

Burma Parliamentary Questions: Briefing Avoiding Embarrassing Answers



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Introduction

As the British government faces a growing number of questions about Burma in the British Parliament, including relating to controversial policy decisions, the government is increasingly resorting to avoiding giving a straight and clear answer to questions, probably in order to avoid proper scrutiny of its policies.

Analysis of the 62 Written Parliamentary Questions answered between October and December 2013 reveals that the British government did not actually answer 25 of them – forty-one percent - instead providing general information or otherwise avoiding giving a clear answer.

Subjects on which the British government avoided giving a straight answer include on military training of the Burmese Army, ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya, Burmese government spending on the military and health, torture, political prisoners and child soldiers.

On some occasions the answers given blatantly ignore the actual question, on other occasions the avoidance is more subtle.

Questions over policy

The British government is facing increasing scrutiny regarding its controversial approach to the current situation on Burma. The government has abandoned the previous policy of prioritising human rights, and instead now prioritises trade and investment opportunities.

This policy change has resulted in the British government adopting a policy of not criticising the Burmese government over ongoing human rights abuses, and dropping support for international

pressure to promote human rights. The British government also appears to be attempting to move as close as possible to the government of Burma in the hope it will help British companies win contracts from the Burmese government. At the same time, aid has continued to increase, with the annual budget now in the region of £60m a year.

The combination of reforms in Burma, the British government's controversial change in policy, ongoing human rights abuses, and significant increases in aid to Burma, have led to an increasing number of questions on these issues being tabled in the British Parliament.

What is a Written Parliamentary Question?

Every month government ministers from each department come before Parliament to answer questions relating to that department's policy. On occasion there are also specific debates on particular issues. This gives MPs and Lords the opportunity to question the government about its policy, and obtain information about what the government is doing.

However, there is not enough time in those debates for all MPs to ask all the questions which they wish to, so they can also table Written Parliamentary Questions to government departments.

Answers to these questions can be important sources of information. Burma Campaign UK monitors all the questions and answers about Burma in Parliament, and publishes the information in a monthly bulletin, Last Month in Parliament, available here: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/last-month-in-burma>

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The current situation whereby Ministers avoid giving straight answers to Parliamentary Questions has generally come to be accepted as just the way it is. Members of Parliament often joke that government departments seem to go to great and convoluted lengths in order to avoid giving a straight answer to a question. It is not uncommon for more determined MPs to have to keep asking the same question using different language on several occasions in order to try to eliminate any opportunity for the Minister to avoid giving a straight answer. Ministerial staff on the other hand, protest innocence and blame badly worded questions. Sitting in between the MPs and the Ministers is the Table Office in Parliament, which sometimes suggests changes to questions which inadvertently can in fact make those questions so general as to strip their original meaning and enable the government to avoid giving a clear answer. The current system clearly isn't working as it should.

Burma Campaign UK has been monitoring Parliamentary Questions on Burma for decades. There have always been occasions when the government has avoided giving clear answers to questions.

However, in recent months, coinciding with growing controversy over government policy, Burma Campaign UK has noticed that an increasing number of answers to Parliamentary questions do not actually answer the question that was asked. The government is clearly breaching its own guidelines¹ on answering Parliamentary questions, which state: 'Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament and the public, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest.'

Rather than being open, government Ministers often appear to be avoiding giving clear answers in order to avoid political embarrassment, attempting to deflect attention from embarrassing facts about what they are, or are not, doing.

Burma Campaign UK is publishing this briefing paper highlighting recent Written Parliamentary Questions which were not properly answered in the hope that it encourages the government to start

giving clearer and specific answers to the questions it is asked. Some of the examples provided in this briefing could be considered to be on the margin of giving a straight answer, while others are more blatant, but in a context of so many questions not being properly answered, more than forty-percent, all are serious omissions.

Questions not Answered October, November & December 2013

1. QUESTION: 28 October 2013 Sir Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the answer of 18 July 2013, Official Report, column 877, on human rights: Burma, what recent representations he has made to his Burmese counterpart on (a) allowing the UN access to military sites and (b) ending the recruitment of children as soldiers in Burma.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: Engaging the military will be vital if Burma's reform process is to succeed. The British Government appointed a defence attaché to Burma in February this year at the request of the Burmese Government and Aung San Suu Kyi; our defence attaché will be the primary mechanism for such engagement.

