



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

MARCH 2009

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

CYCLONE NARGIS

5 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much the Government is providing for post-Nargis recovery work in Burma in the next three years. [260207]*

Mr. Michael Foster: *The UK Government are considering what contribution to make to the continuing international response to Cyclone Nargis, and will reach a decision shortly.*

KAREN

09 March 2009 Mr. Waterson: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Burmese authorities on the treatment of the Karen people. [257095]*

Bill Rammell: *The regular reports of human rights abuses in Karen state, in particular in areas where conflict causes continuous fear and suffering, is deplorable and highlights the need for a comprehensive and just settlement of Burma's ethnic conflicts that will support an enduring peace.*

Our ambassador in Rangoon regularly raises with the Burmese regime the need for the full and fair participation of ethnic nationalities in the political process and for a fair peace settlement that would bring an end to the conflict. Our ambassador calls on the Burmese regime to work with the UN, including the International Labour Organisation and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Tomas Ojea Quintana, to investigate abuses. We also use every opportunity to raise the issue in the international arena, including the UN General Assembly.

A just and inclusive political settlement lies at the core of a prosperous and peaceful future for all the peoples of Burma and there can be little prospect of national reconciliation without genuine recognition of political, economic and social rights of ethnic minority groups, including the Karen.

US POLICY ON BURMA

10 March 2009 Mr. Keith Simpson: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the US administration on its policy on Burma; and if he will make a statement. [261925]*

Bill Rammell: *We remain in close contact with the US and other like-minded international partners regarding the situation in Burma, bilaterally and in multilateral fora, including at the UN and EU. Recent discussions with the US administration have taken place at official level.*

Our shared aim continues to be a credible transition to democracy in Burma that is inclusive. The US and the UK agree on the pressing need for the military regime to release political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi. We continue to work with the US and other partners to encourage the Burmese regime to engage with the UN Good Offices Mission.

ROHINGYA

10 March 2009 Mr. Keith Simpson: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has had discussions with the government of Thailand on the safety and whereabouts of the 126*

people from the Rohingya ethnic group recently reported as missing by the United Nations. [260798]

Bill Rammell: We are concerned by reports of mistreatment of 'boatpeople' from the Rohingya ethnic group by the Thai authorities. We have raised the issue with the Thai Government at the highest levels on a number of occasions. Most recently, my noble Friend, the Minister for Asia, Africa and the UN, Lord Malloch-Brown, discussed the issue with the Thai Prime Minister during his visit to Thailand on 27 February 2009.

Working with EU partners, and in close consultation with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), we will continue to press the Thai authorities to establish the facts and hold those responsible for any wrongdoing to account.

We welcome Prime Minister Abhisit's assurances that the Thai authorities are working with the UNHCR on a regional response to the increasing number of ethnic Rohingya people fleeing Burma. To be effective, any solution must address the root causes of the problem: poor governance in Burma, discrimination, human rights abuse and extreme economic deprivation in Northern Rakhine State.

11 March 2009 Mr. Newmark: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what programmes his Department (a) has established and (b) funds to assist Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. [262740]

Mr. Michael Foster: The Department for International Development (DFID) has not established any programmes or provided funding specifically to assist Rohingya refugees. We do, however, provide assistance to the refugees indirectly through our contributions to the European Commission and to United Nations organisations which have programmes to support Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh.

We are also helping to meet the humanitarian needs of Rohingya people living in Burma's northern Rakhine State through our contributions to multi-donor programmes which operate across the country. These include a UNICEF fund for primary education and the Three Diseases Fund which was set up to fight HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB in Burma.

STREET CHILDREN

18 March 2009 Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer: To ask Her Majesty's Government further to the Written Answer by Baroness Crawley on 7 October 2008 (WA 11), how much funding was provided in each of the past seven years to the street and working children programme in Burma; and to which non-governmental organisations and providers the funding was allocated. [HL1731]

Lord Tunnicliffe: The Department for International Development's (DfID) funding to the street children project examples quoted in the Answer of 7 October in Burma by financial year are as follows:

World Vision—To improve the Status and Quality of Life among Children, Burma, May 1998 to June 2004 (project completed).

