



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

MAY
2008

House of Commons Debates

Burma (Cyclone Nargis)

8 May 2008

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Douglas Alexander): *I begin by apologising unreservedly to the House for my delayed arrival and for the delay in making the statement. However, I am grateful for the opportunity to inform it on the response being taken to cyclone Nargis.*

The cyclone hit Burma on the night of 2 May. It has had a devastating impact on the people of Burma: at least 22,000 people have been killed. Unfortunately, we expect this number to rise very significantly in the coming days. Some estimates already range as high as 100,000 dead. At least 42,000 are still missing. The Government estimate that 90 to 95 per cent. of buildings have been destroyed in the low-lying delta region. One million are estimated to be homeless and 1.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in the delta region and around Rangoon. Preliminary assessments indicate that the most urgent needs are for shelter, food and clean water.

The full scale of the disaster will become apparent only over the next few days, as relief teams are able to reach remote communities in cyclone-affected areas. Assessments by the UN and other international agencies have been delayed by difficulties with communications and access. The situation is becoming increasingly perilous, with relief capacity inside the country already severely stretched. There is, of course, an ongoing crisis for the Burmese people, and we are working hard with others in the international community to do all we can for the relief effort.

We should not underestimate the challenge of the relief effort in Burma. The cyclone struck five states and divisions of Burma: Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Bago, Mon and Kayin. Damaged infrastructure and communications are posing major logistical problems for relief operations. Access to some of the worst affected areas is extremely difficult and will hamper relief distribution. Much of the affected region is accessible only by boat, and many of the boats in that region were damaged or destroyed by the cyclone. It is therefore vital that aid workers get access to areas affected by the cyclone to help to co-ordinate the emergency response and deliver aid to those in need.

We are currently receiving mixed signals on the question of access to Burma for international staff. There were widespread media reports only this morning of UN flights being unable to land in Burma. The latest information available to my Department suggests that the first flight, with 7 tonnes of high-energy biscuits, landed around 0730 on 8 May, UK time, and the biscuits are being unloaded.

It is too soon to have a view on the unloading and customs processes, but the World Food Programme is expected to report back to us early this afternoon. The second flight, with 18 tonnes of high-energy biscuits, has landing rights in Yangon and is currently in Dhaka. It is expected to depart today. Delays to these first two flights were due to delays in obtaining clearances. The third flight will leave Dubai today with a range of items; it too has clearance to land in Burma. The fourth flight, due to leave from Italy, is on hold while a view is taken on the capacity of the airport equipment and staff in Burma. The UN does not want to overwhelm this capacity. The first Red Cross and NGO flights will seek access shortly. We do not yet know whether the Burmese Government will allow free access for international agencies to the areas affected by the disaster.

We, as well as the UN and the NGOs, are continuing to urge the Burmese authorities to ensure rapid access for international humanitarian staff to Burma, and for access, in turn, to the worst affected areas within Burma in order to manage our assistance effectively. Representations are being made at both

multilateral and bilateral levels. I have spoken personally to John Holmes, the UN's emergency relief co-ordinator, who is also appealing to the Burmese authorities to allow UN agencies and international workers access. I have spoken to our ambassador in Rangoon, Mark Canning, who raised the issue of access with both the senior general and the Burmese Prime Minister. I have also spoken to the Burmese ambassador here in London to urge him to facilitate rapid access for international humanitarian staff.

Alongside working to secure access to the affected areas, the UK has made an immediate contribution of up to £5 million—the largest single contribution made by any one country—to help the UN, the Red Cross and the NGOs meet urgent humanitarian needs, including shelter and access to clean water, and food and other emergency items. We have readied stockpiles of emergency supplies such as tents, water containers, blankets, and plastic sheets, and sourced additional logistic equipment and relief supplies to be delivered by the same agencies. We are working closely with agencies on the ground to determine exact needs, and we expect to be able to allocate these funds in the coming days as needs and access become clearer. The UN flash appeal is expected by tomorrow. Yesterday, 7 May, I met UK-based NGOs to discuss potential DFID support. We are ready to deploy an emergency field team to help co-ordinate our assessment and response to the disaster as soon as visas can be obtained from the Burmese Government.

The UN humanitarian co-ordinator will meet the Burmese authorities later today to provide an overview of international commitments and to discuss the progress of the response. Already, more than \$20 million has been pledged by donors to the relief effort. In addition, the UN has announced that a minimum of \$10 million will be released from the central emergency relief fund, to which the UK is the largest contributor. The Red Cross and NGOs that have a presence in Burma, including World Vision, Save the Children and Médecins sans Frontières, are undertaking emergency assessments and have begun distributing basic emergency items such as food and water supplies. Co-ordination mechanisms are in place between the UN, NGOs and donors on the ground.

Domestically, the Government of Burma have pledged some \$4.5 million for relief and have established an emergency committee headed by the Burmese Prime Minister. The Burmese Government have reiterated their readiness to accept international assistance, but they are only just starting to allow in UN aid. The challenges of the relief effort would daunt even the most developed country, and it is important that the Burmese Government accept all offers of international assistance offered to them.

As the House will be aware, as well as our initial pledge of up to £5 million for the relief effort, the UK is one of the few countries providing long-term humanitarian assistance to the people of Burma. In October 2007, the UK announced that it would double its aid for the poorest people in Burma from £9 million per year to £18 million per year in 2010. Our support is delivered in accordance with the European common position—either through the UN or other reputable NGOs; none of it goes through the central Government.

This is a very grave crisis, on a scale not seen since the tsunami of 2004. I want to assure the House that the British Government will continue to work to bring assistance and relief to the suffering people of Burma.

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): *I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it. Our thoughts and prayers are with the many thousands who have lost friends and relatives in this tragedy, and those who are struggling to survive the aftermath of this terrible disaster.*

It is clear that the situation in Burma is a massive humanitarian catastrophe, the like of which, as the Secretary of State said, has not been seen since the Asian tsunami of December 2004. People to whom I have spoken on the ground in the past few days are clear that the death toll will rise much further, and that as of now, hundreds of thousands of people are beyond the reach of the relief effort. The danger now is that hunger, disease and the lack of access to clean water and shelter will add to the suffering.

I welcome the actions that the Secretary of State outlined in his statement. The staff at the Department for International Development are some of the finest development professionals in the world; their compassion, commitment and expertise have a vital role to play in this crisis. In particular, I salute the work of Rurik Marsden, who leads DFID's efforts in Burma, whom I met in Rangoon during my visit to Burma last year, and of our ambassador, Mark Canning, whose knowledge and insight are second to none at this time.

It is already clear that British charities and NGOs are at the forefront of work on the ground. The

outstanding British charity Save the Children, led in Rangoon by Andrew Kirkwood, has 35 offices and 500 staff on the ground in Burma. They have already been able to get help to 50,000 people. ActionAid, Merlin, Oxfam and World Vision are also extremely active.

It is deeply regrettable that the Burmese Government have consistently run down and undermined the UN mission in Burma, not least by forcing out Charles Petrie, the impressive former head of the UN mission there. His experience and dynamism are sorely missed at this time of crisis. The Burmese people and the international relief effort are both the losers from that misjudgment by the Burmese junta. It is a scandal that five full days following the disaster, only a trickle of aid is getting in from the outside world. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether the Burmese Government are still insisting on onerous visa restrictions for aid workers—and even if they get a visa, what guarantees have been received that they will be allowed to leave Rangoon without waiting up to two weeks for a travel permit? After the Bam earthquake of 2003, Iran waived visa restrictions on foreign relief workers for five days, letting in even people from America and Israel. This spirit should prevail again now.

