show the world that it is serious about human rights and democracy. The situation in Arakan state, and the plight of the Rohingya Muslims in particular, highlights that there is much further to go. As a country that cares about continued developments and wants to see progress in Burma, it is vital that we act as a critical friend who will support the Government to make that transition but will be firm about the need to respect the rights of minorities and those who continue to suffer at the hands of perpetrators of violence and hate. We will hold the Government to account, and I call on the Minister to exert pressure on the Government to act now.

Hywel Williams (in the Chair): Six Members are seeking to catch my eye. I hope to start the winding-up speeches at 10.30 am, so I ask Members to keep their remarks to the point so that all voices can be heard.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on securing the debate. I will confine my remarks to just three areas, because previous speakers have covered the ground so thoroughly.

Violent conflict between communities, such as we have seen in Arakan state, is a disaster for all concerned, and especially so when the communities include some of the poorest people, who have no means of recovering from the loss of property or livelihood, let alone the harm to, and loss of life in their families. However, it is particularly hard to bear circumstances in which Government authorities are seen to be either indifferent to the suffering, or to be making it worse, as in this case. Whatever else a Government do or do not do for their people, they must treat them fairly and without discrimination. There are clear reports of arbitrary violence, including rape, looting and torture, by police and security forces. It is also clear that Rohingya who have been displaced are, as a result of their ethnicity, not receiving assistance. That has to stop, and the Burmese Government must allow full access to humanitarian agencies and independent observers.

We are not trying to excuse anyone—everyone who commits violence is at fault here—but behind the conflict lies the pernicious effect of the 1982 citizenship law, under which the Rohingya, who are Muslim, are denied citizenship, even though the land has been their home for generations. Not only that but, as previous speakers have said, the President recently asked the UN for help in resettling the Rohingya in other countries, which is in clear contradiction of the universal declaration on human rights.

In the 21st century, it cannot be the case that a country refuses to recognise as citizens people who have lived there for generations. I urge the UK Government and the European Union to continue making it clear to the Burmese Government that reviewing, reforming or repealing the law is essential to ensuring that there is no discrimination.

Bangladesh, too, as the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) made clear, needs to provide under international law a safe sanctuary to people who flee persecution and violence in Burma. Indeed, the international community needs to support Bangladesh in doing so and to support all who are displaced. I welcome the work of the Department for International Development on that.

Finally, it is not only the Rohingya in Burma who are suffering as a result of their ethnicity and religion, although, perhaps because of the citizenship law, they have suffered the most. The Christian Chin minority and others have also been under great pressure for decades. State-supported persecution because of people's religious views, lack of religious views or ethnicity must be confronted wherever it occurs. As a country, we must speak out whenever that happens, whether in a state that is predominantly Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Hindu or of no religion.

I applaud the UK Government's strong stance, the Foreign Secretary's statement and the United Kingdom's effort at the United Nations. I welcome DFID's constant work in Burma over many years, both under the previous Government and the current Government. Working with the poorest people is especially important, whether they suffered the cyclone in 2010, displacement today or, in the east of the country, the real threat that malaria resistant to artemisinin, which is the only effective treatment, could spread unless it is countered on the Burmese-Thai border. That is why DFID's work in Burma is so important, irrespective of the current policies of the Burmese Government. DFID is there to help the world's poorest people. How much pressure should the UK Government place on Burma? The Prime Minister has invited the President of Burma to the UK. As the previous Minister of State, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Mr

Browne), wrote in a letter to a colleague of mine in the European Parliament on 10 August, a visit will be

“a valuable opportunity to continue the Prime Minister’s dialogue with the President and to stress the need to resolve the many issues outstanding.”

There have been calls for the invitation to be withdrawn, which I understand, but I believe that, perhaps with the conditions that have already been mentioned, a visit would provide an opportunity to raise very publicly and very strongly the plight of the Rohingya and others in Burma.

As the hon. Member for Leicester South so eloquently put it, this year should have been a year of hope for Burma. Indeed, there have been many welcome moves towards democracy. Above all, given the UK’s history in Burma, we should support those moves, but we cannot simply stand by and ignore what is happening. I urge the Minister to make it clear in the strongest possible terms that the UK Government expect the Burmese Government to take action to protect the Rohingya and other communities in Burma whom they are currently failing to protect.

