



LAST MONTH IN PARLIAMENT

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

NOVEMBER 2008

ANSWERS TO WRITTEN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

3 Nov 2008 Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 20 October 2008, Official Report, column 2W, on Burma: international assistance, what progress has been made since his letter of 9th July to like-minded development Ministers on support to the UN appeal for Burma.

Mr. Michael Foster: The United Nations (UN) appeal for Burma on the 10 July was set at US \$464 million. As of 27 October, donors had committed US \$257.6 million. It is therefore now 55 per cent funded.

5 Nov 2008 John Howell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in Burma; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Michael Foster: Humanitarian conditions in the areas of Burma hit by Cyclone Nargis have improved significantly since access to international aid was opened at the end of May. DFID has contributed £45 million to the relief effort. However, very many people in the Irrawaddy Delta remain highly vulnerable.

DFID's pre-cyclone programme of £12 million in 2008-09 continues to help people suffering severe poverty across Burma, as well as Burmese refugees in Thailand.

5 Nov 2008 Greg Mulholland: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in Burma; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Michael Foster: Humanitarian conditions in the areas of Burma hit by Cyclone Nargis have improved significantly since access to international aid was opened at the end of May. DFID has contributed £45 million to the relief effort. However, very many people in the Irrawaddy Delta remain highly vulnerable. DFID's pre-cyclone programme of £12 million in 2008-09 continues to help people suffering severe poverty across Burma, as well as Burmese refugees in Thailand.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

5 Nov 2008 Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment he has made of the humanitarian situation in Burma; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Michael Foster: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 5 November 2008, Official Report, column 505W to the hon. Member for the Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans).

CYCLONE NARGIS

6 Nov 2008 Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what mechanism exists for monitoring the international aid delivered to Burma following Cyclone Nargis to ensure that it is not misused or misappropriated; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Michael Foster: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 29 October 2008, Official Report, column 1163W to the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow).

12 Nov 2008 Mr. Hague: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what

assessment he has made of the extent to which the Burmese authorities have met their commitments to grant access to foreign aid workers to the areas affected by Cyclone Nargis; and if he will make a statement.

David Miliband: Access to the areas affected by Cyclone Nargis improved significantly after the visit of the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on 23 May and the United Nations/Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) conference in Rangoon on 25 May. The rate of delivery of aid has now been good for several months. A Tripartite Core Group (TCG) made up of the UN, ASEAN and the Burmese Government was set up after the Conference. It has played a significant role in ensuring that aid gets through, and that international experts have access to the affected areas. In late July, UN Emergency Relief Co-ordinator John Holmes, declared the operation was now a “normal international relief operation”. However, important challenges remain over the coming months, particularly in providing clean water during the dry season in areas where traditional sources of supply are still contaminated by salt water, and in helping poor rural families restore their livelihoods.

We continue to work with the UN, ASEAN and international partners to press the regime to live up to its commitments to allow unfettered access to the worst affected areas.

DAMS

10 Nov 2008 Mr. Carmichael: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received on the construction of the Tamanthi dam in Burma; how many of these were in favour of construction; how many opposed construction on environmental grounds; and what representations he has made to the government of Burma as a result of such representations.

Bill Rammell: We have received no representations regarding the construction of the Tamanthi dam. We are, however, concerned by reports that the project is having a serious impact on local Kukis villagers, forcing people from their ancestral villages. We condemn all forced relocations and call for all displaced peoples to be provided with adequate humanitarian assistance. We will continue to monitor the dam’s development.

The Tamanthi dam project has been co-developed with several countries’ input. We press Burma’s neighbours at all levels to use their links with the regime to encourage a peaceful transition to democracy.

HUMAN RIGHTS

12 Nov 2008 Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals the Government has put forward to strengthen co-ordination in Burma between the UN Secretary-General’s Good Offices, the Security Council, the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Human Rights Council, the Group of Friends and the Focus Group; and if he will make a statement.

Bill Rammell: The Government maintain a regular dialogue with all UN bodies working in Burma, both in New York and in country, and frequently discusses Burma with partners on the Security Council, the Human Rights Council and in the two informal groupings of countries acting in support of the Secretary-General’s Good Offices Mission. Our embassy in Rangoon is relied upon by a number of international institutions as a source of advice and insights on the situation in Burma.

Through these contacts, we encourage a coherent and consistent approach to Burma aimed at improving the lives of its people, including by providing substantial humanitarian assistance and working towards a credible transition to democracy and respect for human rights.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL

24 Nov 2008 Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have been held with UN Security Council counterparts on the UN Secretary General’s visit to Burma in December 2008 and his objectives for the visit, including specific benchmarks that the military regime must meet.