We will focus on efforts to ensure that the Burmese military is democratically accountable and operates within the context of international standards, including human rights. We set out these objectives clearly to President Thein Sein during his visit to the UK in July 2013. Part of our engagement will focus on the issue of ending the recruitment of child soldiers.

In August 2013 the UK, as part of the UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict agreed a resolution on the issue of child soldiers in Burma. The resolution specifically calls on the Burmese Government to ensure the UN country team is granted access to all military sites, and that steps are taken to remove the incentives for recruiting child soldiers and to strengthen age verification mechanisms. Officials are in regular contact with UN staff and we will continue to engage with the Burmese Government and Burmese military on this issue.

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ANALYSIS: The question specifically asks what recent representations have been made to the Burmese Foreign Minister about access to military sites and ending recruitment of child soldiers. No details are given on whether these issues have been raised with the Burmese Foreign Minister, or if not, who else in the Burmese government has been approached. It would appear the correct answer is that there have been no recent representations. The question also relates to allowing UN access, and no reference is made to this at all in the answer.

2. QUESTION: 28 November 2013 Mr Burrowes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent meetings the British ambassador to Burma has had with family members of Burmese political prisoners who remain in jail.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: British embassy officials are in contact with the lawyers of a number of political prisoners. We meet regularly with civil society organisations including the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma to discuss developments. We have also provided English language and human rights training to a number of released prisoners and are in regular contact with the Remaining Political Prisoners Scrutiny Committee.

We welcomed the release of a further 69 political prisoners on 15 November which represents another step towards fulfilling President Thein Sein's commitment, made during his visit to London in July, to release all political prisoners by the end of the year.

I continue to raise the issue of political prisoners, and did so most recently with Minister for the President's Office, Tin Naing Thein, on 22 November, and again made clear that we did not want to see new arrests or political activists re-arrested.

ANALYSIS: The answer makes no mention of either the British Ambassador or the families of political prisoners, which is what the question is about. The answer seems designed to avoid having to make the embarrassing admission that the British

ambassador has not met with any family members of political prisoners in Burma.

3. QUESTION: 28 October 2013 Sir Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of reports of ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses against the Rohingya people in Burma; and what reports he has received on their continued imprisonment in Thai immigration detention facilities.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: The British Government has been among the most vocal members of the international community in raising our concerns about the plight of the Rohingya community. In Burma we continue to make clear to the Burmese Government that where serious crimes have been committed, those who have perpetrated them must be held accountable for their actions. This should be done through a clear and transparent investigative and prosecutorial process that meets international standards. Further independent investigative work to fully establish the facts would be required for an informed assessment as to whether ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed. We also continue to raise our concerns about the condition of Rohingya refugees, particularly those who flee through Thailand, with the Thai Government.

ANALYSIS: The question has two parts. The first part, 'what assessment he has made of reports of ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses against the Rohingya people in Burma' is completely ignored. The question is specifically about ethnic cleansing, and if the British government has an assessment about this. The answer makes no reference to whether the government has made any assessment. It states that further independent investigative work is needed, but the British government hasn't commissioned any such investigation. The second part refers to reports the government has received about Rohingya detained in Thailand. The answer makes no mention of any reports received. The British government is trying to present a rosy picture of the situation in Burma, and avoids giving specific answers about ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya as it is an inconvenient truth that doesn't fit with their policy approach.

4. QUESTION: 28 October 2013 Sir Menzies

Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the answer of 12 July 2013, Official Report, column 427W, on Burma, what the outcome was of meetings in July 2013 between his Department and President Thein Sein of Burma on the treatment of the Rohingya people and the release of political prisoners; and if he will make a statement.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: As I set out during the Adjournment debate in the House on 8 October 2013, Official Report, columns 138-40, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs raised a number of our concerns during the visit of President Thein Sein. These concerns included the continuing plight of the Rohingya community in Rakhine State and specifically their citizenship status of the Rohingya. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State also repeated our calls for the release of all remaining political prisoners. To that effect, we welcomed the commitment made by President Thein Sein during his visit to release all political prisoners by the end of 2013. As I stated to the House on 8 October, while we welcome recent releases, we also call on the Burmese Government to repeal repressive laws that have led to a number of fresh arrests of political activists over the past year.