The Burmese Government must give unfettered access for the international humanitarian relief effort. A key lesson from the tsunami is the need for the international response to dovetail with the local relief effort; trying to go against the grain does not work. We need to persuade the Burmese authorities to be as co-operative as possible. This House can assure the Government of Burma today that the aid workers are there for non-political humanitarian reasons, to save lives, rather than for political positioning. What steps has the Secretary of State taken to make this clear to the Burmese Government?

As the Secretary of State said, the key requirement now is for a comprehensive needs assessment by the UN, and a well-funded, professional and highly competent relief operation centred on food, clean water, shelter and medical relief. As we saw with the Asian tsunami, we need to know that the aid we give is exactly what is needed. Inappropriate aid can be worse than no aid at all.

There are reports that the Burmese Government have finally decided to accept some of the United States relief flights. Can the Secretary of State update the House on this point?

The regime's suspicion of outsiders is well documented, but we must also seek the support of Burma's cosy friends—China, India and Thailand, with whom the regime has worked closely. In the run-up to the Olympics, many eyes will be on China to examine the role that it plays in helping to ensure that the Burmese Government open up immediately to the international relief effort. What discussions has the Secretary of State had in recent days with the Chinese ambassador in London, Madam Fu Ying, and the representatives of India and Thailand, to underline this point?

There are reports that the Burmese Government intend to impose taxes and duties on planes that bring in aid supplies. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether that is the case, and what representations the British Government have made to the Burmese Government to suspend these tariffs? In the aftermath of the tsunami, concern was expressed about the operation of gift aid tax relief on donations to the humanitarian appeal. At this early stage, what steps are the Government taking on this matter?

It is impossible to talk about good coming out of this terrible event, but we saw in the Indonesian province of Aceh, which was devastated by the 2004 tsunami, that the shock and turmoil of a natural disaster can, in some circumstances, lead to movement and progress on thorny political conflicts, for the greater common good. Can the Secretary of State confirm that Aung San Suu Kyi, whose compound in Rangoon is vulnerable, overgrown and snake-ridden, is safe and well?

Clearly all of us who have been vocal critics of this pariah regime will put politics to one side as we strive for an effective humanitarian response. Once again, I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House and making his statement. In the same spirit, I hope that he will continue to keep the House informed through written and oral statements.

The rest of the debate can be read here:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080508/debtext/80508-0006.htm>

Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs: Topical Questions

13 May

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (David Miliband): *The whole House will be aware that as we debate here today people are dying by the score in Burma, and the Burmese regime are unconscionably holding up the supply of foreign aid. Hon. Members throughout the House will share my anger that any Government could show such a callous disregard for their responsibility towards their own citizens.*

The Prime Minister made it clear yesterday that Britain would do everything possible to make a difference. We have pledged £5 million of assistance, a United Kingdom aid flight has left for Burma and more are planned for this week, and a team from the Department for International Development is on the ground there. We are examining all options for getting the aid through, and getting the message through to the Burmese regime that its obstructionism is completely intolerable. Over the past 12 days we have supported the use of any and all United Nations action that will help, and we will continue to do so. The only test is whether that action saves lives in Burma.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks) (Con): *I support what the Foreign Secretary has said about the gravity of the situation in Burma and the extraordinary callousness of the Burmese regime. Will he take up the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell), the shadow Secretary of State for International Development, that the United Nations Secretary-General go to Rangoon on behalf of the whole international community to urge the regime to provide immediate, unfettered access for all international relief?*

While aid can be delivered with great effectiveness only with the co-ordination of the Burmese Government, does the Foreign Secretary agree that the international community has a responsibility to consider any other options? He just mentioned that the Government were considering all options for delivering more help to people in such desperate circumstances. What assessment has he made of the viability of direct aid drops? What plans exist for such drops, and when would they be put into effect?

David Miliband: *The right hon. Gentleman asks about the role of the United Nations Secretary-General. For some time we have discussed with him the proposition—originally advanced, I believe, by this country in New York—that he should go there himself. The statement that he issued yesterday was very helpful and positive, and suggested the degree of engagement that is necessary. We know from what happened in 2004 that the role of the UN Secretary-General in bringing people together can be very important.*

I chose the phrase “any and all options” deliberately, to make it clear that we are supporting any and all action at the United Nations. As for aid drops, I think it best to quote what has been said by the World Food Programme. It does not rule out such action, and it would be quite wrong to do so, but it does say that

“it’s dangerous and potentially counter-productive if you carry out air drops of food or assistance without the proper set-up on the ground.”

Oxfam, which has a long history in this area, says:

“Food and mosquito nets cannot be targeted at the most vulnerable... clean water systems and safe sanitation cannot be dropped from the sky”.

It also says:

“The biggest risk is that... air-drops will be a distraction from what is really needed—a highly effective aid operation on the ground.”

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to want to be certain that all options are being considered, and I assure him that they are. However, the best option by a long way is for the Burmese Government to stand up to their responsibilities.

Let me raise another matter on which I am sure there is cross-party agreement. We have been emphasising the important role of the Association of South East Asian Nations. The neighbouring countries

that will inevitably have to provide the basis for any sort of humanitarian or military help will play a critical part, which is why we have been talking directly to ASEAN countries on the telephone and in person through ambassadors in capitals. I am sure that that action is supported throughout the House.

Mr. Hague: *May I emphatically support what the Foreign Secretary says about the ASEAN countries...*

Alistair Burt: *I am sure that the House would wish to be associated with the Under-Secretary's sentiments about the Chinese earthquake. The earth's fragility has been awesomely demonstrated through the recent tragic events in south-east Asia, as has the need for the world to rely on itself and our mutual dependence for aid and assistance. Does the Under-Secretary believe that, in the medium term, those events might help China revisit its obligations on issues such as carbon emissions? Much more urgently in the short term, does she believe that China's experience of tragedy today will ensure that it urges the Burmese Government this afternoon to do all they can to allow aid and assistance in immediately, given that it is waiting on the borders and needed to deal with Burma's tragedy?*

Meg Munn: *The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made that point when he spoke to his counterpart in China just before this Question Time. I understand that China is now requesting international support for the situation. We know that the position in China is much better than in Burma. There is much more infrastructure and the Chinese Government are much more capable of supporting people. We know that the situation in Burma is dreadful. Without the help and support being readily offered by the international community, many more people will die. We will continue to urge China, as well as other countries in the region, to make those points to the Burmese Government. This is not a political issue; it is a humanitarian issue.*

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): *The Foreign Secretary has used strong words on the subject of Burma and the responsibilities of other countries, such as China, to assist in getting humanitarian aid instantly—not in a few days—to Burma. The United Nations has established the principles of the right to intervene and the responsibility to protect. We chair the Security Council; surely we can do more than we are now.*

Meg Munn: *We will support any and all activities that will take the matter forward and get that aid into Burma. It is clear that the US and the European countries on the Security Council are ready to move the issues forward. We are pressing to get that aid in. What is important is not just the physical aid, which is already under great pressure, but the need for people who can distribute it. There are development workers on the ground, but they are not disaster relief experts. We need disaster relief experts there. Burma needs to let those people in now.*

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): *In the context of the welcome co-operation between the United Kingdom and China, will my right hon. Friend impress on the Chinese the fact that our humanitarian efforts would be properly amplified if China were to bring considerable pressure on Burma to ensure that the Burmese opened up facilities to humanitarian agencies there?*

David Miliband: *Yes, I shall. The regional powers, notably China, have an immensely important role to play not only in facilitating practical support on the ground but in applying political pressure on a Burmese regime who have so far been closed to reason. It is obviously essential that we continue the links with the Chinese Government to ensure that they understand the strength of feeling across British political parties and across Britain about the need to respond to what is becoming a man-made catastrophe.*

Prime Minister's Questions

Mr. Sarwar: *My right hon. Friend will be aware that 1.5 million survivors of the cyclone in Burma are facing starvation, disease and, ultimately, death. Will he tell the House what the Government are doing to get aid through to those people who are in desperate need?*

The Prime Minister: *My hon. Friend raises a point that is touching the conscience of the whole world: a natural disaster in Burma has been turned, by the actions of a despicable regime, into a human catastrophe—a man-made catastrophe as a result of its actions. While there is a huge debate about some of the issues surrounding it, the key thing for all of us is to get aid to the people of Burma as quickly as*

possible by the means available to us. That is why, over the last few hours, a British plane has arrived in Rangoon and three others will arrive very soon. More planes will be sent over the next few days. The first will provide shelter for 45,000 people. That is also why, over the next day or two, about 60 flights in total will have arrived in Rangoon. There has been an improvement, but it is not good enough.