Total	£442,369
1998-99	£89,247
1999-00	£75,338
2000-01	£104,453
2001-02	£51,502
2002-03	£71,619
2003-04	£40,874
2004-05	£9,336

POLITICAL PRISONERS

23 Mar 2009 John Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received of the number of political prisoners in Burma. [265357]

Bill Rammell: *The UN Special Rapporteur on Human rights in Myanmar, Mr. Tomas Quintana, in a statement to the Human Rights Council on 18 March 2009, indicated that there remain over 2,100 prisoners of conscience in Burma. This figure is in line with our own estimates.*

23 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Burmese Government on the sentencing of Eint Khaing Oo for reporting on Cyclone Nargis. [265877]*

Bill Rammell: *We condemn the lack of media freedom in Burma and the arrest and detention of journalists, including Eint Khaing Oo.*

Our ambassador in Rangoon frequently raises the need for the release of all political prisoners in Burma with ministers in the military government. We also take every opportunity to underline our concern in our public statements and through the EU, UN Security Council and UN human rights bodies. We support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human rights in Myanmar, Mr. Tomas Quintana, who, in a statement to the Human Rights Council on 18 March 2009, again called on the Burmese authorities to release all prisoners of conscience.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

23 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he (a) has had and (b) plans to have with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief on reported violations of religious freedom in Burma, with particular reference to reported discrimination and persecution of Christians and Muslims. [264919]*

Bill Rammell: *We are concerned by reports that the Burmese authorities have closed places of worship for religious minorities and childcare centres run by Christian groups in Rangoon. We condemn the marginalisation or persecution of any community based on their religious beliefs or ethnic background. Although it makes the reported abuses no less serious, we believe that the persecution of religious minority groups by the Burmese authorities is often based on their ethnicity and perceived threat to security rather than their faith. We view the regime's actions as part of a wider deterioration in the human rights situation in Burma.*

The issue of religious freedom is within the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma, Tomas Ojea Quintana, which covers human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We hold regular discussions with Mr. Quintana and his team concerning the human rights abuses we believe to be taking place in Burma, and fully support his efforts. Our ambassador in Burma regularly raises the issue of human rights in his meetings with Burmese government officials.

25 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Burmese government over the recent closure of house churches and Christian-run orphanages in Rangoon. [264920]*

Bill Rammell: *We are concerned by reports that the Burmese authorities have closed places of worship for religious minorities and child care centres run by Christian groups in Rangoon. We condemn the marginalisation or persecution of any community based on their religious beliefs or ethnic background. Although it makes the reported abuses no less serious, we believe that the persecution of religious minority groups by the Burmese authorities is often based on their ethnicity and perceived threat to security rather than their faith. We view the regime's actions as part of a wider deterioration in the human rights situation in Burma.*

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John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received of the number of orphanages and child care centres run by Christian groups in Rangoon that have recently closed down. [264921]*

Bill Rammell: *We are concerned by reports that the Burmese authorities have closed places of worship for religious minorities and child care centres run by Christian groups in Rangoon. We condemn the marginalisation or persecution of any community based on their religious beliefs or ethnic background. Although it makes the reported abuses no less serious, we believe that the persecution of religious minority groups by the Burmese authorities is often based on their ethnicity and perceived threat to security rather than their faith. We view the regime's actions as part of a wider deterioration in the human rights situation in Burma.*

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UNITED NATIONS

23 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether his Department has had contact with the Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General on Myanmar since 1 January 2009. [265475]*

Bill Rammell: *Our mission to the UN in New York is in regular contact with the UN Special Adviser, Ibrahim Gambari and his office. This dialogue was particularly frequent before and after Professor Gambari's visit to Burma from 31 January 2009 to 3 February 2009 and after his briefing to the UN Security Council on 20 February 2009.*

We continue to give our full support to the UN Secretary General's Good Offices mission.

