



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

DEC
2007

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Overseas Trade: Burma

12 December

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform what the total value of UK foreign direct investment in Burma was in each year since 2000.

Mr. Thomas: The UK Government discourage trade and investment with Burma. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures for the UK's foreign direct investment in Burma for the period 2001-04 are protected by commercial confidentiality. The ONS recorded a nil investment return in 2005. Data for 2006 will be published in February 2008.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform what the total value of British trade with Burma has been in each year since 1997.

Mr. Thomas: The Government have a long-standing policy of not encouraging British firms to trade with or invest in Burma. We offer no commercial services to companies wishing to trade with or invest in Burma. British companies who inquire about trade with Burma are informed of the grave political situation, the regime's atrocious record on human rights and the country's dire economic prospects.

12 Dec 2007 :

The following table is based on HM Revenue and Customs Overseas Trade Statistics.
£ million

	UK imports of goods from Burma	UK exports of goods to Burma
1997	19.5	15.4
1998	17.3	12.6
1999	23.8	7.4
2000	49.3	8.6
2001	66.6	9.5
2002	64.3	7.3
2003	62.3	5.0
2004	73.8	2.2
2005	34.6	10.0
2006	26.7	3.7

Arms Trade

17 December

Mr. Crabb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the origin of military hardware being sold to Burma.

Meg Munn: We have considered the recent media reports about alleged arms sales to Burma. We continue to encourage all international partners not to sell arms to Burma and to observe responsible arms trade policies.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reiterated in his statement of 15 October, Burma is subject to an EU arms embargo.

Mr. Crabb: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what reports he

received on the suspension by India of sales of military hardware to Burma following the recent suppression of pro-democracy protests in Burma;

(2) what recent discussions he has had with Indian ministers on sales of military hardware to Burma.

Meg Munn: We are aware of reports regarding the sale of Advanced Light Helicopters by India to Burma. The EU made formal representations to the Indian Government on this issue in July. The Indian Government assured the EU that it had no plans to sell the Advanced Light Helicopter to Burma. We have continued to make clear to the Indian Government—at the most senior level—that we are concerned that EU manufactured military equipment should not reach Burma via third countries. In a statement on 15 October, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that we would ask the EU to review the implementation of the embargo with our partners to address any risk that arms or their components might be diverted or re-exported to Burma.

My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, other Ministers and I continue to discuss the situation in Burma with our Indian counterparts. My noble Friend the Minister for Africa, Asia and the UN, the right hon. Lord Malloch-Brown, also raised Burma during his recent visit to India. We hope India will use its contacts with the regime to press for urgent political reform and dialogue. Like all other partners in the region, they stand to gain from seeing the re-establishment of a prosperous and stable neighbour. We will hope they will join us in working towards that objective.

Constitutions

18 December

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the UK has made to the Burmese authorities on the inclusion of members of the opposition and other democratic and ethnic minority leaders in the process of drafting a national constitution.

Meg Munn: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and I have repeatedly made clear our support for Aung San Suu Kyi's statement of 8 November calling for a genuine national reconciliation including the military, opposition parties and ethnic groups in Burma.

I underlined this point in my speech to the European Union/Association of South East Asian Nations Summit of 22 November, at which Burma was represented.

Our ambassador in Rangoon regularly presses the case for progress on democratic change in Burma. His most recent representation to the Burmese Foreign Ministry was on 11 December.

DEBATES IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development

5 December

The Secretary of State was asked

1. Mr. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): If he will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Burma.

3. Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Burma.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Shahid Malik):

Severe economic mismanagement has led to one third of Burma's population living on less than 16p a day, and the recent brutal suppression has created even greater hardship. In response, the Department for International Development is providing £1 million to meet urgent humanitarian needs, as well as the £8 million already planned for this year. This week, DFID agreed to increase by £100,000 this year's funding to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium for its work with internally displaced people and refugees along the border.