It is not good enough because of the needs of the Burmese people—the one and a half million who face famine and other distress—and it is not good enough because the regime is still preventing aid from getting to the rest of the country. That is why I asked Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, to convene an emergency summit and why I asked him—I believe he is considering it now—to go to the country and also why Lord Malloch-Brown has gone to Asia to talk to Asian Ministers about how they can co-ordinate action. While it is right to debate the responsibility to protect as well as air drops, the key thing at the moment is to pressure the regime by getting all countries in Asia uniting with all of us to make sure that aid gets as quickly as possible to the people of Burma. We are ready to do everything in our power—HMS Westminster is in the area and we are working with French and American ships—to do so. At the same time, we have a humanitarian team in Rangoon ready to do everything it can in the future. I hope that the whole House will unite in saying that the Burmese regime must let into the country all aid workers and all aid immediately.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): ...More importantly, the whole House will want to express our sympathy for the victims of the earthquake in Sichuan. Everyone will have seen the very swift response of the Chinese Government, which is in stark contrast to the reaction of the regime in Burma, where the neglect of the military junta is turning a natural disaster into a man-made catastrophe. I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for his update. He rightly says that the Burmese Government must let aid through, but may I push him a little further on that? If that does not happen, is the right hon. Gentleman prepared to take further steps, including raising the issue of the responsibility to protect at the UN and supporting international efforts to deliver aid directly?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the action that we have already taken. Of course we will raise the issue of responsibility to protect at the United Nations, and of course we will leave ourselves open to considering the issue of air drops. I must tell the right hon. Gentleman, however, that everyone on the ground and every aid agency that is advising us says that the best way of getting aid to the Burmese people quickly is to continue the pressure on the Burmese Government—which has yielded some results, but not sufficient results, in the last few days—so that Asian countries are in a position to help us to convey the aid that is available to those people.

I must also tell the right hon. Gentleman that when we have tried to arrange a meeting of the United Nations Security Council to discuss the issue, we have been blocked by other countries. That is why I have asked Ban Ki-moon to hold an emergency summit of the kind that Kofi Annan held at the time of the 2004 tsunami. I believe that progress is being made in regard to the summit, and I hope it will be a means of bringing additional pressure to bear on the Burmese Government through Asia. I do not rule out anything, and no one should rule out anything, but let us be honest. All the aid agencies and others are telling us exactly the same: we must intensify the pressure to get more aid in through the Burmese Government as quickly as possible.

Mr. Cameron: Of course the Prime Minister is right to say that the best way of providing direct aid is to persuade the Burmese Government to open up the country to allow the aid agencies in, but I think it is worth setting a deadline for when we must say that not enough has got through and more should be done. It is true that the experts say that only a fifth of direct aid will get through, but a fifth of something is better than 0 per cent. of nothing.

Can the Prime Minister clarify an aspect of the responsibility to protect? The British ambassador to the UN has said that the UK's responsibility to protect does not apply to natural disasters, but yesterday the Foreign Secretary said that it certainly could. Will the Prime Minister make it absolutely clear that, in our view, the responsibility to protect should be extended to Burma and to Burmese people at this time?

The Prime Minister: There are two ways of proceeding. There is the responsibility to protect and there is the right to humanitarian intervention, which was invoked in 1999. We are leaving all the options open.

I must correct the right hon. Gentleman: we must not fall for the impression that there is some easy answer in air drops. Like others, I am prepared to consider them, but Save the Children said this morning:

“Right now, talk of air drops is a distraction. Air drops are an ineffective way of delivering aid. We must continue to push for access. We are exploring other creative ways”

to get rid of the blockages

“such as boats.”

Oxfam too has said that air drops are a distraction, and the World Food Programme, which is co-ordinating aid in Rangoon, has said that they would be “counter-productive”. Water supplies cannot be dropped from the air without putting people in the country at risk.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I rule out nothing, but we must not give the public of Britain or other countries the impression that the best course is not the one that we are proposing: to intensify pressure on the Burmese Government, and to ensure that aid reaches the people of Burma.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): *Which country or countries blocked a meeting of the United Nations Security Council on Burma, and what diplomatic pressure are we applying on them?*

The Prime Minister: *We are applying a great deal of pressure, and I think it would be in our interest to apply that pressure rather than to name names at present. If I may say so, the pressure on those countries continues. That is why I have called on the Secretary-General of the UN to hold an emergency summit. The way forward is an emergency summit, hopefully held almost immediately. That will get the international community organised so that we can get supplies to Burma. We will not rest in our determination to get a concerted international response, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will support that.*

Opposition Debate Burma

14 May 2008

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): *I must advise the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.*

Mr. Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): *I beg to move,*

That this House is gravely concerned by the immense suffering and damage caused in Burma by Cyclone Nargis; notes that 200,000 people may have died and that two million people lack access to healthcare, clean water and sanitation, food and shelter; salutes the work of the Department for International Development’s staff and British NGOs, including Save the Children and Merlin, in responding to the disaster; is further deeply concerned by the restrictions placed on the international humanitarian relief effort by the government of Burma; asserts that the international relief effort is motivated solely by humanitarian concerns; calls on the government of Burma immediately to grant unrestricted access for the international humanitarian effort, including the delivery of aid supplies, and the admittance and free movement of aid workers; further calls on the UN Secretary General to visit Burma immediately to make clear the united desire of the international community to secure access for the international relief effort; further calls on China, India, Thailand and other countries with influence over the Burmese regime to make every possible effort to persuade the Burmese government to allow the international relief effort full access; prefers that humanitarian action should be supported by the government of Burma and believes that this approach is more likely to be successful but concludes that the international community has a responsibility to protect the Burmese people and should consider all options for getting help to those who need it, including using direct aid drops.

As the House debates the situation in Burma today, we are equally aware of the terrible earthquake and awful loss of life in China, particularly among children. However, it is hard not to draw comparisons between the responses of the Governments of China and Burma to the terrible disasters that have hit their countries. The Chinese Prime Minister led the humanitarian relief effort to the earthquake in his country. The full

power of the state has been used to rescue and protect the citizens of China, but the position in Burma could not be more different. The regime has not only proved unable to handle the challenges it faces, but actively turned its back on helping its own citizens. Indeed, it has willingly and systematically blocked an unprecedented global humanitarian coalition—a coalition motivated not by politics, but by a desire to help those who are suffering.

Britain's citizens, through the Disasters Emergency Committee, have raised some £6 million to help save lives. I welcome the funds released in the name of the British people by the Department for International Development. I hope that the Secretary of State will update the House on how much of the £5 million he pledged last week has been released to organisations on the ground and on how it is being spent.