Bill Rammell: We have regular discussions with our Security Council partners and other influential countries on how best to support the UN Secretary General's efforts to break the current deadlock in Burma. Most recently my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed Burma with world leaders at the Asia-Europe Meeting in Beijing on 24 and 25 October. He also spoke directly to the UN Secretary General about Burma on the 23 October. Should Ban Ki Moon decide to visit Burma, he would have our full support.

The UN Security Council set clear objectives for progress in Burma in its Presidential Statement of 11 October 2007, which it reaffirmed unanimously in May this year. These demands include the early release of all political prisoners, the start of genuine and inclusive dialogue with the opposition and ethnic groups, and full co-operation with the UN.

DEBATES IN THE HOUSE OF COMMON

11 Nov 2008 John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Given that the Government of Burma continue to practise some of the most bestial human rights abuses to be witnessed anywhere on the face of the planet, will the Foreign Secretary tell the House what steps he has taken to work with his counterparts in the United Nations Security Council to try to bring about a binding resolution that will bring the regime to book and offer the people of Burma the freedom and justice that we have so long enjoyed and which they have so long been denied?

Bill Rammell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, and I pay tribute to the work that he does on that subject. The situation in Burma remains one of our highest priorities. If the UN Secretary-General visits later this year, that visit would have our full support. Indeed, I hope in the next couple of days to discuss that matter in New York at the United Nations. The junta's road-map process and the elections planned for 2010 lack all credibility, and that is a message that we need to send out loud and clear.

DEBATES IN IRISH PARLIAMENT

Dáil (Parliament) Adjournment Debate

12 November 2008: *Debate on Human rights Issues*

Deputy Simon Coveney:

I sometimes wonder whether it is worth bringing motions like this before the House in order to get a response from the Government. There is much frustration among many people in Ireland who are interested in the Burma tragedy. Organisations such as Burma Action Ireland and others are continually trying to raise the profile of what is happening in a country with a population in excess of 70 million that continues to be run by a military dictatorship.

I am glad in some ways that the Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, is present as I expect he will know something about Burma, given his interest in foreign affairs as well as his own brief. I ask him, however, not to read out a history lesson on Burma for us. I would like to know what stance the Government thinks it can take, or is willing to take, in responding to what happened in Burma yesterday. At least 14 - some reports say up to 23 - political prisoners were sentenced to 65 years in prison for so-called crimes of using electronic media - in other words, they are bloggers. They were also charged with harming public tranquility and forming so-called illegal organisations. In many cases, the latter are peaceful political organisations seeking democratic governance in their country.

I have raised the issue of Burma on many occasions in various fora, including the European Parliament and on the floor of this House. Just when it looks as if some progress is inching forward, however, the rulers in the military junta seem deliberately to give the international community the two fingers. As recently as last month, the UN Security Council called for all political prisoners in Burma to be released. We now have a new UN Secretary General who understands the political complications of this part of the world very well and has taken a personal interest in what is happening in Burma, or Myanmar as it is known by some countries. Yet we continue to get the kind of brutal response in the treatment of its own people.

I wish to ask the Minister of State a number of questions. I have read the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Martin's, response. The words are strong but I would like to know what he will actually do to raise this issue at European Council level. Will the EU's Common Position on Burma be changed? Will he raise

the matter in the context of future EU-ASEAN meetings? Will he raise it with his counterparts in other EU countries who, in turn, can raise it at UN level? In that way, the international community, through the UN Security Council - which is the ultimate arbiter of an international strategy towards Burma - can take a tougher stance and send stronger signals to a military dictatorship that seems to understand nothing else. There are strange but real connections between Ireland and Burma. Many of the minority ethnic population there have had biographies of Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera translated into their own dialect. This is to try to inspire hope for their struggle for independence. I saw those books when I visited that part of the world.

In addition, Irish aid agencies working in refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border are doing fantastic work. The Government, through Irish Aid, is sponsoring much of that humanitarian work. We should try to get a serious response from the Government this time around. We will raise in a determined fashion on the international stage the ongoing human rights consequences of what continues to happen in Burma in a way that will at least make some small difference.

Deputy Barry Andrews:

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter on the Adjournment. Like Deputy Coveney, the Government is deeply shocked by the severe sentences which were imposed on Burmese political activists by a closed military court yesterday afternoon. On hearing news of the sentences, the Minister for Foreign Affairs immediately issued a statement on the matter. The statement encapsulates the Government's position on the issue and states:

I am appalled by the severity of the sentences imposed today on several respected political activists, whose sole crime has been to try to communicate to the outside world the truth about the conditions under which the people of Burma are living. The 65-year sentences will mean that these courageous individuals face spending the rest of their lives in Burma's inhumane prison system. This is yet another unacceptable, callous, act by a brutal regime that daily violates the basic human rights of the Burmese people and which will tolerate no voices seeking freedom and justice. I have repeatedly made clear our Government's demand for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners and I will continue to work with my EU colleagues, with the UN and with the countries of the region to do all possible to accelerate our efforts in this regard.