Mr. Evennett: I thank the Minister for that very encouraging response setting out what the Government are doing, but what steps is his Department taking to ensure that economic sanctions against that dreadful regime in Rangoon are carefully targeted on the junta and its cronies, and do not damage the livelihoods of the already impoverished people of Burma?

Mr. Malik: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that on 15 October, European Union Foreign Ministers agreed to tougher sanctions. These are sanctions targeted on the cronies and the regime, and they focus on timber, precious metals and gems. I had the opportunity this week to speak to Mark Canning, Her Majesty's ambassador in Rangoon, who is doing an excellent job. He told me that the sanctions are biting, and gave the example of a person he described as the No. 1 crony of the regime, who owns Air Bagan. It has been forced to shut accounts in Singapore, and it might well be the case that it closes altogether within the next two weeks.

Mr. Vara: With more than 25 per cent. of the people in Burma living on less than \$1 a day, why did the Government not endorse the recommendation of the International Development Committee to quadruple aid by 2013?

Mr. Malik: We fully recognise the need to increase funding and support for Burma. It is for that exact reason that on 29 October this year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a doubling of aid to £18 million from the current £9 million, which is broadly on a trajectory to meet the target of quadrupling aid by 2013 recommended by the IDC report. We will, of course, review the situation in 2010-11, but Members who have a longer memory of this place than I do will recall that in 1997 aid to Burma was £250,000.

John Battle (Leeds, West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for increasing aid to Burma, not least in the light of the report of our International Development Committee, which stressed that for too long the poor and displaced of Burma had been neglected. Will he spell out a bit more where the money will go? It is really important that it reaches the poor and is not filtered out.

Mr. Malik: My right hon. Friend has a long track record in international development matters. He is absolutely right to request that that information be spelled out. I shall speak about the £1 million that was announced. It will go to monastic schools and orphanages, and will also be spent on feeding malnourished children in primary schools, on water and sanitation projects, and on supporting Médecins sans Frontières in its work to provide basic health care.

The doubling of spend will focus on areas where we have already had a really big impact such as primary school education, HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, refugees and internally displaced persons—the IDC made it clear that such work needed to be upscaled—and work on civil society organisations. Of course, we continue to work with the rural poor, which is a massive challenge in Burma.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, North) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware of the horrific incidence of rape and sexual violence against women by militia groups in Burma. Will he explain how his Department hopes to assist civic society groups that support women in Burma in their campaign to bring that issue to the world's attention?

Mr. Malik: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the outrage that exists in Burma. We have provided a new £3 million to strengthen civil society organisations and build the foundations of democracy. We are also discussing our programme over the next three years with various non-governmental organisations, and I have no doubt that the area of concern she raises will receive the attention it duly deserves.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): Can the Minister say how much more difficult it is to get aid through civil societies from Rangoon following the recent demonstrations and crackdown? Given the need to get aid to people wherever they are, will Ministers review the closure of the office in Bangkok in view of the fact that so many out-of-country organisations are based there and need regular support?

Mr. Malik: I shall attempt to give some comfort to the right hon. Gentleman by saying that staff in the Rangoon office will increase from three to 10. We are increasing our capacity in London, stepping up co-ordination between in-country and cross-border assistance and working with the United Nations. DFID staff will make more frequent visits to the borders and the camps. This week, I had an opportunity to speak to Rurik Marsden, who heads the DFID office there, and he said that he had already visited five of the nine camps. Of course, we have the embassy in Bangkok, which will liaise with the Thai Government to monitor the position on the border. The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the matter. I hope that the reply will give him some reassurance that we are serious about tackling it.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): Can my hon. Friend advise the House whether he

believes that DFID provides adequate support to combat the significant HIV/AIDS problem in Burma?