Members of the Burmese diaspora throughout the world are responding by sending money to members of their extended families in Burma. Earlier this week, the American Department of Treasury eased financial sanctions against Burma to let individuals send money to friends and family there. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that everything possible is being done to assist members of the Burmese community in Europe who want to send money home? Could the European Union do more on that? Will he update the House on the aims of the forthcoming visit of the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, who is due in Burma for talks tomorrow?

Night is now falling in Burma. The situation in the Irrawaddy delta is almost unimaginable. Hundreds of thousands of people will spend another night without shelter. We hear reports of massive makeshift camps for survivors, where tens of thousands of people gather on high ground, waiting in the hope of assistance. Today, 11 days after Cyclone Nargis hit, hundreds of thousands of people lack the basic necessities for human survival—food, clean drinking water, shelter and any form of basic medicine—and another cyclone is feared in the area.

What we are seeing in Burma is a double tragedy. The cyclone was obviously a natural disaster for which no one can be held responsible. However, we are now seeing a second tragedy unfold, as relief is barely trickling through to those who desperately need it. I know that the skilled staff of the Department for International Development are doing all that they can. Their disaster assessment team arrived in Rangoon earlier this week. We look forward to hearing from the Secretary of State on what it found. The team is led by Rurik Marsden, the head of DFID in Burma, and Britain's outstanding and experienced ambassador, Mark Canning.

British NGOs and their local partners are doing extraordinary work. Save the Children, whose efforts I saw for myself during my visit to Burma last year, has some 500 staff and 35 offices throughout the country. It is led by Andrew Kirkwood and has managed to reach 100,000 people. The British charity Merlin and others are doing all that they can.

There has been some late, limited improvement in access to aid. An American plane was given permission to land earlier this week and two United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees truck convoys have managed to cross the border from Thailand. I am advised that by 11 o'clock today seven or eight planes carrying aid had landed in Rangoon, among which I understand is one British plane. The World Food Programme reported some easing of access to incoming supplies. I am informed that there has been some progress with the granting of visas. However, that limited progress is nowhere near enough. The Burmese Government continue to cut their people off from the lifelines being offered them. The World Food Programme estimates that it has been able to set up only 10 per cent. of the logistics required for the response and has provided only 20 per cent. of the required food. There is no expectation of a visa waiver.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): *Although this was not made entirely clear when the subject came up at Prime Minister's Question Time, my understanding is that before the tragedy in China, China and Russia were the two countries at the United Nations standing in the way of UN action to force the Burmese Government to give better access. In the light of the second tragedy—the one that has hit China—is there any prospect of a renewed effort to mobilise the United Nations being more successful?*

Mr. Mitchell: *My hon. Friend's understanding is the same as mine. I have no doubt that the Secretary of State will want to update the House on the continuing discussions that are being held under the United Kingdom's chairmanship of the Security Council in New York.*

John Battle (Leeds, West) (Lab): *The hon. Gentleman did not extend or develop his point about the parallels between the tragedy in China and the one in Burma. The Chinese have demonstrated that they understand the need for experts in humanitarian aid to be on the ground immediately, in the place where they are needed. The key issue is not aid, but aid plus people. In the light of their experience, perhaps the Chinese could be encouraged to tell the Burmese to allow the experts in.*

Mr. Mitchell: *The hon. Gentleman, who knows what he is talking about in this matter, makes an extremely good point. I hope that it will be heard clearly by those making Britain's contribution to the discussions in New York.*

I was talking about the situation on the ground, and my understanding is that the authorities still insist that NGO workers should not operate outside Rangoon. Indeed, we have heard today that those restrictions are reported to have been tightened, and foreign NGO workers in the delta will now be required to remove themselves within 48 hours. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to comment on that. If he, understandably, does not have full details of the issue, I hope that he will urgently seek to find out what is happening.

Over the past year, the Burmese Government have sought further to weaken and downgrade United Nations structures in Burma, not least by kicking out Charles Petrie, the able UN head in the country, and by denying visas to key UN personnel. Meanwhile, the price of rice, which was already high due to world conditions, has rocketed, and the price of fuel has increased by 500 per cent., further hindering the relief effort.

The view of the House on the nature of the Burmese Government is well known, but that is unquestionably a matter for another day. Now is not the time to pursue that point. Our position bears repeating. Our motives for wanting to get aid through to those who most need it are not political. The sole aim of the international humanitarian workers on the ground is to save lives. The international relief effort is motivated by simple, common humanity. Our clear preference is for aid to be delivered with the co-operation and active support—or at least the passive acquiescence—of the Burmese Government. It is right that, to date, most of the world's efforts have been focused on securing that outcome.

The international community has learned from bitter experience what has to be done in these circumstances. The UN has conducted a comprehensive needs assessment to identify what materials and skills are most needed, and the world is responding generously. On this point, the Secretary of State's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Hilary Benn), should be given credit for instigating the central emergency response fund at the UN. The British taxpayer should also be credited for being the largest contributor to it. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how much money has been drawn down from it so far to assist in this emergency?

Unfettered access to the people who need help is now required. The UN Secretary-General has expressed his frustration at the slow pace of the aid effort. As we made clear last week in the statement to the House, we believe that the Secretary-General should travel to Rangoon today to see the situation for himself and to remonstrate with the military junta and demand action on behalf of the international community. I was pleased to hear, during Prime Minister's questions today, that the Government have adopted that idea.

Everyone knows that time is running out for the Burmese people, so we now need to consider every available option to get help to those who most need it. That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) said earlier this week that only a defined and limited amount of time should be allowed to pass before the international community takes direct action to reach the people whom humanity demands we assist. If it becomes clear that the Burmese Government remain unco-operative despite continued, concerted pressure from the international community, while people are dying from disease and exposure, the moral imperative to save lives will be overwhelming. The test of our policy must simply be: what will help the people of Burma the most?

The Conservatives are well aware of the complexities and difficulties inherent in attempts to provide aid from the air. Reaching the most vulnerable, ensuring that the aid gets to the people who need it the most and is not seized by the strongest or by the military, and simply finding a suitable place to drop the aid are

all very real challenges. However, if we face a choice between getting aid through, even in this imperfect way, and aid not getting through at all to the people who desperately need it and who will die without it, we will have a clear moral imperative to act.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): *The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that he is making a very serious point. I have not met any representative of an NGO who takes the view that he is expressing. The NGOs realise that the best way to deliver humanitarian aid is by land and by water. Has he really thought through the implications for the personnel who would be expected to deliver the aid if, at this comparatively early stage—despite the seriousness of the problem—we were to involve ourselves in air drops?*

Mr. Mitchell: *The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the difficulties that would accompany such action, but he must bear it in mind that we are not at an early stage. Without any aid or support at all, hundreds of thousands of people in Burma could die. Although the aid agencies and NGOs are sceptical about the case that I am putting, it must nevertheless be considered. If we cannot get aid through by any other means, we should get it through directly.*

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) (Lab/Co-op): *Following on from the previous intervention, will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that certain things cannot be dropped from the air? Safe water systems and other equipment would be badly damaged if they were dropped in on a pallet. The real solution would still require people on the ground who were able to get the resources in by other means.*

Mr. Mitchell: *The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, to some extent. We are not suggesting dropping water from the air; no one has suggested that. Water purification tablets and equipment could be dropped in that way, however. There are many people stranded on the ground who are starving and who are going to die, and we need to reach them. The right hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Mr. Clarke) referred to access by sea, and we should also consider that method. The UN has called for a sea corridor to be established to assist the aid effort. Will the Secretary of State update us on what progress has been made in that regard?*

