



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

JAN
2008

COMMONS HANSARD DEBATES

Trafficking

16 January

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Most of the debate this afternoon has focused on the problem of trafficking within our borders. Actually, most of the victims of trafficking globally are outside Britain, in the developing world. This afternoon and this evening, thousands of women from eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc will be working on the streets and in thousands of brothels in communities up and down this country, but we should not forget the faces of the other victims of trafficking internationally. Young Burmese boys continue to be plucked from street corners and bus stations in Burma and forcibly conscripted into the army. The gangster regime in Burma has created the army with the largest proportion of child soldiers in the world, and most of them have been forcibly conscripted and many trafficked.

British Council

17 January

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Foreign Secretary will not be surprised to learn that we strongly support the Government's actions, particularly in securing the safety and well-being of the British Council staff. Does he agree that the Russian authorities' bully-boy tactics are making them look increasingly ridiculous in the eyes of the international community? When the British Council is successfully continuing its excellent work in places such as Zimbabwe and Myanmar, is it not utterly self-defeating and shameful for the Russian authorities to be acting in this way over educational and cultural links

David Miliband; The hon. Gentleman said that the Russian Government had made themselves look ridiculous in their attacks on the British Council, and he made the point about the British Council's activities in Zimbabwe and Burma. In my question and answer session with the Foreign Affairs Committee in December, I suggested that the Russian Government's activities put them on a par, at least in their treatment of the British Council, with what was going on in Burma. I now regrettably inform the House that the situation in Russia is unique: it is worse than in Burma in respect of the British Council. The hon. Gentleman is right that in many capitals around the world there is incomprehension at the Russian authorities' actions. When I attended the European Council in December, just after the Russian authorities' first announcement, there was incomprehension—and, I am sorry to say, a fair degree of ridicule, to use the hon. Gentleman's word, because the British Council operates well in all such countries.

Genocide

31 January

Bob Spink : The Under-Secretary talks about lessons being learned. Does he accept that events in the world show that lessons have not been learned? The raison d'être of holocaust memorial day is learning lessons about genocide. Yet actions are taking place throughout the world, such as

in Burma, against ethnic groups. Does he believe that the international community, including this country and the United Nations, should lead the world in tackling the repression and genocide that continue to happen?

COMMONS WRITTEN ANSWERS

22 January

Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General on Myanmar

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what the UK objectives were at the meeting on 19 December 2007 of the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General on Myanmar; and who represents the UK on the group;

(2) when the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General on Myanmar plans to meet next.

Meg Munn: Our permanent representative to the UN represented the UK at the first meeting of the Group of Friends.

The UK looked to the group to strengthen and support the UN Secretary-General's Good Offices mission, maintain international focus on Burma and encourage political reform in that country.

No date has yet been set for the group's next meeting.

Burma: Arms Trade

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what progress has been made on the EU review of the implementation of the arms embargo on Burma following the Prime Minister's statement on 15 October 2007;

(2) what progress has been made in discussions with the UK's international partners on a UN arms embargo on Burma following the Prime Minister's statement on 15 October 2007. [180737]

Meg Munn: Following my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister's statement of 15 October 2007, the UK raised the embargo at the EU Working Group on Conventional Arms Exports. All member states confirmed that they rigorously enforce the embargo, but also agreed to pay particular attention when issuing licences where there was a risk that equipment might be diverted to Burma from third countries. Any such applications would be in breach of criterion 7 of the Consolidated EU and National Export and Licensing Criteria (known as the Code of Conduct), and as such, the licence would be refused.

The UK strictly applies the EU arms embargo on Burma and the Government have investigated all the reports received of alleged breaches. The Government have no evidence that British-made equipment is currently being exported to Burma in breach of the embargo.

The UK works closely with its partners at the UN to press the regime to engage constructively with the Secretary-General's Good Offices mission. We have made clear that, should the regime fail to make progress towards genuine national reconciliation under UN auspices, we would press for further UN action. An arms embargo on Burma would require a Chapter VII Security Council resolution.