Hywel Williams (in the Chair): I have been informed that we may start the winding-up speeches at 10.40, so there is slightly more time, but I appeal to hon. Members to be to the point.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams. I promise to be brief, because I realise that other Members want to speak.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on securing this important debate. Many of my constituents, from all backgrounds and all faiths, have been in touch to highlight their concerns about what is happening to the Rohingya community, which they have seen on their screens.

We are recognising a tragedy taking place on the other side of the world in which innocent families are losing their lives. Given today’s significance, we should all put on record our thoughts and prayers for the families who lost loved ones on 9/11 or in other tragedies across the world.

My constituents, and people across the world, will be shocked by the images of death and destruction in Burma. Hundreds of people have lost their lives, and hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. Human Rights Watch, for example, has highlighted concerns that the Burmese authorities in many cases stood by and watched, and in some cases took part, as the tragedies occurred. It is incumbent on the UK Government and the international community to tell the Burmese authorities that they must fulfil their international obligations and, more importantly, their basic human rights obligations to every single one of their citizens.

We had the pleasure of having Aung San Suu Kyi here, which was a great day for us and a great beacon of hope for anyone who believes in freedom and democracy. Democracy is not only about being able to vote or stand as a candidate; with democracy come responsibilities such as access to justice, recognition of fairness and equality for all and, hopefully, opportunity for all. Sadly, that is not the case for the Rohingya community in Burma, who are denied citizenship and must get permission to marry, have children or leave their local villages. That situation is not acceptable in the 21st century in any country, and it is incumbent on us to condemn those actions.

The circumstances and responsibilities of neighbouring countries are also interesting. Bangladesh has many challenges from poverty and budgetary and cost constraints, but it also has an obligation to the international community. We support the Bangladeshi Government and their work to fight poverty and lack of opportunity in Bangladesh, and we must help them through this difficult period and, hopefully, ensure that they fulfil their international obligations.

I recently wrote to the Bangladeshi high commissioner, who kindly responded by saying that his Government are doing all they can to support the 25,000 Rohingya refugees in various camps across the country. He assured me that Bangladesh will fulfil its obligations under the UN charter and has repeatedly raised the issue in regional and religious forums across the world.

The one sad thing is that the high commissioner's response shows that there is still work to be done. He concluded by saying that he thinks there is a Burma-only problem that can be solved only by the Burmese themselves. He said that the Rohingya population in Bangladesh causes drug dealing, arms dealing, murder and looting. He labelled the Rohingya an economic and social burden. There is still some work to be done to ensure that Bangladesh fulfils its obligations.

I welcome the Minister, for whom I have a few closing questions. What discussions has he had with representatives of the Department for International Development on ongoing humanitarian support for the Rohingya community? What discussions has he had with the Burmese authorities on the commission that has been set up to investigate the recent violence against the Rohingya community? What discussions has he had with the Bangladeshi authorities? What steps are being taken, alongside other international partners, to raise this important issue at the UN Security Council? What action can be taken from there?

Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): It is always a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams. I look forward to the debate you will be leading later, although I doubt whether I will be able to take part.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), who has done a great service by enabling the House to show itself in its finest tradition by speaking up for a minority in a distant part of the world that finds itself greatly persecuted and its human rights violated. I also thank hon. Members who, through other parliamentary processes such as parliamentary questions, have enabled Ministers to put on record their approach to this problem.

I was not aware of the extent of the issue until recently, but, unfortunately, the pattern with the Rohingya in Burma can be seen across the world. Minorities often find themselves isolated in their own country. Where a minority has a different ethnicity, sometimes visibly so, from the majority, where a minority follows a different religion or religious practices from the majority or where a minority has a different language from the majority, the majority, feeling under pressure, often exhibits frustration that manifests through oppression and violence against the minority, even though the minority might not be the cause of the problems perceived by the majority.

Through hon. Members' efforts, Ministers have put on record the approaches that they have made to the Burmese and Bangladeshi Governments. Although those overtures are on record, what have been the Governments' responses? To reinforce the questions asked by other hon. Members, how can the United Nations best use its influence to enable peace and reconciliation in that part of the world? What can be done about the refugee status of the Rohingya in Bangladesh? Can the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development do anything more to support those people in difficult circumstances?