ANALYSIS: The question asks for outcomes of meetings with the Burmese government in relation to the Rohingya and political prisoners. In relation to political prisoners, the answer cites a promise (which was not kept) to free all political prisoners by the end of 2013. In relation to the Rohingya no outcome is listed, and no admission is made that there were no outcomes.

5. QUESTION: 14 October 2013 Rushanara

Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department has taken to prevent (a) sexual violence, (b) human trafficking and (c) further victimisation and abuse of women and girls in Kachin State, particularly along the Burma-China border.

ANSWER: Mr Duncan: In June we announced £13.5 million of humanitarian funding for Kachin for the next two and a half years. This includes

funding for a Gender-Based Violence Coordinator who will work to improve the coordination and response of the international community to sexual violence. DFID is also supporting the Secretary of State's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative. Two proposals have been approved and are due to begin implementation this calendar year (these include activities along the Burma-China border). Through an international NGO, the UK also gives support to trauma care camps in Kachin State which deals with rape cases.

ANALYSIS: The answer gives no clear details on the steps being taken to prevent sexual violence, only stating that two unnamed proposals have been approved, and one gender-based violence coordinator has been funded. There is no indication of the focus and scale of these steps. Is this because stating exactly what is being done exposes how little is being done? Using the £13.5 million humanitarian figure is not relevant to the question because this money is humanitarian, not focussed on sexual violence or trafficking. It seems just placed there to try to impress with a high number. No reference at all is made to the question of human trafficking.

6. QUESTION: 10 October 2013 Valerie Vaz:

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he has raised the case of Daw Bawk Ja with his Burmese counterpart.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: Officials from the embassy in Rangoon raised Daw Bawk Ja's case with senior Members of the Burmese Government in August. We continue to follow her case closely and remain in touch with local Burmese organisations that support her and the many other political prisoners that remain detained.

As I set out to the House, we welcome the release of over 50 political prisoners announced on 8 October. This is a further step towards fulfilling the commitment, made by Burmese President Thein Sein during his visit to London in July, to release all remaining political prisoners by the end of this year. We continue to call on the Government to ensure that democratic activists are able to voice their opinions freely and without fear of arrest. We have also urged both the Government and the Parliament

to repeal all existing laws which are not in line with democratic standards. Repealing these repressive laws will be vital for Burma as it continues on its path to greater democracy.

ANALYSIS: This is a long answer but doesn't actually answer the question about whether Daw Baw Ja's case has been raised with the Burmese Foreign Minister. The correct answer would be to state that the case has not been raised with the Burmese Foreign Minister, but has been raised with unnamed officials by British Embassy staff. Avoiding answering this question fuels suspicion that human rights issues are not being pressed forcefully by British government ministers, who now prioritise trade and partnership in discussions, paying only lip service to human rights as a kind of box-ticking exercise.

7. QUESTION: 22 October 2013 Valerie Vaz:
To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his Burmese counterpart on the unconditional release of (a) Naw Ohn Hla and (b) other political prisoners.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: British officials in Rangoon are in close contact with those offering support to political prisoners detained in Burma. There have not been specific discussions with the authorities concerning Naw Ohn Hla's case although officials at the British embassy are in touch with her lawyer.

We continue to call for and actively monitor the Burmese Government's progress against the President's commitment made in London in July 2013 to free all political prisoners by the end of the year. We will also continue to call, as I did during a debate with the House on 8 October 2013, Official Report, columns 138-40, for the repeal of repressive laws which lead to the arrest of political activists.

ANALYSIS: Again the answer avoids making reference to the Foreign Secretary's counterpart, the Burmese Foreign Minister, as specified in the question.

8. QUESTION: 22 October 2013 Valerie Vaz:
To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received

of changes in incidences of the practice of torture and ill treatment towards political prisoners in Burma following the report of the UN Special Rapporteur in March 2013.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: We continue to monitor reports of torture in Burma. The UK believes that torture is abhorrent; we call on the Burma authorities to introduce preventive and monitoring mechanisms to end such practices. We also continue to raise our concerns more generally. Last week in Naypyitaw, officials discussed Burma signing up to the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits explicitly the use of torture. The Minister of State, Department for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr Duncan), raised concerns over reports of torture in prisons in Rakhine during his visit there in June.