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): *Are we not in danger of getting into a false argument on this matter? I was in Ethiopia during the famine in 1985. Because of the desperate situation, it was necessary to deliver a lot of the aid by air. RAF Hercules planes, working with Russian cargo freighters, did fantastic work getting food and other supplies into difficult parts of Ethiopia. That was an example of an airlift being used to the best advantage. This is not a false dichotomy. Given the scale of the disaster in Burma, we are almost certainly going to need air support at some stage. My hon. Friend has rightly pointed out that there comes a time at which the international community has to say, "We have a responsibility to intervene if the Burmese Government are not willing to look after their own people."*

Mr. Mitchell: *My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I seek to carry the House with me when I say that no one believes that delivering aid directly, whether by sea or by air, is easy. However, the House must consider what we should do if we cannot get aid through in any other way.*

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Douglas Alexander): *I am keen for the hon. Gentleman to clarify the position of his Front Bench on this issue. My understanding is that the Leader of the Opposition set yesterday as the deadline when contemplating air drops during an interview on "The World at One", but that position now seems to be shifting, if the hon. Gentleman is saying that they should be contemplated for the future. Who is correct: the Front-Bench spokesman or the leader of his party?*

Mr. Mitchell: *I strongly urge the right hon. Gentleman not to abuse his position by trying to make party political points on this matter. I heard the interview that my right hon. Friend gave yesterday, and the point that he made is precisely the point that I am making. If, after a period of time—which my right hon. Friend rightly argued should be defined—the aid is still not getting through, the international community must address the issue of getting it through directly.*

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): *Does it not illustrate just how callous the Burmese regime are when the small trickle of aid that has finally got through is halted by the Burmese junta and repackaged to make it look as though it has come from the junta itself? Surely the important thing is that we get the food*

and aid through to the people who need it most as quickly as possible.

Mr. Mitchell: *My hon. Friend is entirely right. I was referring to the issue of access by sea and to the UN sea corridor, which has been called for to assist the aid effort. I invited the Secretary of State to update us on any progress that has been made in that regard. The House would also like to hear what steps are being taken in consultation with Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister, for Britain to join up with the French vessels that are currently approaching Burma. What plans do the Government have to use HMS Westminster in the relief effort? Will the Secretary of State set out exactly what supplies the ship is carrying and what plans have been made to use them?*

In 2006, amidst much self-congratulation, the leaders of the international community in New York embraced a responsibility to protect people whose Governments failed to do so. The UN Security Council referred to the “intentional denial” of humanitarian assistance. The responsibility to protect focuses on genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

Lawyers might say that the situation in Burma does not currently fit the technical definition that triggers the responsibility to protect. Conservative Members say that it should and we say further that the international community, through the UN, must revisit this failure to protect as part of the reform of the international architecture so that regimes cannot obstruct and frustrate with impunity the common humanitarian responsibility of the international community. For now, there is one thing and only one thing that matters—the saving of lives, which will surely be lost in their thousands unless international aid reaches those in such peril in Burma tonight.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Douglas Alexander): *I beg to move, To leave out from “House” to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:*

“notes with horror the devastating impact of Cyclone Nargis upon the people of Burma; recognises the vast scale of humanitarian assistance needed urgently to prevent further loss of life; is appalled at the unacceptably slow pace at which the Burmese authorities have so far allowed in international expertise for the relief effort, and at their lack of capacity to distribute aid to the affected areas; calls upon the Burmese authorities to allow immediate and unfettered access for both the delivery of aid and for its distribution inside Burma; strongly welcomes the UK Government’s initial £5 million pledge to the relief effort for emergency items; strongly supports the UK Government’s exchanges with key international partners in order to bring about a concerted international effort for access for humanitarian assistance; in this regard, welcomes the visit to countries in the region by Ministers from the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; urges countries in the region to increase their efforts to persuade the Burmese authorities to allow in unfettered international assistance and to ramp up the delivery of aid; and strongly supports continued efforts of the United Nations to secure access and ensure aid is delivered to those in need.”

Let me begin by associating myself with the statement of sympathy offered by the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) to the people of China in light of the terrible earthquake that has afflicted the country. I will address the hon. Gentleman’s points in the course of my remarks, but let me start by updating the House on the latest assessment of the situation in the affected areas of Burma. Then I will share with the House the efforts we are making to provide humanitarian relief, before detailing our political and diplomatic efforts to secure further access for aid and, indeed, for humanitarian workers.

As the hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield described, the situation in the disaster zone of the Irrawaddy delta is rapidly deteriorating—largely, and tragically, because of the inadequacy of the Burmese regime’s response. People are dying now not because of a natural disaster, but because a disaster has been turned into a man-made catastrophe. The state media in Burma are reporting that some 28,500 people have died, 1,400 are injured and more than 33,000 are missing. However, we believe the true figures to be far greater.

I spoke only this morning to Rurik Marsden, the head of the Rangoon office of the Department for International Development, and some agencies in the field are now estimating that the number of dead and missing is rising to more than 200,000 people. At least 1.5 million people are in need of assistance, and for 300,000 of those the need is desperately urgent.

The likelihood of widespread infectious disease as a consequence is increasing fast. The initial risks are diarrhoea and water-borne disease. One aid agency to which we have spoken reports that one fifth of the children they have reached already have diarrhoea. In time, there will be an increased risk of the spread of malaria due to the large amounts of standing water following the cyclone.

There have been some signs in recent days that the amount of aid reaching Burma is increasing. As of Monday, just 35 flights had arrived in the course of the preceding week. In contrast, two US military flights arrived in Rangoon this morning, along with eight aid flights, and we expect a total of 23 flights to arrive in the course of today. One of the eight aid flights to arrive this morning was carrying UK assistance—36 tonnes of plastic sheeting, which is enough to provide shelter for many thousands of people. That shipment was consigned directly to the UN World Food Programme—not, of course, to the Government of Burma—and distribution within Burma will now be taken forward.

Four further UK aid flights are expected to fly out this week, with shelter and blankets as well as flat-bottomed boats to help those most in need. We will also supply experts, both in Bangkok and in Rangoon, to ensure the smooth running of relief flights into Rangoon, and I have also requested the Ministry of Defence to direct HMS Westminster to the region to assist in any appropriate humanitarian response. That request has been approved, and HMS Westminster is now on its way to international waters off the coast of Burma.

The rest of the debate can be read here:

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/cgi-bin/newhtml_hi?DB=semukparl&STEMMER=en&WORDS=burma&ALL=burma&ANY=&PHRASE=&CATEGORIES=&SIMPLE=&SPEAKER=&COLOUR=red&STYLE=s&ANCHOR=80514-0007.htm_spnew1&URL=/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080514/debtext/80514-0007.htm#80514-0007.htm_spnew1

Prime Minister's Questions

21 May

Mr. Jones: *May I add my condolences to the family of the brave serviceman killed in Afghanistan this week? In the last few weeks, the world has seen the devastation by a cyclone in Burma, earthquake destruction in China, and now the spectre of the possible return of the famines of a generation ago in Ethiopia and the horn of Africa. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the test by which the international community and developed world will be judged is how they respond to those crises and the cries from some of the poorest in the world?*

The Prime Minister: *I am sure the whole House will wish to join me and others in sending condolences to all those who have lost their lives in China, where 40,000 people have died as a result of the earthquake, and in Burma, where we estimate up to 200,000 people have now died as a result of the cyclone, and to all those who are suffering as a result of famine, which is now hitting Africa again in this generation. The rescue effort in China has been heroic, and thousands of lives have been saved. We are now sending aid for shelters to China, as well as giving help with equipment. The progress in Burma remains slow, however. We have worked with the Association of South East Asian Nations—ASEAN—and the United Nations Secretary-General, and I believe that ASEAN aid will now flow into Burma with the permission of the Burmese Government. There is also to be a donors' conference this weekend in Rangoon, headed by the UN Secretary-General. We continue, however, to hold the Burmese Government accountable for the loss of life and the suffering of their people.*

As far as Africa is concerned, the Secretary of State for International Development will be announcing new aid for Ethiopia and other countries that are hit by famine. Six million children are likely to be affected over the next few months, which makes the case not only for action on food shortages, but for the proposal put by the Foreign Secretary at the UN Security Council: that we now need a civilian stand-by humanitarian and reconstruction force that has the necessary funds to move immediately whenever disasters are threatening in the world.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): *I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the British soldier who was killed in Afghanistan on Monday. He died serving our country and we should all honour his memory.*

May I return to the issue of Burma? Everyone is grateful for the efforts the Government have made over the last week, and it is good news that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is visiting Burma later this week. The donors' conference the Prime Minister spoke about is also very worth while, but the situation on the ground remains desperate. What is the Prime Minister's assessment of the percentage and number of people who are still without aid three weeks after the cyclone hit?