The Rohingya community has historically and effectively been made stateless by the actions of the Burmese and Bangladeshi Governments. They are now being persecuted without redress, save for the efforts of the United Kingdom Government and international agencies such as the United Nations. I congratulate the Minister on his new position and urge him to use it to make the most of the channels available to the Government to resolve the problem.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Lab): I appreciate the opportunity to speak, Mr Williams. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) for securing this extremely important and timely debate. The issue has been raised with me, as I am sure that it has been raised with other hon. Members, by a number of my constituents, and it is increasingly and rightly moving up the international agenda.

The intolerance shown by the Burmese state towards the Rohingya community is completely and utterly unacceptable. As my hon. Friends have pointed out, we must do all that we can to urge the Government to put more pressure on the Burmese Government to terminate the persecution of the Rohingya people. The atrocities are appalling, as my hon. Friends have outlined. The Burmese Government must be held to account for how they are treating the Muslim people. Injustice is being done to the Rohingya people. As has been outlined, the 1982 citizenship law is completely unacceptable. The security services in Burma are not only failing to intervene but are acting against the Rohingya people. There is a complete failure to protect those citizens of Burma.

Turning to the situation in Bangladesh, I urge the Government of Bangladesh to treat the refugees with much more compassion and to allow the United Nations to intervene in the refugee situation to see precisely what is going on. The Minister might wish to consider this important point. As Bangladesh approaches a general election, tensions are arising between the Awami League, which is currently in power, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. If we are not careful, the Rohingya people will become a political football in Bangladesh. That should raise concerns for us. Perhaps we could urge the Bangladesh Government to reduce the tensions between those two main political parties involving the Rohingya people.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I welcome what the hon. Gentleman is saying, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on securing this debate. The treatment of the Rohingya people in Burma has raised concerns among many of my constituents. As someone who spent time in Bangladesh last summer, helping to teach English in a rural school, I have been in contact with numerous non-governmental organisations in Bangladesh, particularly Islamic Relief, which is incredibly keen to help the Rohingya. Will the hon. Gentleman say more about what he thinks we can do to support NGOs such as Islamic Relief in helping those people?

Simon Danczuk: It is right and proper that both the FCO and DFID play a part in working with NGOs in Bangladesh to provide the assistance and support that many Rohingya people who reside in Bangladesh are, sadly, missing.

I have two final points to make. First, we must urge all political parties in Bangladesh to unite in helping the Rohingya. I also urge our Government to press all Governments in the region to provide justice for the Rohingya people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on bringing this issue to the House. It takes a crisis to bring such matters to everyone's attention, as he said.

I have spoken in the House on many occasions about the persecution of ethnic groups, particularly Christians. I remind Members that a small Christian minority in the area has also been persecuted over the years. Perhaps the Minister will give us some indication about that when he responds. I congratulate him on his elevation. Two years in Northern Ireland maketh a man, and here he is in a new job.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on highlighting the suffering of the Rohingya people as well as drawing attention to the ongoing persecution of Christian minorities. Later today, at the all-party parliamentary group on Burma, I will be chairing a presentation by the Chin Human Rights Organisation of its report, "Threats to our existence: persecution of ethnic Chin Christians in Burma", which highlights the fact that that ongoing persecution has not got the attention that it deserves.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and agree wholeheartedly that the issues must be highlighted. I am conscious of the need for religious liberty for Christians, as well as for Muslims or Buddhists. That opportunity should be available to all, but in many cases it is not.

The 2012 state riots highlighted the ongoing conflicts between ethnic groups in Rakhine state in Myanmar. At the same time, they show that the UN and our Government have a role to play in the crisis. What contact has the Minister had with the UN? Have the British Government applied pressure through the European Union on behalf of the Burmese people?

The Myanmar authorities report that the violence between ethnic groups has left 78 people dead, 87 injured and thousands of homes destroyed. Other figures indicate that as many as 650 people could be dead. Whatever the figures are, the issue is that cruel and vicious ethnic violence is taking place, and we must see what our Government can do to help to end it. We have a responsibility on the world stage.

A state of emergency has been declared. In July 2012, the Myanmar Government asserted that the Rohingya minority group, classified as stateless Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh, is not included among its more than 130 ethnic races and has no claim to Myanmar citizenship, which is why the Rohingya do not receive the protection that they should. Has the Minister had discussions on the matter? If so, what

assurances can we give to the Rohingya people about their citizenship and the protection that they should receive but clearly are not receiving?

