



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

JULY
2008

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

1 July 2008

Foreign Investment

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk of 26 February 2008, Official Report, column 1364W, on investment in Burma, what progress has been made in discussions between the UK and EU partners on restrictive measures against Burmese companies as agreed at the October 2007 General Affairs and External Relations Council; whether a full prohibition on new investment in enterprises in Burma engaged in the logging, timber and mining of metals and minerals industries is under consideration; and what assessment he has made of the effect of Cyclone Nargis on discussions on restrictive measures at EU level.

Meg Munn: In November 2007 EU partners agreed a prohibition on new investment in enterprises engaged in logging, timber, mining of metals and minerals, precious or semi-precious stones as well as related technical and financial assistance. This came into force with the publication of EC Regulation 194/2008 on 10 March 2008.

The EU General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) conclusions agreed to consider further financial measures at the April GAERC in 2008. The European Commission is working on an options paper. A review of two annexes to the current common position, listing companies targeted by the EU measures, is due for completion in July.

Cyclone Nargis struck Burma after the new common position was agreed. The financial and other measures set out in the common position target the regime's leaders and those who benefit from its policies, rather than the ordinary Burmese people. Any future financial measures would be designed to meet the same objective. The common position also restricts the scope and means of delivery of non-humanitarian aid or development programmes, but these restrictions do not apply to humanitarian aid—such as that provided in the wake of Cyclone Nargis.

7 July 2008

Overseas Trade

John Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform what recent representations the Government has made to British companies operating in Burma to persuade them to withdraw from the country.

Mr. Thomas: We are unaware of any major UK-based company operating there. The Government were instrumental in persuading the last two major UK investors—BAT and Premier Oil—to withdraw from the country. Current trade levels are very low.

The UK Government discourage trade and investment with Burma. We offer no commercial services or support to UK 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 record on human rights and the country's dire economic prospects.

10 July 2008

Arms Trade

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Answer of 22 January 2008, Official Report, column 1850W, on Burma: arms trade, how many times criterion 7 of the Consolidated EU and National Export and Licensing Criteria has been breached in respect of Burma since October 2007; and if he will list the instances.

Meg Munn: The EU arms embargo on Burma has been in place since 1996. We are not aware of any EU supplied equipment reaching Burma in breach of the embargo either directly or via a third country since October 2007. Were we to have concerns that goods covered by a UK export licence application might be diverted via a third country to Burma in breach of the embargo, and in contravention of criterion 7 of the EU and National Export Licensing Criteria, the application would be refused.

We continue to vigorously enforce the EU Common Position on Burma with the co-operation of our EU partners.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the Answer of 22 January 2008, Official Report, column 1850W, on Burma: arms trade, what further UN action the Government has proposed relating to the regime in Burma in light of the undemocratic nature of the referendum on the constitution in May.

Meg Munn: On 2 May the UN Security Council (UNSC), under UK chairmanship, issued a presidential statement in advance of the 10 May referendum underlining the need for an inclusive and credible political process, including full participation of all political actors and ethnic groups and respect for fundamental political freedoms. The UNSC also reaffirmed its previous demands, including the release of all political prisoners.

Since 2 May, the humanitarian crisis in Burma caused by cyclone Nargis has been our priority. However, the political situation in the country remains a cause of deep concern and the need for political change is stronger than ever. The referendum was deeply flawed and the results lack all credibility.

We will work to refocus international efforts on the political situation and are exploring options with our international partners for further UN action, including in the UNSC, to encourage political progress. We continue to give our full support to the UN Secretary-General's Good Offices Mission.

Famine

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate he has made of the number of people suffering from famine in Chin state in northwest Burma; and what assistance the Government has given to relief efforts.

Mr. Malik: Food security in the already vulnerable Chin State dramatically worsened at the end of 2007 and early 2008 due to a rat infestation. The worst affected areas appear to be remote villages in townships along the Indian border in central and southern Chin—Tahntlang, Matupi and Paletwa townships. Comprehensive figures of the total affected population are not currently available, but the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) will be undertaking a more thorough assessment of the situation in the coming weeks.

The Department for International Development (DFID) is providing support of £4 million over four years to UNDP for its national human development initiative, which includes work in all the townships of Chin State. The UNDP has helped villages to rebuild their livelihoods and address food insecurity in affected villages in Paletwa and Tahntlang townships.

We will consider the case for further directed assistance to affected populations in Chin State on the basis of UNDP's assessment.

Overseas Aid

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of helicopter aid lift for humanitarian operation in Burma; and what steps the Government is taking with its international partners to ensure adequate capability.