Prime Minister: China

25 January

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Prime Minister ... whether he plans to raise the issue of the human rights situation in Burma with Chinese officials on his forthcoming visit to China;

The Prime Minister: I discussed a wide range of issues on my visit to China. I refer the hon. Members to the press conference I held with Premier Wen of China in Beijing on 18 January 2008. A transcript of this is available on the No. 10 website <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page14307.asp> and a copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

Entry Clearances: Skilled Workers

28 January

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many highly skilled migrant visas have been issued since April 2006, broken down by (a) country of origin and (b) skill.

Mr. Byrne: The following table sets out the number of highly skilled migrant programme applications, by country of origin. We are unable to answer part (b) of the question, as this information is not asked on the application form.

The figures quoted are not provided under National Statistics protocols and have been derived from local management information and are therefore provisional and subject to change...

HSMP applications granted between 1 April 2006 and 31 December 2007

Country of origin	Total
Myanmar	135

Burma: Politics and Government

28 January

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department is taking in support of the United Nation Security Council's call for greater dialogue between the military government and pro-democracy leaders in Burma.

Meg Munn: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have made clear to UN, EU and regional partners the UK's support for the UN Secretary-General's Good Offices mission to seek reconciliation in Burma. We support Aung San Suu Kyi's call for 'meaningful and time-bound' dialogue between the regime and opposition and ethnic groups.

Burma: Sanctions

28 January

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans there are to increase the number of Burmese officials subject to the EU asset freeze and travel ban.

Meg Munn: The UK, with its EU partners, is considering a range of measures that could be implemented through the EU Common Position, should the Burmese regime fail to engage constructively with the UN or make significant progress towards political reform and genuine national reconciliation. Among the measures under consideration is an extension of the list of those covered by the asset freeze and visa ban under the Common Position.

18 more Burmese officials and 48 individuals who have benefited from the regime's economic policies were added to the list in November 2007.

China

29 January

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what discussions he held with the Chinese Government on Burma on his recent trip to China...

Sir Robert Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had with the Government of China during his recent visit to that country on the political situation in Burma.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Members to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on 25 January 2008.

LORDS HANSARD DEBATES

Relations with Burma's Neighbours

24 January

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: It should have been clear from the outset that all Iraq's neighbours had a vital interest in that country's future, policies and structure, and that each one of them had the capacity seriously to undermine the prospects for a stable and prosperous Iraq.

That ought to have led to an approach which created a dialogue with those neighbours and which built in the dimension of regional security, ideally through the establishment of sub-regional security guarantees and confidence-building measures, to any long-term perspectives for Iraq. Instead, the three crucial neighbours of Iraq—Turkey, Iran and Syria—were handled in ways which either marginalised them or treated them as pariahs with whom even dialogue was not possible. The reversal of that policy has come very late in the day and yet that same regional dimension arises when dealing with any number of the world's most burning questions—Afghanistan, Burma, Zimbabwe and Darfur, to give a few examples. We ignore that dimension at our peril.

People Trafficking

24 January

Baroness Cox: Every 30 seconds while we are debating here this afternoon, another child is forced or tricked into slavery: the 25,000 children trafficked into the so-called Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the girls trafficked into prostitution in Thailand, the children trafficked into slave labour in India and the 70,000 boys forced to become child soldiers in Burma are just a fraction of the indescribable toll of man-made suffering.

LORDS WRITTEN ANSWERS

Free Trade Agreements

16 January

Lord Pearson of Rannoch asked Her Majesty's Government:

With which non-European Union countries the European Union is currently negotiating free trade agreements.

Lord Jones of Birmingham: The EU is currently negotiating free trade agreements with: India; the Republic of Korea; the Gulf Co-operation Council (comprising of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)); Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay); the Euro-Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel,

Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey); the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Cambodia); Central America (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama) and the Community of Andean Nations (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru).

COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEES

European Scrutiny - Eighth Report Donor Assistance

16 January

Minister's response: Budget support was “recognised as being the most efficient form of donor assistance where you have confidence that a country is committed to using those resources effectively”...

— As for the recipient countries...he would not want to see budget support given to a country like Zimbabwe or Burma, where it was necessary to operate through different mechanisms...

International Development - Third Report

Funding aid work in Burma

17 January

19. We decided to examine DFID's assistance to internally displaced people (IDPs) in Burma and to refugees on the Thai-Burma border because, despite the desperate deprivation in which many people in the country live, Burma receives the lowest level of aid of all least-developed countries. We wished to investigate the channels the UK was using for its funding to Burma and whether these should change, and to assess whether the overall amount the UK provided in aid should be increased. We decided not to visit Burma itself because we were concerned that such a visit would be too tightly controlled by the regime to make it worthwhile. We did, however, visit refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, where around 150,000 people live in camps with thousands more unregistered refugees living in the border areas.

20. Our report acknowledged that funding aid work in Burma is fraught with difficulties, but that aid could be effectively targeted and used, and constraints addressed, if there was sufficient commitment by donors. We acknowledged that DFID had quadrupled its budget for Burma over the last six years, from £2.3 million to £8.8 million, and recommended that it should quadruple its overall aid budget to Burma again by 2013. We pointed out that, as one of only four donors with a staffed office in Burma, DFID is in a leading position to assist Burmese IDPs and refugees. We believed that DFID's support to community-based organisations was particularly important in developing locally 'owned' responses to displacement, and that this should be increased.

21. Just as we began our inquiry, DFID announced a change of policy in relation to cross-border assistance to Burma.[13] This entailed removing the restriction on the use of its funds for assistance to refugees on the Thai-Burma border, so that they could be used for either cross-border or refugee assistance, as need and funding dictated. However, we pointed out in our report that, as the change of policy was not accompanied by any additional funding, it might be perceived as an empty gesture. We therefore recommended that the UK's expansion of aid for Burma should include specific funding for cross-border assistance. We acknowledged that providing aid in this way was far from ideal in terms of neutrality or safety, but believed it was the only way to reach very vulnerable IDPs located throughout Burma's conflict border zones, including those areas that border Thailand.

22. We were shocked to learn upon arriving in Thailand for our visit that DFID had decided completely to relocate the management of its Burma programme from Bangkok to Rangoon. The DFID South-East Asia office in Bangkok was scheduled to close and it was planned that the number of staff in Burma would increase from three to 10 by May 2008. Although we welcomed the increase in staffing in Burma, we believed that DFID's plans fully to relocate management of its Burma programme from Bangkok to Rangoon would impair its work. We recommended that, in order to work independently of the Burmese regime, to fulfil a co-ordination role, to support non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Thailand and to engage with cross-border and refugee assistance on the Thai-Burma border, at least two senior, full-time members of DFID staff should be retained within the Bangkok Embassy. We regret that the Government did not accept this recommendation:[14] we intend to monitor the impact of this relocation on the delivery of aid.

23. Our report received extensive press coverage when it was published in July. We were extremely distressed, as so many people were, to witness the further deterioration of the situation in Burma in September following the regime's brutal suppression of protests by monks and others. The Government responded to our report on 15 October and, although it acknowledged that overall aid levels to Burma should increase, no specific commitment was given.[15] However, on 30 October, DFID announced in a press release that aid to Burma would be doubled from the current £9 million to £18 million by 2010.[16] Whilst we wholeheartedly welcome this increase, we regard it as rather dismissive on the part of the Government that no mention was made in the announcement of our contribution to the debate about aid to Burma and our specific recommendation on funding. We took the opportunity of a debate on our report in Westminster Hall on 6 December to make this point to the DFID Minister.[17] We believe parliamentary processes would be strengthened, and the Government's own standing enhanced, if it gave due acknowledgement to select committees for their contribution to policy-making when it is appropriate.