The Rohingya have been displaced and are living in camps. Political leaders are working to expel them from the country. Burma's President, Thein Sein, has attempted to hand over the group to the UN refugee agency. Have our Government had any contact with the UN about the issue? Bangladesh, already home to an estimated Rohingya refugee population of 300,000, has turned away more migrants. It has sealed its 200 km border with Myanmar, as it is unable to cope with the strain of more refugees. What humanitarian aid have the British Government given, either on their own or with the EU or UN? Clearly, a crisis is unfolding very quickly and many people are under pressure.

In conclusion, it is clear that these problems must be addressed and that this cannot be done by Government officials washing their hands of a sector of their people. I have stood in support of many ethnic groups that are persecuted because of their religion, skin colour, culture or history. I urge the Minister to respond to the ethnic human rights crisis and to see what we can do to help.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I will heed your advice to be mindful of the time, Mr Williams, and I will be brief.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) for securing the debate. His excellent speech put the issue in its proper context and acknowledged the perception that it has perhaps not received the attention it deserves. The situation is extremely important to a number of my constituents, some of whom brought it to my attention when I recently attended Eid celebrations. I was impressed by the passion and awareness of the young people who told me the extremely sad story of the Rohingya minority in Burma. Denied their citizenship and basic rights, they face a sectarian feud that has already left many dead and many more homeless.

The reported response of the Burmese security forces is extremely troubling. There have been reports of police and soldiers standing by and watching as violence unfolds. In some cases, there have been reports of them actually antagonising the situation by participating in the violence directly, and that has often been followed by arbitrary arrests of Rohingya Muslim men. This has revived the worrying association between the Burmese state and summary detentions at a time when most observers have welcomed the fall in politically motivated arrests.

There is a concern that the recent progress in Burma may tempt the international community to downplay the situation. That would be a mistake, and I think we all sincerely hope that that will not happen. There is no doubt that this is an important time for developments in Burma, but we must be very clear with the Burmese Government. If they really want to become a fully accepted member of the international community, then their response to human rights abuses must be completely unambiguous. The protection of basic human rights is fundamental to any democratic country, and it would be tragic if this situation were to undermine the progress of a country that otherwise appears to be moving in the right direction. A stable, democratically elected government in Burma that respects basic civil liberties and defends all of its citizens, regardless of ethnicity, will not just be good for all the people of Burma, but the wider region too.

I hope the Burmese Government will act promptly to bring an end to these atrocities and to put right the injustices that Rohingya Muslims have suffered for many years. I hope that Her Majesty's Government will continue to do what it can to help secure that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to see you in the Chair, Mr Williams. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on securing the debate. I, too, have been contacted by constituents who are concerned, particularly by what they saw on the Channel 4 programme about the plight of the Rohingya community. Everyone who has spoken today has done an excellent job in conveying to the Chamber some of the problems faced by the community and some of the human rights abuses being committed against it. I welcome the Minister to his new role. I suspect that we will be spending quite a lot of time in Westminster Hall together in such debates in the coming months.

I was fortunate to visit Burma in July, with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, to see the progress that has undoubtedly been made by the regime, and to discuss the need for continuing reforms if Burma

is to be a true democracy where political freedoms and human rights are respected, where the rule of law is firmly established, and where communities are not torn apart by conflict. It is important to note how far Burma has come in a very short space of time. There was a feeling of optimism from everyone I spoke to, particularly when I met Aung San Suu Kyi and other newly elected MPs who had won by-elections earlier this year. There is a sense that the genie is out of the bottle and that there will be no return to the former repression, but obviously there is a very long way to go and further progress to be made.

The problems faced by ethnic minority communities were a key issue we discussed. I think I am right in saying that approximately 43% of the population in Burma comes from a minority community. Conflicts in some states, such as Kachin, Karen and, of course, Rakhine, are a graphic reminder that there is still a long way to go in Burma.

I wish to give as much time as possible for the Minister's winding-up speech so that other hon. Members have the chance to intervene, so I will not go through the problems faced by the Rohingya community again. As hon. Members have said, villages have been destroyed by fire, and we have heard about rapes and the brutal murders of children. The World Food Programme estimates that 90,000 people have been displaced by the violence. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South said that up to 100,000 had been displaced. There is clearly a humanitarian crisis and I hope the Minister will tell us what steps the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development are taking to ensure that victims are receiving the humanitarian assistance they clearly need, what access there is to the camps, and how much aid the British Government are prepared to contribute.