Mr. Douglas Alexander: During the second half of June the World Food Programme (WFP) succeeded in bringing 10 helicopters into Burma to support the relief operation. These have facilitated needs assessments and have flown supplies to 60 different locations in the Delta—including five that had not previously been reached by any aid.

Given the increasing use of boats, the expensive nature of helicopter operations and the fact that most assessments have now taken place, WFP has scaled down to only five helicopters from 1 July.

WFP is currently facing a 50 per cent. shortfall in funding for its whole logistics operation. Agencies are being encouraged to reduce reliance on the air bridge and to build transport costs into forthcoming appeals. We are in close contact with other donors, encouraging them to increase their funding for WFP's logistics appeal. The UK has already contributed £5 million to the overall WFP logistics operation.

Storms

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent estimate he has made of the number of visas granted to relief workers by the Burmese authorities to assist those affected by Cyclone Nargis.

Mr. Douglas Alexander: We do not know the total number of visas issued to humanitarian workers since Cyclone Nargis, as this information is held within the Burmese Ministry of Social Welfare. However, we have noted a significant increase in the numbers and length of visas being issued to humanitarian workers since the 25 May UN/ASEAN conference. For example, UN staff have been issued with 302 visas in the May to July period, of which 77 have been extended. Department for International Development (DFID) staff have been issued with 19 visas since the cyclone hit.

Prisoners

Lord Alton: What representations they have made to the Government of Burma about the conditions in which political prisoners in Burma are held.

Lord Malloch-Brown: We are gravely concerned by the continued arrests of political activists and the conditions in which they are held in prison. Up to 2,000 political dissidents remain behind bars, many without charge and in unknown locations, outside of external supervision.

We have called repeatedly upon the Burmese regime, both in our public statements and through the regular contact between our ambassador in Rangoon and senior government representatives, to grant unhindered access to all political detainees by the International Committee of the Red Cross and other international humanitarian organisations, in accordance with international norms. We have also expressed our concern about the conditions in which political prisoners are held. We will continue to do so.

Under UK chairmanship, the UN Security Council reaffirmed its call on the regime to release all political prisoners on 2 May. The release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, is vital if Burma is to begin the process of inclusive national reconciliation that is the country's only path to a more prosperous and stable future.

Lord Alton: What steps they are taking to secure the reinstatement of regular access to Burma's prisons for international monitors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

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14 July 2008

Sanctions

Lord Avebury: Whether, following the allegations on the BBC News 24 programme "Our World" on 29 June on imports of gems and timber of Burmese origin, they will consult other European Union member states on monitoring imports covered by the sanctions introduced on 10 March; and whether those sanctions cover imports processed in or transferred through third countries.

Lord Malloch-Brown: We have no evidence that EU sanctions on Burma are being circumvented, but will reiterate the need for all member states to carefully monitor their implementation. Article 2 of Regulation 194/08 prohibits the import of goods listed in its Annex 1 if such goods originated in Burma/Myanmar or have been exported from Burma/Myanmar. This includes goods entering the EU via third countries.

15 July 2008

Prisoners

Lord Alton: What representations they have made to the Government of Burma about the denial of medical treatment to Min Ko Naing.

Lord Bach: Our embassy in Rangoon continues to inquire about the cases of Min Ko Naing and Myo Yan Naung Thein with political prisoner support networks and those non-governmental organisations concerned with prisoner welfare. We have received no recent updates on the status of Myo Yan Naung Thein, but understand that Min Ko Naing was transferred to a hospital for treatment in May. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials met a family member of Myo Yan Naing Thein on 4 July to discuss his case.

Our Ministers, the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council and the UN Security Council have called for the release of all political prisoners in Burma. Our embassy in Rangoon regularly repeats this call in their contacts with the Burmese regime.

Lord Alton: Whether they have received representations about the denial of medical treatment to Burmese political prisoner Myo Yan Naung Thein; and what plans they have to investigate his situation and raise his case with the Government of Burma.

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Drugs

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment she has

made of the extent of illicit trafficking of opium across Burma's borders into neighbouring countries; and what proposals the Government has put forward to reduce the trade.

Mr. Coaker: The most recent assessment was conducted in 2007 and drew on information from the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime's World Drugs Report 2006. This noted that opium and heroin from Laos and Burma is trafficked to neighbouring South East Asia countries (notably China) and to the Oceania region (mainly Australia). The main focus of the United Kingdom Government's drugs strategy is on drugs trafficked to this country and there was no indication that any of the traffic out of Burma is destined for the United Kingdom. The current stance of the Burmese Government makes it difficult for any non-Burmese national and international agency to work in that country.

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FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
AND DEMOCRACY IN BURMA**