We also note the remarks of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma, Tomas Ojea Quintana, following his visit at the end of August. We echo his concerns about the continued arrest, detention and sentencing of political activists in Burma. Such actions are not in line with Burma's wider positive reforms.

ANALYSIS: The answer lists welcome, if obvious, condemnation of torture, but the actual question relates to changes in incidents of reports of the practice of using torture. No mention is made of this. Perhaps this is because if they answered the question they would have to state that there had been an increase in reports of the use of torture, both in Rakhine State and Kachin State, and this is another inconvenient truth that the British government does not want to talk about as it calls into question their policy of partnership and soft engagement with the government of Burma.

9. QUESTION: 16 October 2013 John Mann:
To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will promote the rational use of antibiotics in obstetrics in Burma's health system.

ANSWER: Mr Duncan: DFID programmes, including in Burma, follow international guidelines for antibiotic use. Guidelines for antibiotic use in maternal health services follow international best practice.

ANALYSIS: The question relates to the whole of Burma's health system, the answer is only about DFID guidelines and programmes.

10. QUESTION: 29 October 2013 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they consider that Burma's current rulers, and military leaders, will agree to removing the military's quota of Members in the Burmese Parliament.

ANSWER: The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con): We continue to encourage Burma's government, its military leaders and members of its parliament to listen to the demands of the Burmese people and ensure that international democratic standards are adhered to. Our objective, as the former Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards, explained to his Burmese counterpart during his visit to Burma in June, is to support the reform process by helping to facilitate the democratisation of the Burmese military. We believe it is important for the integrity of Burma's democracy that the Burmese people are free to choose their political leaders and parliamentary representatives.

ANALYSIS: Of course democratisation is important and Burmese people should be free to choose their political leaders. That wasn't the question. The question was whether the British government thought the political and military leadership would agree to removing the military quota in Parliament, and Baroness Warsi made no reference to this at all in her answer.

11. QUESTION: 19 November 2013 Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the government of Burma agreed to support the United Kingdom initiative on sexual violence in conflict when requested to do so by Hugo Swire, the United Kingdom Minister of State with responsibility for Burma, during his visit to that country in December 2012.

ANSWER: The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth

Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con): During his visit in December 2012 to Burma, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), called for action to tackle sexual violence.

President Thein Sein welcomed the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) during his visit to London in July. Mr Swire pressed the Burmese Foreign Minister for his government to endorse the PSVI Declaration at the UN General Assembly in September. We will continue lobbying to strengthen accountability systems and eliminate impunity for rape in Burma.

At its outset, the Initiative identified countries, in consultation with the UN and other partners, for initial deployments. Over recent months the Initiative has extended to a number of other countries—including Burma. Our Embassy in Rangoon is looking to incorporate PSVI activities in to new and existing work—for example, funding a new project to improve access to justice for victims, develop community-based preventive mechanisms and promote wider legal and policy reforms.

ANALYSIS: The answer provides a great deal of detail but the simple answer as to whether Burma agreed to Hugo Swire's request to support the UK's initiative and sign the declaration of sexual violence is no. The Minister seemed to want to avoid directly admitting this as it is yet another example of how the current soft approach towards Burma's government is not winning influence or leading to improvements in human rights.

12. QUESTION: 21 November 2013 Keith Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many women who are victims of rape and sexual violence by armed forces in Burma have received financial assistance from her Department in each of the last two years.

ANSWER: Mr Duncan: Tackling violence against women is a high priority for the UK in Burma. In Kachin state, DFID is providing humanitarian assistance for over 40,000 internally displaced people, of whom 21,000 are female. This assistance includes shelter, food and in certain areas specific support for victims of conflict, including for women

affected by sexual violence. In the Burmese refugee camps in Thailand we are providing support to victims of gender-based violence including onward referrals to specialist centres. We have agreed to provide funding to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for two specialists to further strengthen the response to gender-based violence in the conflict-affected areas of Rakhine and Kachin states. We continue to emphasise to the Burmese Government the need to protect all citizens and respect human rights, particularly for women, and the UK has recently approved two new projects to tackle this problem in Burma, under the Foreign Secretary's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative in conflict situations.