Much of the blame for the violence against the Rohingya community has been attributed to other ethnic groups within Rakhine, but disturbing evidence suggests that the Burmese border security force, army and police are also involved and culpable. Human Rights Watch has condemned the authorities for standing by and watching, indifferent to what is going on. Amnesty International reports that

“Hundreds of mostly men and boys have been detained, with nearly all held incommunicado, and some subject to ill-treatment.”

It describes the arrests as “arbitrary and discriminatory”. Worryingly, it seems that political prisoner numbers are once again on the rise.

As part of the package of reform in Burma, we have seen the release of political prisoners and a relaxation of press censorship. In Rakhine, however, a different picture seems to be emerging. During my visit the plight of the Rohingya was raised at virtually every meeting, but there is a lack of support for the community across the board. Although we talk about this as being a Muslim issue—certainly the British Muslim community has done a lot to bring it to people's attention—we were told that it was an issue of what was deemed to be illegal immigration, and not that the Rohingya community is a Muslim community. I am sure that that would be disputed by many within the Rohingya community, but it comes down to the basic issue of what country they belong to and their disputed legal status in Burma.

I had a positive and informative discussion with representatives of the Rohingya community. One question I posed to them was whether they would qualify for protection under the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. They have not passed that hurdle yet, and it is debatable whether they would. Some would say that the 1982 citizenship law was passed by the military government specifically to exclude the Rohingya population from Burmese citizenship.

I do not think that anyone else has gone into any detail about that law. It categorises people into three groups. Full citizens are those who belong to one of the eight specified national races, or whose ancestors settled before the British occupation in 1823. Obviously, the Rohingya do not come into that category. Associate citizens who applied before the 1982 Act came into effect qualify under the previous 1948 law. For the most part, the Rohingya would not meet that criterion either. Finally, naturalised citizens are required to provide conclusive evidence that they or their parents' residency in Burma predates independence in 1948. Some of the Rohingya community that I met have generations who go back that far, but a lot more have arrived more recently. Those who have at least one parent qualifying under one of those categories can become naturalised citizens if they are at least 18 years old and speak one of the national languages. That does not include the dialect spoken by the Rohingya, so even if they manage to

prove that they meet one of those other categories, the language criterion excludes them. That means that the Rohingya are, in effect, left stateless or classed as resident foreigners without any legal status. Many of them have little formal documentation, so even if their roots in Burma go back pre-1948, it will be difficult for them to prove that.

Human Rights Watch, in its report, “The Government Could Have Stopped This”, suggests that many of those who had any paperwork would have lost it in the fires earlier this summer. That organisation has received reports from some Rohingya that the authorities confiscated their ID. Clearly, the Rohingya people are in a Catch-22 situation now. There is no way that they can prove that they meet the citizenship requirements under the current law. They are, in effect, stateless; they cannot prove that they have the right to be citizens of any other country. I will mention Bangladesh in a moment.

Will the Minister say what discussions there have been with the Burmese Government regarding the 1982 law and, given that Rohingya children born in Burma are denied citizenship of any nation, what representations have been made regarding article 7 of the convention on the rights of the child?

Jonathan Ashworth: Historically, the Burmese Government were, perhaps, more sympathetic towards citizenship rights in relation to the Rohingya. The first President of Burma said that the “Muslims of Arakan certainly belong to the indigenous races of Burma. If they do not belong to the indigenous races, we also cannot be taken as an indigenous races.” In the past there has been a more understanding attitude towards the Rohingya. It is important that we get that on the record.

Kerry McCarthy: That shows clearly why the 1982 Act was such a backward step: by establishing the principle that there are eight national races, it went back on what the then President said. Review and reform of the 1982 Act is crucial to dealing with the Rohingya’s situation.

The establishment by the President of a commission to investigate the violence in Rakhine state was welcomed by the Foreign Office Minister, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who does not cover Burma, but deals with human rights issues—or did at the time. He issued a statement welcoming the announcement, emphasising that it was crucial for the commission to be impartial and inclusive. Will the Minister say what involvement the Foreign Office has had in the commission’s work? Have any direct representations been made to the commission? Has the Foreign Office been involved in assessing the commission’s progress to date?