EU EXTERNAL TRADE WITH BURMA

23 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform what estimate he has made of the volume of trade between Burma and the EU in each of the last three years. [265367]*

Mr. Thomas: *Eurostat's databases give the following figures for European Union trade in goods with Burma:*

Million Euros

Year	EU 27 exports of goods to Burma	EU 27 imports of goods from Burma
2006	81	306
2007	164	263
2008	105	184

Million Euros

Year	EU 27 exports of services to Burma	EU 27 imports of services from Burma
2006	62	73
2007	30	54

Data for trade in services for 2008 are not yet available.

UK TRADE WITH BURMA

23 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform what the volume of trade between the UK and Burma was in (a) 2007 and (b) 2008.*

Mr. Thomas: *HMRC Overseas Trade Statistics data on recorded trade in goods with Burma are shown in*

the following table:

Million £

Year	UK exports of goods to Burma	UK imports of goods from Burma
2007	4	28
2008	4	36

ONS data published in the UK Balance of Payments Pink Book 2008 were:

Million £

Year	UK exports of services to Burma	UK imports of services from Burma
2007	34	1

Geographical estimates of trade in services in 2008 are likely to be published on 31 July.

The UK Government discourage trade and investment with 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.

CHINA: ILLEGAL EXPORT OF LOGS AND TIMBER FROM BURMA

24 March 2009 John Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the government of China on reports of illegal export of logs and timber from Burma. [265883]

Bill Rammell: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not raised this issue in his contacts with the Chinese government. However, the ongoing UK-China Sustainable Development Dialogue includes a strand of work on natural resource management, under which the UK Forestry Commission and the Chinese State Forestry Administration co-operate on 'Forest Law Enforcement and Governance', including to combat illegal logging. Discussions between officials have covered sustainability and legality of timber exports, and are due to cover timber tracking systems. These discussions are relevant to all timber exporting countries, including Burma.

EU COMMON FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

24 March 2009 John Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on the implementation of the EU Common Position on Burma; and if he will make a statement. [265359]

Bill Rammell: The Government are determined that the common position should be implemented such that it targets those individuals and entities that benefit directly from the regime's misrule, while allowing vital humanitarian work within Burma to continue.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

23 March 2009 Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with Burmese authorities on the political situation in Burma. [264125]

Bill Rammell: We continue to do all we can to generate international pressure for a peaceful transition to democracy and respect for human rights in Burma. The Common Position adopted by the EU restricts ministerial contact with the military regime.

In his contacts with the Burmese authorities, our ambassador in Rangoon regularly raises the urgent need for all political prisoners to be released and for all opposition and ethnic groups to be allowed to play their full part in shaping the country's future.

Elections planned for 2010 will have no credibility unless these fundamental issues are addressed.

24 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to discuss the political situation in Burma with his colleagues in the United Nations Security Council. [265358]*

Bill Rammell: *We regularly discuss Burma with members of the UN Security Council, as well as those countries participating in the UN Secretary-General's Group of Friends. We use this frequent dialogue to reinforce our deep concern at the political and human rights situation in Burma, and urge those with influence on the military government to help the UN Good Offices Mission deliver tangible progress on the ground. The UN Security Council will continue to seek a briefing from the Secretary-General and his representatives on the outcome of their interaction with Burma.*

FORCED LABOUR

24 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the efficacy of the Supplementary Understanding reached by the government of Myanmar with the International Labour Organisation in assisting people forced into labour. [265360]*

Bill Rammell: *Our embassy in Rangoon has discussed the effectiveness of the supplementary understanding on forced labour with the office of the executive director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Our assessment is that the mechanism is continuing to produce results. Of 80 complaints referred to the Burmese authorities over the last year, all but eight have been seen some action to resolve them.*

The military government has shown signs of genuine co-operation with the ILO. However, the problem of forced labour remains widespread and we are particularly concerned by the failure of the authorities to publicly condemn the practice and address its use by the military.