The Prime Minister: *I agree with the Leader of the Opposition; it is still a small fraction of people who are getting aid. Aid agencies, particularly British ones, are getting aid to people, but the key effort will now rely on an ASEAN-mobilised effort, as a result of the decision of its Foreign Ministers on Monday. We will put our resources behind that, as will the Americans, the French and the ships that are now off the coast of Burma. We hope that, as a result, aid will now get very quickly to the people of Burma. It is the combination of the ASEAN aid effort—I have been in touch with the Prime Ministers of India, Singapore and Thailand and the President of Indonesia asking them to move things forward as quickly as possible—which the Burmese Government are now prepared to accept, and the push from the United Nations at the conference this weekend that can start to make possible the biggest difference.*

As I said, I hold the Burmese Government responsible for what was a natural disaster turning into a man-made disaster, but, at the same time, we continue to look at all the other options, as I said last week. The general view of aid agencies on the ground is, again, that it is better to work through the Burmese Government to get the aid to people as quickly as possible, rather than to use the other options that may be available to us in the future. In the next few days, that is where all the efforts will be focused.

Mr. Cameron: *Clearly we all agree about the frustration with the slow progress; the UN estimates that fewer than a quarter of the people affected are receiving aid. I put a question to the Prime Minister: is there not a danger that the junta in Burma is doing just enough each day to prevent the international community from taking those further steps to make sure the aid gets through on a huge scale? He said last week that he does not rule out direct aid. I think that he is absolutely right that the efforts by ASEAN to open up the country are the best route forward, but can he give us his latest assessment on how direct aid could be delivered if it had to be delivered? Is it not the case that for too many people in Burma time is just running out?*

The Prime Minister: *What has changed in the past few days is the determination of the ASEAN countries to take action. I spoke to the Prime Minister of India, and he has moved to agree to the action that is necessary and now agreed by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers. I spoke to the President of Indonesia and the Prime Minister of Singapore, and they, too, are behind the major effort that ASEAN will now mount. Britain, France and America have been pushing for aid to be delivered, but what has changed in the past few days is that the ASEAN group of countries will now co-ordinate action, which will be backed up by the donors' conference.*

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that aid has been too slow and I agree with him also that the Burmese regime has made it impossible, in some cases, for aid agencies to do their work. But what I do believe is that, as has happened in the past few days, the ASEAN countries have been seized of the necessity to take action—every phone call that I have had suggests that, as do Lord Malloch-Brown's visits to the region—and that is what we must monitor over the next few days. I do not rule out anything, but I think that the right hon. Gentleman would agree that, in talking to aid agencies—Save the Children, Oxfam and the World Food Programme, which is acting on the ground in the area—they still believe that food drops or other drops of aid would be counter-productive and that they still believe that military intervention would be counter-productive at this time. Let us hope, and let us push the ASEAN effort forward. Given the scale of the loss of life of which we are now aware, the whole House would wish that effort to move forward very quickly now.

Mr. Cameron: *I wish the Prime Minister well with his efforts, and I thank him and the Government for keeping us regularly updated on this issue in the House. What has happened in China is also a huge tragedy—the Prime Minister and I both went to the Chinese embassy yesterday—but we must not let it knock off the front pages what is happening in Burma.*

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Burma: Storms

12 May

Mr. Keith Simpson: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in Burma following the recent cyclone; and what UK assistance has been offered to Burma;*

(2) what steps the Government are taking to seek to ensure that humanitarian agencies are permitted access to cyclone-affected parts of Burma; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *I refer the hon. Member to the statement that I made in the House on 8 May 2008, Official Report, column 863.*

United Nations: Finance

John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had at the UN on strategic reserves for rapid response in emergency situations.*

Mr. Thomas: *I have been asked to reply.*

The Department for International Development (DFID) is in regular discussions with all United Nations (UN) agencies delivering humanitarian assistance, such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), on the locations and quantities of their emergency stockpiles. This is part of our wider efforts to build global capacity for humanitarian response. Most recently, DFID officials met with WFP officials to discuss their Humanitarian Response Depots, which are currently being set up in five locations around the world. Emergency food supplies from the WFP stockpile in Brindisi, Italy, have already been drawn on to assist those affected by the recent cyclone in Burma.

Burma: Storms

13 May

Mr. Jim Cunningham: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid and assistance the Government have made available to Burma following the recent cyclone.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *The UK made an initial pledge of £5 million for the immediate relief effort following Cyclone Nargis and stands ready to contribute much more. These funds will be used to help meet urgent humanitarian needs and will be channelled through UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs delivering assistance on the ground. This contribution will be in addition to the UK's long-term humanitarian programme inside Burma.*

We have readied our stockpile of emergency supplies including tents, water containers, blankets, and plastics sheets. And we have sourced additional logistic equipment and other relief items. The first airlift of these materials has departed.

A DFID team of emergency response experts arrived in Burma on weekend of 10/11 May, to support the DFID Burma Office and help to maximise the impact of DFID emergency funding.

Mr. Greg Knight: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development whether he plans to give additional aid to Burma following the recent cyclones.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *The UK made an initial pledge of £5 million for the immediate relief effort following Cyclone Nargis and stands ready to contribute much more. These funds will be used to help meet urgent humanitarian needs and will be channelled through UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs delivering assistance on the ground. This contribution will be in addition to the UK's long-term humanitarian programme inside Burma.*

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EU Foreign Policy

Miss McIntosh: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his French counterpart on EU foreign policy.*

Mr. Jim Murphy: *The UK Government have regular contact and discussions with the French Government on EU and other foreign policy issues. Our recent discussions have included exchanges of views on Burma, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Kosovo, Iran and Georgia.*

Burma: Politics and Government

14 May

Mr. Greg Knight: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Burmese government on (a) human rights violations and (b) the introduction of democratic institutions in that country.*

Meg Munn [holding answer 13 May 2008]: *The lack of respect for democracy and human rights in Burma is of grave concern to the Government. We take every opportunity to raise concerns with the Burmese authorities, at the relevant multilateral organisations, and with countries in the region that have an influence over the regime. Before the devastating cyclone hit Burma, we called for urgent action ahead of the 10 May referendum because, as currently conceived, the process designed by the Burmese regime will not deliver the reconciliation, stability and prosperity that Burma needs. Nor will it address the long-standing violations of human rights. Since the cyclone hit Burma, our efforts have focused on seeking to provide humanitarian support.*

Burma: Storms

14 May

Mr. Hague: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions he has had with the Chinese government on securing access for international humanitarian aid to Burma.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *I have spoken to the Chinese Ambassador and the Foreign Secretary has written to his Chinese counterpart. Our Ambassador in Beijing has also lobbied the Chinese Government. As the most important friends of the Burmese regime we want them to exert pressure to ensure that aid flows in the quantities required and the experts are allowed unfettered access.*

The Prime Minister intends to speak to the Chinese Prime Minister as soon as possible to underline the need for urgent and strong messages to be conveyed to the Burmese Government pressing them to accept international assistance.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Burma: Sanctions

16 May

Mr. Keith Simpson: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the answer of 13 March 2008, Official Report, column 640W, on Burma: sanctions, whether a date has been set for the presentation of the conclusions drawn from discussions between the UK and its EU partners on how best to target financial transactions owned or controlled by Burmese officials; and if he will make a statement.*

Meg Munn: *The UK has shared proposals for targeting financial transactions with the European Commission and EU member states. Discussions are continuing at a technical level in Brussels.*

It is too early to say when these will be concluded.