Several hon. Members mentioned Bangladesh, which is important, because Burma cannot resolve the situation alone and it is not Burma’s sole responsibility to resolve it. The Rohingya’s treatment by Bangladeshi authorities is also a serious cause for concern. It is difficult to verify numbers, but we have seen videos of packed boats being turned away by Bangladesh. It is estimated that more than 300,000 Rohingya refugees have managed to cross the border into Bangladesh, but the Government there officially recognise only 29,000 of those as refugees.

It is worrying that Bangladesh has now stopped three aid agencies, Médecins Sans Frontières, Action Against Hunger and Muslim Aid, from providing aid, claiming that Rohingya are in Bangladesh illegally. They are going backwards and forwards across the border and are regarded as illegal immigrants in both cases. What contact has there been between the UK and Bangladesh regarding the principle of non-refoulement and humanitarian access? Has the Minister tried to encourage a dialogue between the Bangladesh and Burmese authorities? That is what is needed at the moment to deal with the immediate humanitarian crisis, because the refugees have nowhere to go.

Burma should be praised for the steps that it has taken towards democracy, but it still has a long way to go. The progress is fragile and grave human rights violations remain, including but not limited to the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities. The President must prove that his Government are committed to addressing those violations and the UK must demonstrate, when the Burmese President visits this country, that all due representations are made and that this matter is flagged on the political agenda. I am sure that the Minister wants to update us on all those issues in his response.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Mr Williams, I am grateful for serving under your chairmanship in my first outing for the Foreign Office. Like other hon. Members, I am

grateful to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) for requesting this debate and for his providing me with the opportunity, at an early stage, to give the first Government speech on this important issue for many years.

I recognise the important role that this Parliament continues to play in supporting both human rights and democracy in Burma. Many of my colleagues have worked tirelessly for many years to ensure that the international spotlight remains firmly focused on events in Burma.

I agree with the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Roger Williams), who said that this debate shows Parliament at its best in seeking to protect minorities in far-flung parts of the world. The discrimination faced by the Rohingya people has long been an issue of serious concern for the Government.

The hon. Member for Leicester South said that he did not think that what was going on with the Rohingya was well enough known and that it was not getting enough worldwide publicity. I agree. However, the UK has been and will continue to be one of the most active, vocal members of the international community in raising concerns about the plight of the Rohingya community. We have, for many years, continually sought to raise the profile of this issue with the international community and to raise our concerns directly with the Governments of Burma and Bangladesh.

Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary met a range of ethnic groups, including Rohingya representatives, during their respective visits to Burma in April and January this year. Their visits, in the wake of the visit by the then Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) in November 2011, were the first by a western Head of State for many decades and the first by a British Foreign Secretary since 1955, and show the importance that this Government attach to that part of the world. Their meetings with Rohingya representatives demonstrate how seriously the concerns of the Rohingya, particularly, are viewed by this Government.

During his visit, the Foreign Secretary also raised with the Burmese Government the specific issues facing the Rohingya. More recently, the troubling inter-communal violence in Rakhine state has once again brought these issues to the attention of the world. We have seen violence perpetrated by both Rohingya and Rakhine ethnic groups. Our assessment is that this is less about religious differences and more the latest manifestation of decades-long inter-communal tensions between the communities, which highlights once again the need to find a long-term solution to the issues facing the Rohingya, as the UK has been urging for many years.

We reacted quickly to the recent outbreak of violence—as hon. Members have acknowledged—issuing a statement on 10 June that called for all parties to act with restraint and urged the authorities and community leaders to open discussions to end the violence and protect all members of the local population. We called on President Thein Sein and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to work with the communities affected to resolve the situation rapidly in a peaceful and constructive manner. Following this statement and subsequent ministerial statements, we welcomed the Burmese Government's decision to establish an independent investigative commission to probe the violence. For the commission to be credible, it needs to be as inclusive as possible, as hon. Members have said, involving those from all the affected communities, including the Rohingya. Our embassy is in close contact with members of that commission and continues to make that point.

Since the violence in Rakhine state, this Government have been active in renewing our calls for a lasting solution to address the plight of the Rohingya. We have repeatedly called for the Burmese Government to ensure unrestricted humanitarian access across Rakhine, including areas that were receiving aid before the recent outbreak of violence. It is also crucial to address reports of arbitrary detentions and mistreatment of detainees and to find a long-term solution that resolves the issue of the citizenship of the Rohingya. We continue to raise these issues with senior members of the Burmese Government, including with the President and the Burmese ambassador.