We will continue to support the work of the ILO in Burma.

EU AID

25 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate he has made of the amount of EU cross-border aid to Burma in (a) 2007 and (b) 2008; and if he will make a statement. [265453]*

Mr. Michael Foster: *Comprehensive information on cross-border aid to Burma is not available. In 2007 the Department for International Development (DFID) agreed that its funding to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) may be used for cross-border programmes of support to internally displaced people in eastern Burma. DFID's contribution to TBBC was £770,000 in 2007-08 and £1 million in 2009-09. DFID has not stipulated what proportion of these contributions should be allocated to cross-border programmes. DFID plans to give £1.1 million to TBBC in 2009-10, a 10 per cent. increase over 2008-09.*

Several other EU member states, as well as the European Commission, give funding to TBBC. Overall the EU contributed about 55 per cent. of TBBC's income in 2008. The Commission does not allow its contributions to be used for Thailand Burma cross-border programmes. Other member states have their own individual policies on how their funding to TBBC may be used.

DFID and the European Commission both contribute to cross-border health care provision from China to Kachin and Shan States in Burma. We estimate that spending on this programme, by UK financial year, was approximately:

2007-08—£571,000 (£235,000 from the Commission; and £336,000 from DFID)

2008-09—£426,000 (£204,000 from the Commission; and £222,000 from DFID)

KACHIN: HIV INFECTION

27 March 2009 John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much has*

been allocated by the Three Diseases Fund to tackle HIV/AIDS in Kachin state, Burma, since the fund was established. [265884]

Mr. Michael Foster: Since it was established, the Three Diseases Fund has allocated US\$2,272,000 to HIV/AIDS projects in Kachin State, Burma.

OVERSEAS AID

27 March 2009 John Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development through which United Nations organisations his Department channels funding for Burma-related aid and activities; and how much was channelled by his Department through each such organisation in the last 12 months. [265885]

Mr. Michael Foster: During the 2008-09 financial year, the Department for International Development (DFID) has channelled funding for Burma through UN organisations as follows:

Cyclone Nargis emergency response:

Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)	£2,271,179
International Labour Organisation (ILO)	£590,810
UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)	£750,000
UN Development Programme (UNDP)	£1,850,000
UN Habitat	£250,000
UN Habitat and UNDP jointly	£600,000
UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)	£300,000
World Food Programme (WFP)	£12,000,000
World Health Organisation (WHO)	£250,000

Regular country programme:

UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)	£1,560,000
UN Development Programme (UNDP)	£1,569,565
UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), for the Three Diseases Fund	£4,500,000
UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)	£550,000
World Food Programme (WFP)	£350,000

EARLY DAY MOTIONS

To view the full list of MPs who have signed these EDMs please visit:
<http://edmi.parliament.uk/edmi/>

EDM 670: THAILAND'S TREATMENT OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES

03.02.2009

Signed by 52 MPs

EDM 671: CLOSURE OF CHURCHES IN RANGOON

03.02.2009

Signed by 111 MPs

EDM 343: UNITED NATIONS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BURMA

17.02.2009

Signed by 173 MPs

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

BURMA

3 February 2009 E-0486/09 Raül Romeva i Rueda (Verts/ALE): *In May 2008 the Burmese regime promoted and approved a new constitution for Burma, termed the SPDC Constitution, according to which elections are planned to take place in 2010. During a recent visit to the region, a number of sources (e.g. opposition political parties, ethnic organisations and lawyers' organisations) voiced serious concerns to me regarding those elections. First of all, the SPDC does not recognise the 1 990 results (when the NLD won 80 % of the seats). Furthermore, the 2008 constitution is full of articles which are very difficult to accept in a state based on the rule of law, such as, for instance, Article 445, which states that no legal action can be taken against SLORC, SPDC or Government members for any past crimes. The constitution is also of questionable legitimacy because of the way it was ratified by referendum. (Even the victims of Cyclone Nargis were asked to vote 'yes' in order to obtain assistance.)*