ANALYSIS: This answer goes to great lengths to avoiding directly admitting that DFID cannot say how many women who are victims of rape or sexual violence by the Burmese Army have received assistance from DFID. This is because for many years DFID has resisted calls to provide funding to grassroots women's organisations which help such women. The most they can do is imply without evidence that some of the internally displaced Kachin women who have received British funded aid may be victims of sexual violence by the Burmese Army. The reference to funding in Burmese refugee camps in Thailand is deliberately misleading, as they are fully aware that this project has not assisted any women in relation to cases of sexual violence by the Burmese Army. It is only after pressure from campaign groups and Parliament that DFID has now started to fund projects relating to sexual violence, although it has not been transparent regarding details of these projects.

13. QUESTION: 26 November 2013 Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with ethnic civil society organisations in Burma's conflict zones before offering training to the Burmese army.

ANSWER: Mr Francois: Educating the Tatmadaw (Burmese military) in their role within a democratic society is part of a wider HMG approach to security sector reform in Burma. Officials have met with members from NGOs who have interests in Burma, in order to ensure that their concerns about our engagement are listened to and in some cases, our

approach has been tailored to support their views. During Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, she asked for our help in instilling in the Burmese military an understanding of the value—including to themselves—of being a professional and apolitical Army. Indeed, Daw Suu particularly liked the fact that the education that we intend to provide to the Burmese military will be jointly delivered by military and civilian academic staff. We will continue to review our engagement in Burma in the light of the Tatmadaw's evolving stance on reform.

ANALYSIS: The question regards 'ethnic civil society organisations in Burma's conflict zones' but no mention is made of this in the answer, presumably to avoid having to provide the embarrassing response that there had been no discussions. Use of the term 'NGOs who have interests in Burma' could also be misleading in the context of this question, as an NGO with 'interests' isn't even necessarily an NGO from Burma.

14. QUESTION: 04 November 2013 Rushanara Ali: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to support civil society organisations that are (a) registered and (b) unregistered in Burma.

ANSWER: Mr Duncan: DFID supports a number of registered organisations in Burma. DFID has been helping civil society organisations in their lobbying of the Burmese Government and Parliament to amend the draft Associations Law. This law would change the process of registration for civil society organisations in Burma.

ANALYSIS: The question specifically asks what steps DFID is taking, but no steps are described beyond the word 'helping', which could mean anything. Unregistered organisations are not even referred to in this question about unregistered organisations. In the context of DFID having largely avoided supporting unregistered organisations (ie: organisations the Burmese government doesn't like because they promote human rights, democracy and genuine civil society capacity building), the vague answer seems designed to avoid having to admit this in Parliament.

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15. QUESTION: 28 November 2013 Paul

Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings he has held with Burmese ethnic political and civil society leaders in the last year.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: Four British Ministers have visited Burma in the last year. I visited in December 2012 and the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr Duncan), visited in June 2013. During our respective visits, Mr Duncan and I met a wide range of leading Burmese political, religious and civil society leaders to discuss Burma's human rights situation and reform agenda. The British ambassador and embassy officials also meet regularly with ethnic and civil society leaders, in Rangoon, Naypyitaw, in the ethnic states, and in Thailand.

In London, I engaged with a range of Burmese ethnic and civil society representatives at a briefing event in March 2013. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development officials regularly meet representatives of Burma's ethnic and civil society groups, both those based in the UK and those visiting from Burma, such as the visit of the '88 Generation' of former political prisoners in June. Ministerial colleagues, including the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), and I, have met key Burmese political figures in the UK including: President Thein Sein; Ministers in the President's Office Aung Min and Soe Thane; and opposition leader Aung Sang Suu Kyi.

ANALYSIS: There is a long and detailed answer about various government ministers having meetings, and finally at the end of the answer details of who the Foreign Secretary has met, but it is carefully worded to avoid giving the straight and politically embarrassing answer that the Foreign Secretary has not met any ethnic political or civil society leaders from Burma in the past year. In fact, apart from Aung San Suu Kyi, every person the answer says he has met is from the military-backed government.