Mr. Malik: My hon. Friend is right to focus on HIV/AIDS, which was a taboo subject only a few years ago. We have made incredible inroads in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Burma. For example, 48 million condoms were distributed in 2005—a fourfold increase on 2000. There has been a 70 per cent. increase in the number of people visiting sexually transmitted infection clinics since 2000. Some 1.1 million needles and syringes were provided in 2005—that represents a doubling of the 2004 numbers. For the record, every second 15 DFID condoms are used somewhere in the world.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Further to the question of the hon. Member for Glasgow, North (Ann McKeichin), and in welcoming the proposed doubling of aid to Burma, may I appeal to the Minister to acknowledge the imperative requirement to fund exiled groups, such as pro-democracy organisations, on the border, notably the Shan Women's Action Network and the Karen Women's Organisation, not to mention the Federation of Trade Unions-Burma? They have a critical role to play and they need our support.

Mr. Malik: To correct the perception that I may have created, I have nothing to do with the usage of the condoms. The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. We are considering the role of exiled groups with the new money that we have. DFID staff are already discussing with exiled groups the projects that may be compatible with the International Development Act 2002 and the normal financial management requirements. We are considering that with exiled groups, civil society organisations, community-based organisations and other NGOs. It is one of the IDC's recommendations and I know that it is dear to the hon. Gentleman's heart. We are seriously considering the matter and we will be scaling up on it.

Lynne Featherstone (Hornsey and Wood Green) (LD): No doubt the Minister will be aware of the recent Amnesty International and Saferworld report, which details the practice of arms with components that have been manufactured in the United Kingdom being re-exported to Burma through third countries, thus circumventing the EU arms embargo. Does he share my concern that that undermines DFID's work in Burma? Will he give a genuine commitment to lobbying the relevant Ministers to outlaw that practice?

Mr. Malik: If what the hon. Lady describes takes place, it is unacceptable. We are not aware of any major company that invests in Burma. We know that India is considering whether to continue its arms relationship with Burma. It might end it, and that would be welcomed by the House and have an impact on the matters that the hon. Lady raises.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): As I saw earlier this year, British taxpayers' money that is spent in Burma is extremely well spent, not least in the forgotten border camps, which desperately need more help and support. Why will the Minister not accept in full the proposal of the Select Committee and the Opposition to keep the Bangkok office open and sharply increase our support for the Burmese people?

Mr. Malik: I think I have made it clear that we are sharply increasing our support for the Burmese people. We will continue to do that. The impact of our programmes is there for all to see. Four thousand primary schools and up to 500,000 children benefited from basic supplies and text books last year, and 100,000 farmers now use low-cost water pumps, increasing their income by \$190 a year—money that they can spend on food, clothing and medicines. I have already explained our position on the Bangkok office. We believe that our measures will be effective in tackling our mutual concerns about the suffering people in Burma, including the refugees in China, Thailand and elsewhere.

Mr. Mitchell: The Minister and the Government need to do better on this. He knows well that we are spending more than £100 million of taxpayers' money in several African countries and more than £35 million in China this year, which last month alone had a trade surplus of £12 billion. What skewed sense of priorities does it show that we are spending less than £9 million this year in Burma, at such a critical point in that country's development?

Mr. Malik: I think that, to the people who have been listening, that would have been a less than convincing position to take. I did not want to go this far back, but in 1992 just £50,000 was given to Burma. It is a disgrace that Opposition Members can lecture us about aid to Burma.

PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT

17 December

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): With permission, I would like to make a statement about the European Council held in Brussels on 14 December. It focused on two major concerns: first, the reforms that Europe must make to meet and master the global challenges we face with competitiveness, employment, secure energy and climate change; and, secondly, issues of security, in particular in Kosovo, Iran and Burma, that we must confront together...

The EU also reaffirmed its deep concern about the unacceptable situation in Burma, and made it clear that if there is no change in the Burmese regime's approach to political negotiations and basic political freedoms, we stand ready to review, amend and—if necessary—further reinforce restrictive measures against the Burmese Government. We also reaffirmed the important role of China, India and the Association of South East Asian Nations in actively supporting the UN's efforts to establish an inclusive political process leading to genuine national reconciliation.