Burma: United Nations

Mr. Keith Simpson: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when a UN Security Council Presidential Statement on Burma is expected following discussions by the UN Security Council on 24 April.*

Meg Munn: *On 2 May, immediately before the devastating cyclone hit Burma, the UN Security Council agreed a Presidential Statement relating to the Burmese regime's 10 May referendum. The Council reaffirmed its statements of 11 October and 15 November 2007 and called on the Burmese regime to establish the conditions and create an atmosphere conducive to an inclusive and credible political process.*

Since the cyclone hit, we have focused on the imperative of getting humanitarian need to those who desperately need it.

The UK will continue to make the case for the Security Council to engage on the growing humanitarian situation in Burma.

Mr. Keith Simpson: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government is taking to ensure that Burma is put on the UN Security Council's formal agenda; and if he will make a statement.*

Meg Munn: *We have made clear our belief that the UN Security Council should engage on the fast deteriorating situation in Burma as a matter of urgency. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has indicated his immense frustration at the way in which the Burmese government is restricting the international aid effect, and the Secretary-General should have the firm resolve of the Security Council behind him. The UK raised Burma in Security Council consultations on 12 May and continues to encourage members to place humanitarian relief on the formal agenda. We have also asked the UN Secretary-General to convene an Emergency Summit of world leaders to press for expanded delivery of aid as soon as possible. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister discussed these issues with the UN Secretary-General on 13 May and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's Special Envoy, Michael Williams, traveled to New York on 14 May to continue this dialogue with the UN and Security Council partners. The UK Permanent Representative in New York continues to make our concerns clear.*

International Development

Burma: Storms

16 May

Mr. Davey: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many times he has met the Foreign Secretary to discuss the Government's emergency relief aid response to Burma following Cyclone Nargis; and if he will make a statement.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *The Foreign Secretary and I are in regular contact to discuss the crisis in Burma following Cyclone Nargis.*

Mr. Davey: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which sections within his Department are responsible for co-ordinating the Government's emergency relief aid response to Burma following Cyclone Nargis; and if he will make a statement.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *The Department for International Development's (DFID) Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department is responsible for co-ordinating the UK's emergency relief response to Burma following Cyclone Nargis.*

Mr. Davey: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what information his Department holds on the countries and organisations that supplied one aircraft or more carrying emergency relief aid to Burma in the first 10 days following Cyclone Nargis; and if he will make a statement.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) is co-ordinating air relief efforts. According to WFP, as of 12 May, 35 flights carrying emergency relief had arrived in Burma since the cyclone hit. Since then the rate of arrival has been increasing: there were 23 flights scheduled for 14 May. The Department for International Development (DFID) does not hold full information on the countries and organisations which supplied these aircraft.*

Burma: Storms

19 May

Mr. Jim Cunningham: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government has taken to encourage the Burmese government to respond rapidly to the humanitarian situation caused by Cyclone Nargis.*

Meg Munn: *The UK has pledged £5 million for emergency relief and we are willing to do more for the victims of Cyclone Nargis. The obstacles being placed in the way of the international donor effort by the Burmese regime are totally unacceptable.*

UN Human Rights Council

19 May

John Bercow: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the UN Human Rights Council.*

Meg Munn: *The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) is now fully up and running after an institution building phase begun in 2006. Achieving UK human rights priorities remains difficult with the majority of members wishing to prevent the body effectively tackling country specific problems. However the HRC has, largely through UK/EU action, taken some encouraging steps, including special sessions on Burma and Darfur and discussions of a wide range of country specific situations during open session. These sessions are webcast and open to non-governmental organisations and interest groups.*

International Development

Burma: Storms

19 May

Mr. Davey: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions he has had with (a) relevant UN agencies, (b) the European Commission, (c) non-governmental organisations and (d) other countries on co-ordinating the international emergency relief aid response to Burma following Cyclone Nargis; and if he will make a statement.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *In addressing the crisis in Burma since Cyclone Nargis hit on 2 May, I have spoken to a number of international partners. These include: Sir John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Co-ordinator; Louis Michel, European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid; Henrietta Fore, USAID Administrator and Director of US Foreign Assistance; and Josette Sheran, Executive Director of the World Food Programme. I pressed for the extraordinary meeting of EU Development Ministers in Brussels on 13 May at which I spoke to a number of my EU counterparts. I have also spoken to the Burmese and Chinese Ambassadors to the UK. I held meetings with non-governmental organisation (NGO) groupings on the crisis on 7 and 14 May.*

Mr. Davey: *To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when his Department made the first request for aircraft to take UK Government aid to Burma following Cyclone Nargis; and if he will make a statement.*

Mr. Douglas Alexander: *The first request for aircraft to fly UK Government aid to Burma was made on 5*

May.

Mr. Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) how many days after Cyclone Nargis it was before aircraft with UK Government aid to Burma first arrived in that country; and if he will make a statement;

(2) what UK Government emergency relief aid has been sent to Burma following Cyclone Nargis; and on what date each consignment arrived in Burma;

(3) how many aircraft have been chartered by the UK Government to transport emergency relief aid to Burma following Cyclone Nargis; what types of aircraft have been used; when each arrived in Burma; what cargo each carried; and who provided each aircraft.

Douglas Alexander: The first planes carrying UK Government aid arrived in Rangoon on the 13 May and 15 May (11 and 13 days after Cyclone Nargis). Both flights were carrying plastic sheeting which was consigned to the UN World Food Programme (WFP).

Six flights have been chartered by the UK Government so far for emergency relief aid. Details are in the following table:

Date Type of aircraft Cargo Status(1) Aircraft provided by (Broker)

13 May IL76 8,000 sheets (consigned to WFP for use by the shelter cluster) Landed in Rangoon 15 May 2008 Hanover Aviation

14 May IL76 Plastic sheeting (consigned to WFP) Scheduled to arrive 16 May at 1400 local time Air Charter Service (ACS)

15 May IL76 13,000 jerry cans and 5,000 plastic sheets 16 May Air Charter Service (ACS)

15 May IL76 14 fully equipped boats Due to arrive 16 May Air Charter Service (ACS)

16 May(2) IL76 8,000 plastic sheets - Hanover Aviation

(1)()Subject to change. (2)Scheduled.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Burma

20 May

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the next meeting of his Department's Burma stakeholder group will be held; and what the Government's objectives for the meeting are.

Meg Munn: The most recent meeting of Burma stakeholders took place on 14 May, at which there was an exchange of views on the situation following Cyclone Nargis. There is no set date for the next meeting but it is our intention to maintain regular dialogue with stakeholders. The objective for all our stakeholder meetings is to exchange views and information with those groups and individuals that have an interest in Burma's future.

Burma: Storms

22 May

Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has made to the government of China on its role in seeking a relaxation of the restrictions imposed by the Burmese government on the flow of international aid to those affected by Cyclone Nargis.