Informal meetings and seminars

The Committee has continued its practice of holding informal seminars as an integral part of medium- and large-scale inquiries. These 'teach-ins', held before evidence sessions are commenced, provide an opportunity for us to discuss with experts the key areas we should consider in the course of our inquiries. This year we held seminars on: maternal health; Afghanistan; Burma and Vietnam.

Refugees and IDPs

We also examine DFID's programmes in specific countries to assess the extent to which these programmes have met DFID's stated aims. This year we...have looked at the work it is doing to assist Burmese refugees and internally displaced people in Burma.[6] We maintained our emphasis on the critical link between development and trade by examining developments in EU trade with developing countries; and the Government's support for fair trade. We maintained our emphasis on the critical link between development and trade by examining developments in EU trade with developing countries; and the Government's support for fair trade.

Subjects covered by the International Development Committee in 2007;-

DFID Assistance to Burmese Internally Displaced People and Refugees on the Thai-Burma Border: 3 sessions. Report, July 2007

Visits by the International Development Committee in 2007;-

Foreign Affairs – Fourth Report

Human Rights

23 January

In our Report we looked at human rights with respect to Burma... Zimbabwe. We also looked at cross-cutting issues such as the UN Human Rights Council, the arms trade and cluster munitions, corruption, international criminal tribunals...

The FCO did not publish a Human Rights report in 2007. It is our intention to inquire into the report expected to be published in March or April 2008.

Joint Statement on Burma by the UK, US and French Foreign Ministers at the World Economic Forum in Davos

The Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum at Davos is a unique event. No other occasion brings together so many of the world's leaders from all fields. For over three decades now, these meetings have provided a global platform for collaboration and action to address international priorities of concern to us all.

One such priority is the urgent need for progress towards a transition to democracy and improved human rights in Burma. The fact that we have chosen to write about this issue, with so many competing priorities, should underline the strength of our governments' determination to support the people of Burma in their pursuit of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic future. We have repeatedly made clear that the situation in Burma cannot continue, and that we remain committed to helping the people of Burma.

It is now more than four months since the world was horrified by the violent repression of peaceful demonstrations in Burma. The dramatic pictures seen around the world of the brutality directed against peaceful protestors, including monks and nuns, were truly shocking. We cannot afford to forget. We must convince the Burmese regime to meet the demands of the international community and respect the basic rights of Burma's people.

The UN Security Council in October spelled out its expectations and reiterated those expectations on January 17. First, the early release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and the creation of conditions for a genuine dialogue between the Government and the opposition. Second, full co-operation and constructive engagement with the UN. Third, the need for the regime to address the economic, humanitarian and human rights concerns of the Burmese people. Several months on, however, we find the regime has met none of these demands.

The regime claims to be moving ahead with its roadmap to civilian rule. However the process, already 14 years old, is open-ended, and many key political actors, not least Aung San Suu Kyi, are excluded. There can be little doubt that only genuine and inclusive dialogue can deliver national reconciliation and stability for Burma and its neighbours.

We call on all those attending the World Economic Forum to demonstrate that, while the regime may be indifferent to the suffering of the Burmese people, the world is not.

We ask you to support the return to Burma by UN Special Adviser Gambari as soon as possible, and to urge the regime to cooperate fully with him and the UN. We call on the regime to act on the

recommendations of UN Human Rights Envoy Pinheiro; to release all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi; and to launch a substantive, time-bound dialogue with democratic leaders and ethnic minority representatives, as called for in Aung San Suu Kyi's statement of November 8.

A unified call for genuine and peaceful political reconciliation and reform will be heard in Burma. We would not live up to our values if we ignored Burma's plight.

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**CAMPAIGNING
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
AND DEMOCRACY IN BURMA**