16. QUESTION: 11 November 2013 Kerry

McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Ambassador of Thailand about the charges against UK citizen Andy Hall.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: I discussed Mr Hall's case with Thailand's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jullapong Nonsrichai on 20 May 2013. The Thai Government are not able to interfere with the legal process. Her Majesty's ambassador to Thailand and officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have met Mr Hall to discuss his case, most recently in October 2013. We hope that Mr Hall is able to access the appropriate legal advice to resolve his situation in Thailand.

ANALYSIS: It is very welcome that Minister Hugo Swire has taken up the case of Andy Hall with the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs. However, in relation to this specific question, a more correct answer to the question would have been, while the Foreign Secretary has not raised the case with the Ambassador of Thailand, as Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for Thailand I have raised the case with the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs.

17. QUESTION: 18 November 2013 Baroness

Jenkin of Kennington: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they will take to encourage Burma's involvement in Family Planning 2020.

ANSWER: Baroness Northover (LD): The UK Government will continue to support Burma's efforts in engaging with Family Planning 2020, including through dialogue with the relevant ministry.

ANALYSIS: The answer does not list a single step as requested, instead just giving a vague answer regarding dialogue with an unnamed ministry.

18. QUESTION: 16 December 2013 Mr Ward:

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether his Department has commissioned an investigation into reports by Human Rights Watch that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have been committed against the ethnic Rohingya in Burma.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: We are very concerned by the number of disturbing and specific allegations of human rights abuses in Rakhine State, some of which are backed up by comprehensive evidence. We have raised these concerns repeatedly at the highest levels of the Burmese Government.

ANALYSIS: The question is specific, has the British government investigated reports that ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity have taken place against the Rohingya? The answer makes no reference as to whether they have investigated these reports, and deliberately avoids even mentioning ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, which is the main subject of the question. The British government has repeatedly avoided answering specific questions on reports of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya, which again does not fit with the narrative they try to present of the situation in Burma. The failure to give a straight answer to this question appears designed again to avoid using these words, and to avoid directly making the embarrassing admission that the British government has not bothered to investigate these allegations or take any practical action in response to them.

19. QUESTION: 16 December 2013 Mr Ward:

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has had with Aung San Suu Kyi on visiting places in Burma where anti-Muslim violence has taken place.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), and I discussed a range of issues with Aung San Suu Kyi during her most recent visit to the UK, including the situation in Rakhine State and anti-Muslim violence. Our ambassador in Rangoon also has regular discussions with her covering these issues. Aung San Suu Kyi has made clear that human rights and the rule of law must be upheld—whether in Rakhine or other areas affected by anti-Muslim violence. She has also publicly called for the Burmese citizenship law to be applied fairly to all in Rakhine State and to be reviewed in line with international standards.

I myself visited Rakhine State in December 2012 and have consistently made similar points to the Burmese Government.

ANALYSIS: The question is specific regarding discussion with Aung San Suu Kyi about visiting areas where anti-Muslim violence has taken place. Instead the answer just states there have been a range of discussions, and then makes more general observations on anti-Muslim violence. Presumably the answer to the question is simply, none

20. QUESTION: 05 December 2013 Sir Alan Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which civil society organisations in Burma receive how much funding from her Department.

ANSWER: Mr Duncan: The DFID Burma bilateral programme is providing just over £22 million to 21 civil society organisations in Burma in 2013-14. Civil society organisations in Burma also receive DFID funding through central and regional funding streams, and through our contributions to trust funds such as 3MDG and LIFT. Details of organisations receiving funding are available on the DFID and partner websites.

ANALYSIS: The answer says how much funding is provided, but doesn't answer the part of the question asking which civil society organisations receive funding. Burma Campaign UK has not been able to find details of all these organisations on the DFID website as claimed.

21. QUESTION: 02 December 2013 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they have made specific representations to the government of Burma about ending the quota of military members in the Burmese Parliament; and, if so, what responses they have received.

ANSWER: The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con): We continue to lobby regularly and publicly on the need for reform of Burma's constitution on a number of issues, including the role of the military in the executive and

legislature, the rights of Burma's ethnic groups, and the clause that prohibits any individual with foreign family members from becoming President.