I was specifically asked to provide no international support for the elections and to keep denouncing the constant violations of human rights committed by the SPDC regime, to denounce the illegitimacy of the 2008 constitution and of the 2010 elections, to promote tripartite dialogue (between the NDL, ethnic groups and the SPDC), to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, and to ensure that no international support is used by the SPDC regime for continuing to commit atrocities, which means that no international investments (whatsoever) should be allowed, if they are under SPDC control, and that there should be a blanket ban on all arms deliveries. Much of this was called for in the European Parliament resolution of 24 April 2008 (P6_TA(2008)0178).

Taking all this into account, what is the strategy planned by the Commission regarding the current constitution and the 2010 elections?

**E-0486/09EN Answer given by Mrs Ferrero-Waldner on behalf of the Commission
(24.3.2009)**

The Commission believes that the Burma/Myanmar Regime firmly intends to go ahead with their Road Map and holding elections early 2010 on the basis of the new Constitution.

For the Commission therefore the issue is how to ensure that these elections are made more inclusive than they might otherwise be, so that they actually do begin a process, however gradual, to a democratic form of government. To this end, the Commission is urging EU Member States to focus on mobilising international efforts to persuade the Regime to allow participation of all stakeholders concerned, and, with that in mind, to release all political detainees.

In this context, the Commission believes that it is also very important to support the efforts of the United Nations and in particular to ensure that the planned visit of Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to Burma/Myanmar is fruitful.

The Commission has also raised these issues regularly with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China and India seeking their assistance to moderate the behaviour of the Burma/Myanmar authorities.

CYCLONE NARGIS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

3 February 2009 E-0484/09 Raül Romeva i Rueda (Verts/ALE) *According to the testimony of many victims of Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the Irrawaddy Delta region in Burma in May 2008, no preventive strategy had been set up by the Burmese regime in order to warn and to evacuate the population from the area despite the fact that the regime had been repeatedly informed about the arrival of the cyclone by the Indian authorities. Furthermore, after the cyclone killed more than 150 000 people and left hundreds of thousands with no possessions, the regime impeded the adequate delivery of assistance to the population affected and even capitalised on the situation in order to promote the referendum on the constitution by making the provision of basic aid subject to a 'yes' vote.*

Accordingly, considerable evidence is being gathered to demonstrate that the regime took no preventive action, despite having had the proper timely information, and was thus responsible for hundreds of deaths, which might even be considered a crime against humanity.

Can the Commission explain what its assessment of this particular issue is? Would the Commission support an initiative to bring the junta before the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity?

**E-0484/09EN Answer given by Ms Ferrero-Waldner on behalf of the Commission
(23.3.2009)**

Cyclone Nargis devastated the Ayeyarwaddy Delta region of Myanmar on 2 May 2008, and, according to United Nations (UN) estimates and official statistics, left 140,000 people dead and 2.4 million people severely affected and in need of humanitarian assistance. The Commission had a first-hand involvement in the response to the disaster, beginning with immediate Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) operations, followed by a visit of the Member of the Commission responsible for Development and humanitarian aid, and a set of programmes which continue to date.

Whether preventive action had been possible must be seen in the difficult geographic context, as large parts of the Delta are not linked at all by road and other infrastructure. Moreover, the cyclone was not expected to become a disaster of historic dimensions: a standard cyclone warning had been sent out by the Government, and on 1 May 2008, the UN Disaster Management Team had met and concluded that it was unlikely that the storm would impact directly on Yangon, but that the Delta might be the first point of impact. Therefore, it may be assumed that – besides the UN agencies – the Government of Myanmar and individual citizens in the Delta area expected the storm to be like other seasonal cyclones.