For our part we believe that the forthcoming visit of Professor Gambari, the UN envoy, is critical. It is essential that the Burmese Government meet the demands set out in the UN Security Council statement: to release all political prisoners; to create the conditions for political dialogue, including relaxation of restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi; to allow full co-operation with Gambari; to address human rights concerns; and to begin a genuine and inclusive process of dialogue and national reconciliation with the opposition. In particular, the regime should respond to the constructive statement of Aung San Suu Kyi on 8 November and open a meaningful dialogue with the opposition and the country's ethnic groups...

DEBATES IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

EU: General Affairs and External Relations Council

6 December

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Malloch-Brown): My honourable friend the Minister for Europe (Jim Murphy) has made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

Burma has been added to the agenda at the Government's request to maintain EU focus on Burma and to support the work of the UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Sergio Pinheiro. The Government also want the council to take stock of the continuing detailed, follow-on work on EU sanctions being undertaken following decisions at the October and November councils.

10 December

Lord Alton of Liverpool: My Lords, on this anniversary day celebrating human rights, can the Minister tell the House anything about the situation in Burma and North Korea? In Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest and we have seen Buddhist monks mowed down by the military in the past few months. In North Korea, despite some progress in the six-party talks on nuclear disarmament, little progress seems to have been made on human rights.

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, I am glad that the noble Lord draws attention to both cases on this particular day. We continue to be active with Burma's neighbours, as well as with the international community, to try to ensure more effective action. We hope that the Secretary-General's special representative will return to Burma in the coming weeks and allow a dialogue to proceed.

17 December

Baroness Billingham: My Lords, I thank my noble friend for her presentation of the Statement, in which she mentioned the deliberations during the weekend on Burma. For many of us, the commitment to resolve the problem seems long overdue. Today, there is even more information in the national press that gives us great cause for concern. How much urgency was given to those deliberations? What further outcome does she expect and hope to see in the short term, rather than the long term?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: My Lords, this was an important part of the discussions for the Council over the weekend. Noble Lords will recall that new sanctions were agreed in October, which are being

implemented. As I indicated in repeating the Statement, we reaffirmed the deep concern over the situation in Burma and the importance of the roles played by China, India and ASEAN in supporting change. We believe that the next visit to Burma by Mr Gambari will be crucial, and we need real evidence that the regime is ready to move beyond gestures. We maintain that the UN continues to have the lead role in establishing an inclusive political process, and we fully support it in so doing, but my noble friend is right to bring us back to the realities of some of the desperately difficult situations that exist and the need to make significant progress, which I hope that we shall see shortly.

The Lord President of the Council (Baroness Ashton of Upholland): My Lords, with the leave of the House, I shall now repeat a Statement made in another place by my right honourable friend the Prime Minister.

“With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a Statement about the European Council held in Brussels on 14 December, which focused on two major concerns: the reforms Europe must make to meet and master the global challenges we face for competitiveness, employment, secure energy and climate change and issues of security, in particular Kosovo, Iran and Burma, that we must confront together. As set out in the Council’s conclusions, the EU also reaffirmed its deep concern about the unacceptable situation in Burma, and makes clear that if there is no change in the Burmese regime’s approach to political negotiations and basic political freedoms, we stand ready to review, amend and—if necessary—further reinforce restrictive measures against the Burmese Government. The Council also reaffirmed the important role of China, India and the Association of South-East Asian Nations in actively supporting the UN’s efforts to establish an inclusive political process leading to genuine national reconciliation. “For our part, we believe that the forthcoming visit of the UN envoy—Professor Gambari—is critical. It is essential that the Burmese Government meet the demands set out in the UN Security Council statement of 11 October to: release all political prisoners; create the conditions for political dialogue, including relaxation of restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi; allow full co-operation with Professor Gambari; address human rights concerns; and begin a genuine and inclusive process of dialogue and national reconciliation with the opposition. “In particular, the regime should respond to the constructive statement of Aung San Suu Kyi of 8 November and open a ‘meaningful and timebound dialogue’ with the opposition and the country’s ethnic groups.

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www.burmacampaign.org.uk tel: 020 7324 4710 fax: +44 20 7324 4717**



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