In addition, the Department of Foreign Affairs contacted the French EU Presidency and other EU partners urgently seeking the issue of an EU statement on these events. This statement, issued today, condemns the sentences and demands the immediate release of these and all political prisoners. It also recalls the statement made by EU Foreign Ministers on Monday calling again for the lifting of restrictions placed on political parties in Burma and the early release of those under detention. The Ministers also stated their view that the elections scheduled for 2010 will have no credibility unless all political prisoners are released unconditionally, in particular Aung San Suu Kyi, and a political process is initiated with the support of the United Nations on the basis of an inclusive, long-term dialogue in which the opposition and ethnic groups can participate fully. It is estimated that at present over 2,000 political prisoners are under detention in Burma, often in appalling conditions.

There is increasing concern for the worsening treatment which many of these prisoners face. NGOs have received reports from sources in Burma that the regime is now confining political prisoners to their cells without exercise periods and is stopping families from bringing them extra food and other supplies to top up the meagre food rations. Most seriously, the regime appears to be systematically denying medical treatment to political prisoners, including to Aung San Suu Kyi. Earlier this year, her doctor was refused permission to visit her over a three-month period.

I note with great regret that the junta has detained even more political prisoners in the past weeks and months. Human Rights Watch has reported that 39 politically-motivated arrests were made in August and September, and more than 20 political prisoners were given jail terms. Among those arrested in recent months was Ms Nilar Thein, a leading member of the 88 Generation Group, who was one of those sentenced yesterday afternoon.

There has been a conspicuous absence of political progress in Burma since the events of 2007. The military continues to repress monks, political activists and ethnic minorities. The sentences handed down yesterday seem to confirm that the junta is determined to maintain an iron hold on the country, irrespective

of the fact that elections will be held next year.

The Government has long taken a strong, proactive stand on the appalling situation in Burma. We would very much like to see the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, engaging on a personal level in the search for a solution and a more concerted, effective role by Burma's neighbours. I am most grateful to have this opportunity to reiterate the Government's deep concern on this issue.

ASEAN INTER-PARLIAMENTARY MYANMAR CAUCUS

20 November 2008

The ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) is pleased to announce the names of Members of Parliament (MP) from Malaysia who now form the national committee of the Malaysian Chapter of the regional caucus. They are:

Office-bearers: Chairperson: MP Lim Kit Siang
 Vice-Chair: MP Mohd Puad Zarkashi
 Secretary: MP Mohd Yusmadi Mohd Yusoff

Committee members: MP Teresa Kok
 MP Ahmad Kasim
 MP Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj
 MP Lo' Lo' Hj Mohamad Ghazali
 MP Salahuddin Ayub
 MP Nurul Izzah Anwar

The current AIPMC President (regional caucus committee) – MP Kraisaak Choonhavan, Member of the Parliament from Thailand – congratulates the new AIPMC Malaysian Chapter Chairperson and Committee members and warmly welcomes them. MP Lim Kit Siang will also now assume the post of AIPMC Vice-President (regional caucus committee).

Since its inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur, on 26-28 November 2004, AIPMC has been calling on the military government in Burma to bring about changes and democratic reforms in the country.

The regional grouping of ASEAN Legislators from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand have also continuously called for the unconditional release of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as for the freedom of over two-thousand other political prisoners in Burma.

For more information on AIPMC, please visit: www.aseanmp.org

COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON BURMA/MYANMAR

2902nd GENERAL AFFAIRS Council meeting
Brussels, 10 November 2008

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

“The Council welcomed the Chair's Statement adopted at the ASEM Summit in Beijing on 24 and 25 October 2008, calling for the lifting of restrictions placed on political parties and early release of those under detention and encouraging the government to engage all stakeholders in an inclusive political process and to cooperate more closely with the United Nations. The Council also called upon the Burma/Myanmar authorities to facilitate the issue of visas.

However, the Council deplores the lack of progress made this year towards a genuine transition to democracy in Burma/Myanmar since the violent repression of peaceful demonstrations by the military authorities.

The European Union points out that the elections scheduled for 2010 will have no credibility unless the Burma/Myanmar authorities unconditionally release all political prisoners, in particular Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and initiate a political process with United Nations support on the basis of an inclusive, long-term dialogue in which the opposition and ethnic groups can participate fully.

The Council reaffirms its firm and unconditional support for the UN Secretary-General's Mission of Good Offices and welcomes his renewed personal commitment to ending the current deadlock.

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