Prior to the landfall of the cyclone, UN agencies and operational partners offered support to national response efforts if requested, based on an assessment of needs. The Myanmar authorities indicated on 4 May 2008, and again in a formal briefing to diplomats and the UN on 5 May 2008, their openness to international assistance. As the emphasis was on support to a national response, rather than international relief operations, no preparations were made by the authorities in advance to adapt the standard procedures for issuing visas and travel permits for travel outside Yangon. In the event, local staff of UN agencies, of some international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and, notably, of the Commission's ECHO Field Office did not encounter restrictions and were able to travel to the Delta.

The cyclone was the worst natural disaster in recent Myanmar's history. It overwhelmed the national capacity to respond. Even capacities of other countries would have been overstretched when faced with a disaster of this scale. Moreover, the international isolation of the country made it difficult to communicate quickly to the authorities what an international response would entail. One should also emphasise that little or no disaster preparedness (i.e. storm shelters) was in place. The comparative example of Bangladesh, hit by cyclone SIDR (a category 5 cyclone) in 2007, shows that where disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities were in place since a number of years, the death toll was almost 50 times less than in the area hit by cyclone Nargis (a category 4 cyclone) for a similar geographical setting. The post cyclone period is certainly the best period for starting integrating DRR into early recovery actions.

The cyclone struck at a critical moment, i.e. shortly before the electorate was to vote in a referendum on a constitution. As humanitarian and socio-economic questions remain less important for the authorities than political and security considerations, it was clear that the referendum was to proceed, except in the disaster-stricken areas where it was delayed. The Commission is not aware that a certain voting behaviour has been made a precondition for receiving assistance. The Myanmar authorities, including the Embassy in Brussels, have been cooperative in opening up the humanitarian space. Furthermore, the Commission was pleased to see Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) taking a leading role in coordinating international relief efforts. The "Tripartite Core Group", comprising ASEAN, the UN and the Government of Myanmar, became a successful model in securing access to the Delta and building confidence. It is obvious that the humanitarian space has increased, despite remaining challenges.

Regarding the competence of the International Criminal Court (ICC), it needs to be said that Myanmar is not a State Party to the Rome Statute of the ICC. The Court could only exercise jurisdiction, irrespective of the nationality of the accused or the location of the crime, if the UN Security Council referred the matter to

the Prosecutor. This seems unlikely, given the attitude of some members of the Security Council. Moreover, as explained above, Cyclone Nargis offers hardly a reason to link the issue to the ICC.

REFUGEES IN THE THAI – BURMA BORDER REGION

3 February 2009 E-0482/09 Raül Romeva i Rueda (Verts/ALE) *On a recent visit to the border between Thailand and Burma, I had an opportunity to learn about the critical situation of the thousands of Burmese people living in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) camps. I also learnt about the enormous financial difficulties that the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) is facing in order to provide proper assistance for them. I am personally very much concerned at the fact that very little financial assistance is being provided in order to meet cross-border needs, i.e. assistance that should be sent to Thai territory with the goal of delivering it, from there, to the Burmese population within Burma.*

In this regard, I would like to know what the financial plans of the European Commission are concerning the provision of aid to the Burmese population, especially persons living in refugee camps in Thailand and in the IDP camps in Burma, including cross-border assistance. Specifically, will funds be provided for cross-border aid and what financial assistance will be provided to the TBBC in the next three years?

**E-0482/09EN Answer given by Mrs Ferrero-Waldner on behalf of the Commission
(20.03.2009)**

The situation in Myanmar is characterised by severe humanitarian, social and economic difficulties, aggravated by the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. The Commission is trying, through humanitarian and other assistance, to alleviate the difficult living conditions of the population. Thus, the Commission funds relief projects (e.g. clean water and sanitation, nutrition and primary health care) as well as food security and other programmes to address longer – term needs in the fields of education, health and livelihoods. These programmes cover the refugees who have sought shelter in the nine refugee camps on Thai soil as a result of armed conflict in specific border areas.