Meg Munn: *We have been in close contact with many of the governments of the region in our efforts to persuade the Burmese authorities to allow unhindered access to all affected areas. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary wrote to Foreign Minister Yang recently and spoke to him on 13 May. Minister Yang agreed to convey our concerns to the Burmese.*

Mr. Carmichael: *To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has made to members of the Association of South East Asian Nations on their role in seeking a relaxation of the restrictions imposed by the Burmese government on the flow of international aid to those affected by Cyclone Nargis.*

Meg Munn: *The Burmese government's obstruction of the international aid effort is utterly unacceptable. A natural disaster is in real danger of becoming a man-made catastrophe. We have been in close contact with many of the governments of the region in our efforts to persuade the Burmese authorities to allow unhindered access for international aid to all affected areas.*

Recently, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken to his counterparts in Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia. He met the Foreign Minister of Malaysia in London on 12 May. Recently, my noble Friend Lord Malloch-Brown has visited Thailand, Singapore and Burma where he pressed senior members of the regime to allow more aid into stricken areas in full co-operation with the international donor community. I called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) ambassadors to the Foreign Office on 14 May to express our concerns. I have also spoken to senior politicians in Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines, in addition to high level lobbying by our Missions around the region.

On 19 May, with Burmese agreement, ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed to create a regional mechanism to facilitate the effective delivery of aid from the donor community to Burma. Our current effort is to secure a means to deliver aid on the back of a logistics chain we are asking ASEAN countries to establish.

DEBATES IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Burma: Cyclone Nargis 8 May 2008

Baroness Rawlings: *My Lords, I thank the Minister for repeating the Statement made by the Secretary of State earlier today [see above] in another place. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who have lost friends and relatives in this tragedy and who are struggling to survive the aftermath of this terrible disaster.*

It is clear that the situation in Burma is a massive humanitarian catastrophe of the like not seen since the Asian tsunami of December 2004. Reports coming through are that the death toll may well rise much further and that, as of now, hundreds of thousands of people are beyond the reach of the relief effort. The danger now is that hunger, disease and the lack of access to clean water and shelter will add to the suffering.

We on these Benches welcome the actions outlined in the Statement. The staff at DfID are some of the finest development professionals in the world. Their compassion, commitment and expertise have a vital role to play in this current crisis. In particular, we salute the work of Rurik Marsden, who leads DfID's efforts in Burma, and our ambassador, Mark Canning, whose knowledge and insight are second to none. It is already clear that British charities, including the Red Cross, and NGOs are at the forefront of work on the ground. Save the Children, led in Rangoon by Andrew Kirkwood, has 35 offices and 500 staff on the ground in Burma and has already been able to help 50,000 people. It is deeply regrettable that the Burmese Government have consistently run down and undermined the UN mission in Burma, not least by forcing out Charles Petrie, the impressive former head of the UN mission there. His experience and dynamism are sorely missed at this time of crisis. The Burmese people and the international relief effort are the losers from that misjudgment by the Burmese Government.

It would be very interesting to know exactly what relief work is being done by the Burmese Government themselves, apart from the pledge of \$4.5 million that we heard about from the Minister. Can the Minister update the House on this important matter? It is a scandal that five full days after the disaster only a trickle of aid is getting in from the outside world. Can the noble Baroness tell us whether the Burmese

Government are still insisting on onerous visa restrictions for aid workers? Visas have always been tricky for Burma—I remember that during the time of the communist regime. Even if aid workers get a visa, is there any guarantee that they will be allowed to leave Rangoon without waiting for up to two weeks for a travel permit? After the Bam earthquake of 2003, Iran waived visa restrictions on foreign relief workers for five days, even letting in people from America and Israel. That spirit could prevail again now. The Burmese Government should give unfettered access to the international humanitarian relief effort.

A key lesson from the tsunami is the need for the international response to dovetail with the local relief effort. Trying to go against the grain does not work. We need to persuade the Burmese authorities to be as co-operative as possible. Aid workers are there for non-political, humanitarian reasons—to save lives—rather than for political positioning. I trust that this has been made clear to the Burmese Government.

As the noble Baroness said, the key requirement now is for a professional and highly competent relief operation centred on money, food, clean water, shelter and medical relief. As is clear from the experience that we gained from the Asian tsunami, we need to make certain that the aid we give is exactly what is needed and that it goes to the right people. Inappropriate aid and aid that ends up in the wrong hands are as bad as no aid at all.

As the regime's suspicion of the West is well documented, does the Minister have any reports of aid being given by Burma's hugely wealthy economic friends of the regime, such as China and Malaysia, which have substantial investments in what was, and potentially is, a very wealthy country? In the run-up to the Olympics, many eyes will be on China to examine the role that it plays in helping to make certain that the Burmese Government open up to the international relief effort. What discussions has the Secretary of State had in recent days with the Chinese ambassador in London, Madame Fu Ying, to underline this point? There are reports that the Burmese Government intend to impose taxes and duties on planes that take in aid supplies. Is that the case and what representations have the British Government made to the Burmese Government to suspend these tariffs?

In the aftermath of the tsunami, concern was expressed about the operation of gift aid tax relief on donations to the humanitarian appeal—at this early stage, what steps are the Government taking on this matter?

It is difficult to talk about good coming out of this terrible event. However, as in the case of the Indonesian province of Aceh, devastated by the 2004 tsunami, the shock and turmoil of a natural disaster can, in some circumstances, lead to movement and progress on thorny political conflicts for the greater common good. Clearly, all of us who have been vocal critics of this pariah regime, and of the former communist regime, will put politics to one side as we strive for an effective humanitarian response.

Once again, I thank the noble Baroness for repeating this Statement. In the same spirit, I hope that she will continue to keep the House informed through Oral and Written Statements.

The full debate can be viewed here:

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/cgi-bin/newhtml_hi?DB=semukparl&STEMMER=en&WORDS=burma&ALL=burma&ANY=&PHRASE=&CATEGORIES=&SIMPLE=&SPEAKER=&COLOUR=red&STYLE=s&ANCHOR=80508-0008.htm_spnew2&URL=/pa/ld200708/ldhansrd/text/80508-0008.htm#80508-0008.htm_spnew2

LORDS WRITTEN ANSWERS

Burma: Cyclone Nargis

21 May

Lord Lester of Herne Hill asked Her Majesty's Government:

Whether they will make representations to the Government of Burma to postpone the referendum scheduled to be held on 10 May because of the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Malloch-Brown): *Our ambassador*

in Rangoon wrote to Senior General Than Shwe, Prime Minister Thein Sein and other members of the Burmese Government to put the referendum process to one side and mobilise all efforts on the urgent relief effort following Cyclone Nargis.

It is incomprehensible in the current circumstances that the regime went ahead with the referendum on 10 May, with the intention to conduct the remaining part of the process on 24 May. The referendum and any subsequent process leading to the planned election in 2010 need to be inclusive, transparent and conducted in an environment where all political parties can participate without fear of intimidation.

SELECT COMMITTEES

Common Foreign and Security Policy

21 May

Annual report from the Council to the European Parliament on the main aspects and basic choices of the CFSP

South East Asia

The Minister says that:

“through public statements and Council Conclusions, the EU was quick to condemn the brutality of [the] Burmese regime’s suppression [of] the popular uprising last autumn, and called for the release all political prisoners. A Council Common Position also adopted new sanctions against Burma, to cover trade in commodities that are important sources of revenue for the regime (timber, metals, minerals and precious and semi-precious stones). With UK support, the EU tabled two resolutions at the Human Rights Council strongly deploring the actions of the regime. This pressure led to the regime accepting the first visit to Burma in four years by the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in November.

“Through Special Envoy Fassino, the EU has engaged with countries in the region that are well-placed to influence the regime. The EU also offered its full support to the mission of UN Envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari.”

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



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