The Foreign Secretary raised the issues concerning those fleeing the violence to Bangladesh—another point made by the hon. Member for Leicester South in his opening remarks—in a recent meeting with Prime Minister Hasina of Bangladesh. The then Secretary of State for International Development, my

right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, also raised the matter in a meeting with Prime Minister Hasina in August. We and our European Union partners have lobbied the Government of Bangladesh to allow humanitarian assistance in Cox's Bazar, which is home to many thousands of displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh, to continue.

We also highlighted our concerns with international partners and urged greater EU collective action. The United Kingdom continues to raise the situation in Burma at the UN Security Council. At our request, we have had three separate briefings in the past eight months from Mr Vijay Nambiar, the UN Secretary-General's special adviser on Burma. We also strongly supported a UN Human Rights Council resolution on Burma this year, which included an extension to the mandate of the UN's special rapporteur for Burma, Mr Tomas Quintana, who visited Rakhine state recently.

A number of Members asked what we would do if there were no improvement in the present situation. We are absolutely clear that we will support further easing of EU sanctions only once there has been further progress against the benchmarks for political progress that we want to see met, including the release of all political prisoners, an end to ethnic conflict and further credible steps towards reconciliation with Burma's ethnic groupings.

We will encourage the Association of South East Asian Nations and its member states to play an active role in supporting Burma's Government to resolve the situation, in particular those countries that have experience of resolving ethnic tensions. I was asked about the involvement of or discussions with Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, and we are in regular contact with those ASEAN states about the issue, and in particular with those with Rohingya populations, such as Malaysia. We are calling on such ASEAN states to play a helpful and moderating role in their neighbour's finding a lasting solution, drawing on their own experiences of democratic transition and of resolving conflict between ethnic groups. Interestingly, various Burmese representatives have had discussions, I believe, with some in Northern Ireland—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is here to talk about the lessons that can be learned from conflict resolution there.

We are also providing substantial development assistance to all communities throughout Rakhine state in respect of livelihoods, health and educational programmes. Additionally, the UN has launched an appeal for \$32.5 million to address urgent needs over the next six months. As well as the development assistance that we are already providing, any further future contribution that we make to that appeal will focus on ensuring that such programmes do not entrench segregation, but instead focus on restoring services in villages, rather than in camps, so that communities can return to their homes.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for his comments and for his tribute to the work of the Department for International Development. We are already the largest bilateral aid donor to Burma: we have been giving £187 million over four years, with programmes focused on health care, governance, public finance management, livelihoods, strengthening the work of Parliament and civil society and helping the process of ethnic reconciliation.

We welcome the Government's efforts to reach out to ethnic groups and their success in signing ceasefires with 10 of the 11 main groups. We have certainly not forgotten the plight of such groups, who continue to suffer as a result of the 60-year conflict with the Government. We also recognise, however, that the ceasefires are fragile and simply a first step, albeit an important one. The UK is devoting considerable resource and expertise to supporting that process and to ensuring that those ceasefires are now followed by genuine political dialogue and national reconciliation, which is what we all hope to see. In that context, we welcome Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's appointment as chair of the parliamentary committee on the rule of law, peace and stability, which we hope will allow her to play an active role in helping to address the issue.

In answer to the shadow Minister's question about the citizenship law, which was also mentioned by other hon. Members, we have specifically raised the 1982 citizenship law with the Government of Burma. As we have done for many years, we will continue to make it clear to the Burmese Government that the citizenship of the Rohingya people must be dealt with. We are working to ensure that the issues facing the Rohingya are reflected in the resolution on Burma at the UN General Assembly due in November—as we have done, in all fairness, previously.

We remain deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict in Kachin state. We urge all sides involved to renew their efforts to reach a lasting solution and we call on all parties to cease hostilities. We have provided more than £2 million of humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of more than 28,000 people affected by the conflict in Kachin.

The United Kingdom welcomes the significant progress in Burma in the past 18 months. We pay tribute to the bold steps taken by the President and by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. We are committed to supporting them both as they continue together on the path to genuine reform and transformative change in Burma.

In that context, I welcome the Westminster Foundation for Democracy visit to Burma, which the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), went on—she is ahead of me in that respect. Other Members also went, not least my hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for St Ives (Andrew George), and the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). That is interesting because four political parties were represented in that group, which is a good demonstration of how parties can work together and an extremely good example to the Burmese of how differences can be buried for the sake of national interest and democratic progress. I welcome that move very much, and it was a good first step in a wider programme of UK support to the Burmese Government.