The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) is practically the sole provider of relief items, particularly food, to the camp population along the Thai-Myanmar border. These non-governmental organizations (NGOs) performing well and reliably, has been for many years a beneficiary of Commission funding (through its humanitarian aid department (DG ECHO)). Future funding will depend on the existing needs and the evolution of the situation. Since the Commission funding for TBBC is coming from the humanitarian aid budget line, it is difficult to predict future allocations. The long-standing existence of the refugee camps makes it necessary to look at political solutions, in parallel to maintaining a humanitarian engagement. In 2009 the Commission is supporting TBBC food assistance activities by € 5.5 million. A further € 3.25 million is being allocated for primary health care and water and sanitation through three other NGOs.

In the Democratic Scrutiny Process (2007 on) of the Parliament, the Commission outlined its reasons for not funding cross-border operations: notably, but not exclusively, risks of jeopardising the implementation of programmes inside Myanmar, fiduciary risks, and the equitable distribution of funds with regard to local needs (an estimated 100,000 people only can be accessed from across the Thai border, for whom donors spend annually an estimated total of € 3 million (€ 33 per capita), compared to around € 42 million (est.) assistance within Myanmar: € 0.77 per capita (54 million people) or € 2.31, if only the third of the population living below the poverty line is taken into account.

The Commission can assure the Honourable Member that it remains committed to alleviate the plight of the people of Myanmar – including the refugee population – to reduce their isolation and to provide them with a better perspective for their future development.

EU should strengthen its common position on Burma
12th March 2009

Media release from the European Parliamentary Caucus on Burma

The European Parliamentary Caucus on Burma (EPCB) was set up to support human rights and democracy in Burma, and consists of 156 MPs from 15 European countries, strongly urged the European Union to strengthen its Common Position on Burma when it is renewed in April.

In a letter to European Foreign Ministries, the EPCB stressed its concern about the continuing human rights and humanitarian crises in Burma, including the appalling conditions of the political prisoners, the ongoing attacks by the Burmese Army against ethnic people in Eastern Burma, and the humanitarian problems the attacks are causing. The EPCB welcomes the European Union's longstanding engagement on the issue of Burma, such as increased humanitarian assistance, support for a global arms embargo, new sanctions on imports of timber and gems, and rejection in their current form of the dictatorship's elections planned for 2010.

However, the EPCB believes the EU has not done all it can to push the Burmese military regime to engage in a genuine democratisation process in Burma.

The military dictatorship is ignoring calls by the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly to enter into tripartite dialogue, and Than Shwe, the dictator of Burma, has repeatedly snubbed UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari. Instead, the regime is pushing ahead with elections in 2010 that will enact a constitution which will effectively legalise dictatorship, and do nothing to change the human rights and humanitarian situation in the country.

"Allowing this situation to continue is unacceptable on human rights and humanitarian grounds. Clearly more pressure needs to be placed on the generals to ensure they comply with the demands of the United Nations. We believe the European Union can and should do more to ensure the generals comply with the UN" the letter states.

Therefore the EPCB urges the European Union to use all its influence to secure the release of all political prisoners and to promote positive change in Burma.

EPCB also asked the European Union to consider the following four proposals:

- 1. To reiterate that the military dictatorship's planned 2010 elections and constitution are unacceptable in their current form, and support the National League for Democracy and other democratic forces' proposals for genuine dialogue and reform.*
- 2. To work to build a global consensus for a global arms embargo.*
- 3. To consider carefully targeted economic sanctions, including targeted financial sanctions, and sanctions stopping European companies providing insurance in Burma.*
- 4. To continue to increase humanitarian assistance in Burma, and to do more to challenge restrictions on aid delivery imposed by the regime. Until such restrictions are lifted, the European Union should support the delivery of cross border aid in order to save lives.*

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