The Prime Minister my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) raised the Burmese constitution with President Thein Sein when he visited London in July 2013. The President acknowledged the need for change, and pointed to the work of the parliamentary committee set up to review the constitution. Recently, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire) discussed the need for constitutional change with Deputy Foreign Minister Thant Kyaw and with Minister in the President's Office Tin Naing Thein. Our Embassy in Rangoon continues to lobby on constitutional reform with the President's office, Ministers and officials in the Burmese government and members of the ruling party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

ANALYSIS: The question is quite specific about the military quota in Parliament and responses from the Burmese government on this issue. The answer, however, is on the Constitution in general, making only a passing reference to the role of the military in legislature. Despite stating that there have been general discussions on the constitution with a wide range of Burmese government officials, no answer regarding their response is provided in the answer. In the context of the British government's current soft engagement policy failing to deliver results, the failure to give a straight answer to this question appears designed to avoid having to admit that despite repeatedly raising this issue with many government ministers, they have not been able to gain any specific commitment to reform.

22. QUESTION: 06 December 2013 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead : To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the level of public expenditure on health in Burma; and whether they have made any representations to the government of that country about the matter.

ANSWER: Baroness Northover (LD): DFID is working closely with the World Bank to implement a Public Expenditure Review, including detailed assessments of public expenditure for health and education. This is due to report in early 2014, and the results will be disseminated to the Ministry of Health.

ANALYSIS: The answer provides no answer to the question as to whether DFID has made any past or present assessment itself, and does not say that they have made any representations about this either. It only refers to a report due in early 2014 by the World Bank. Either the answer is incomplete or the government is trying to avoid giving an answer and having to address the fact that Burma is still spending far more on military spending than health, that representations to significantly increase health spending have failed, and that this is yet another example of the failure of the British government's soft engagement policy to deliver any practical results.

23. QUESTION: 05 December 2013 Sir Alan Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she made to the government of Burma on the need to reduce military expenditure and increase spending on health and education.

ANSWER: Mr Duncan: DFID is providing support to Burma's peace process which includes advising the Government on how to manage reforms in the security sector. DFID is also working with the World Bank on a public expenditure review which has a particular focus on improving spending in the health and education sectors.

ANALYSIS: The answer ignores the question almost completely. The question made no reference to the peace process. No details are given regarding whether the British government has even raised this issue with the government. It would be extraordinary if they have not, but by avoiding stating that they have, it gives the impression that the answer is designed to try to avoid having to admit that.

24. QUESTION: 04 December 2013 Sir Alan Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign

and Commonwealth Affairs what pre-conditions he has set before the UK will provide training to the Burmese Army.

ANSWER: Mr Swire: The Burmese military remain a core political force in Burma and will be key to the process of political reform. It will only be through engagement with all actors, including the military, that we will see greater democracy in Burma. The focus of our defence engagement in Burma will be on adherence to the core principles of democratic accountability, international law and human rights. As part of this policy of engagement, in January 2014 a civil-military team from the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, in collaboration with Cranfield University, will deliver a tailored version of the Managing Defence in a Wider Security Context course in Burma to 30 students, drawn from government and the Burmese military. The course will educate participants on effective governance and management in support of a civilian government within a democratic framework. The programme will also include an examination of the legal framework by which defence and security operations are legitimised and controlled in line with international human rights and humanitarian law. We have made clear that training delivered to the Burmese military will not contain any combat or combat related elements.

ANALYSIS: This answer provides lots of commentary on the training without once coming close to acknowledging the question regarding pre-conditions. This appears to be because there were no pre-conditions, and the government does not want to have to admit that.

25. QUESTION: 05 December 2013 Yasmin Qureshi: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which companies have so far received support from the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business.

ANSWER: Mr Duncan: The Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business has engaged with over 40 Burmese, and over 50 foreign, companies in group settings, and directly, since July 2013. These include companies in the sectors where the Centre is or will be conducting sector-wide responsible business assessments including: oil and gas, tourism, information and communication technology (ICT), and agriculture.

ANALYSIS: The answer ignores the question, deliberately providing related information but not the information the question was obviously about, which was 'which companies' not how many and what sector they are from. Not one company name is given.

Full lists of all questions about Burma, sourced from the official Hansard records, are available here: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/last-month-in-burma>

Footnote

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61195/drafting-pq-responses.pdf

More briefings are available here:
www.burmacampaign.org.uk/burma-briefing

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