I also welcome the setting up of the all-party parliamentary group again—I think it was in abeyance for some time. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), who is no longer in his place, is chairing a meeting this afternoon, I think he said. The more people who are engaged, in both Houses of Parliament and all the political parties, in supporting what we are trying to achieve in Burma is manifestly a good thing.

I pay tribute to the work of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Mr Browne)—who has just appeared mysteriously, no doubt to claim all the credit for British action in Burma and for this excellent speech. I am glad, however, of the issue's now falling firmly within my bailiwick.

Much remains to be done and progress is not guaranteed. We will not let up in our calls for all remaining political prisoners to be released, for an end to ethnic conflict and for the human rights of all Burma's people to be respected. The best way to achieve our vision of a democratic Burma that enshrines freedom and human rights for all is to engage with the parties in Burma to help embed reform and to encourage further meaningful progress towards the peaceful democratic governance that we all hope for and aspire to.

I appreciate the spirit in which this morning's debate has been conducted. I am sure that what we have said in the Chamber will be read by those who follow such matters closely, not least I hope by the Government of Burma, who will see that this country is absolutely united on achieving reconciliation between the Government and the ethnic groups of that country, in particular with respect to the Rohingya people who need to be treated in a fairer manner quickly.

All Party Parliamentary Group for Democracy in Burma

Meeting with Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO)

On 11 September 2012, APPG organized a meeting with Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO). CHRO launched its new report, "Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma, exposes serious ongoing human rights violations even as the new nominally-civilian government claims to implement reforms in Burma.

For years, state-sanctioned deep-rooted discrimination against the Chin on the dual basis of their ethnicity and religion has given rise to widespread and systematic violations of fundamental human rights, particularly religious freedom. Based on over 100 qualitative interviews and in-depth research conducted over the past two years, the report reveals that the Chin continue to be denied religious freedom and are targeted for induced and coerced conversion to Buddhism, in pursuance of an unwritten State policy of forced assimilation.

In the meeting, CHRO delegations presented the deepen situation of religious violations in Burma, and their far-reaching impact. CHRO also highlighted the urgent need to place minority and indigenous rights at the heart of the democratic transition process in the country.

For more information about the briefing, please see:

<http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/reports/title/threats-to-our-existence-persecution-of-ethnic-chin-christians-in-burma>

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND VISIT TO PARLIAMENT 21 JUNE 2012

23. 05. 2012

That this House welcomes Aung San Suu Kyi's election into Pyithu Hluttaw, the Lower House of the Burmese Parliament, as an indication of change in the country; congratulates the National League for Democracy on its success in the by-election; welcomes change in the Burmese government; notes that Burma still holds a considerable number of political prisoners, who should be released immediately; welcomes Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to speak to both Houses of Parliament on 21 June 2012; and calls on the Government to continue actively to promote the transition to free democratic government in Burma.
Total number of signatures: 44

COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN BURMA

16.07.2012

That this House sends condolences to the families and friends of all those killed and affected by recent communal violence in Arakan (Rakhine) State in Burma; expresses concern that the government of Burma and local community leaders have not taken sufficient action to stop continuing sporadic violence; is deeply concerned by reports of widespread rape and of mass arrests, predominantly against the ethnic Rohingya minority; calls on the government of Burma to stop obstructing international agencies from delivering desperately needed humanitarian assistance to around 90,000 displaced people; further calls on the the government of Burma to stop obstructing ethnic Rohingya from returning to their homes and villages; further calls on all parties in Burma to reform the 1982 citizenship law, which discriminates against ethnic minorities in Burma; and requests that the Government ensures the swift delivery of aid to the region.
Total number of signatures: 31

HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

06.09.2012

That this House calls on the Government to work with the international community to encourage the Burmese government to use this period of political transition to take action to improve the human rights situation in that country; and congratulates the excellent work being done by Aung San Suu Kyi and other Burmese human rights campaigners to bring to the world's attention the greatly troubling situation that has persisted for many decades, and tragically still continues, in Burma.
Total number of signatures: 33

Note: House of Lords written parliamentary questions were answered during summer recess.

**Published by Burma Campaign UK, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT
www.burmacampaign.org.uk tel: 020 7324 4710 fax: +44 20 7324 4717**



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