Burma Campaign UK Submission to the International Development Committee Inquiry: Future of UK aid and development assistance

1. Burma Campaign UK works for human rights, democracy and development in Burma. It was founded in 1991 in response to calls from Burma's democracy movement for international pressure on the military. We are writing this submission based on our long-term experience advocating for aid to Burma to be delivered more effectively, and specifically in response to the question:

How does the UK's delivery approach for a) development and b) humanitarian assistance need to adapt to the changing funding and values landscape?

Lack of coherent decision-making regarding aid to Burma

2. As you would expect, Burma Campaign UK has been advocating to protect Burma and refugees from Burma living in camps in neighbouring countries from devastating cuts in UK aid.

3. In the course of this advocacy, it has become apparent that it is not only aid which has been reduced, but also coherent and strategic policy making and decision making.

4. While the FCDO team responsible for Burma have recently made some important changes to the way UK aid to Burma is delivered, including some which the International Development Committee recommended as long ago as 2007, overall, there is no discernible logic to how much aid to Burma is allocated and why.

5. Cuts in aid to Burma of around 70% at their peak could not have been made based on need as they happened at a time when Burma faced a dramatic and unprecedented increase in humanitarian need. Cuts seemed in part more to be taking about advantage of the coincidence of the end of development assistance following the 2021 coup and using that as an expedient place to save money instead of reallocating the funding so that it could save lives at a time of growing need.

6. Budgets have not been announced in the same way as before, with decisions appearing to be made late, and budgets topped up with small extra amounts during the year.

The wider implications of aid cuts to Burma in the context of the UK's leadership role on Burma globally, does not appear to have been considered.

7. This ad hoc and late allocation of funding has meant that during the past four years UK government ministers and officials have on occasion been left in the embarrassing position of being unable to announce UK support to Rohingya refugees at important UN meetings and pledging conferences.

8. The impact of this has repercussions internationally resulting in less aid to Burma from other countries as well. This is because the UK is seen as the lead country on Burma internationally. We are the penholder on Burma at the United Nations Security Council and historically have led the world in responding to events in Burma, including the latest coup in 2021.

9. International aid has been an integral part of that leadership. If the lead county on Burma cuts aid, it encourages or gives cover for others to do the same. If we increase aid, it encourages others to increase aid and makes it harder for them to cut aid. In our private discussions with officials from other countries about their aid to Burma, they have cited cuts in UK aid in defence of their own reduced aid to Burma.

Aid cuts directly contradict and undermine the broader UK foreign policy objectives regarding Burma.

10. In Burma aid is not only about poverty and humanitarian need, but also integral to the struggle for human rights and democracy. The military deliberately creates humanitarian crises in Burma to soak up the capacity of those resisting military rule, for example knowing they will prioritise aid to displaced civilians.

11. On social media, Burmese military accounts have been gloating about cuts in aid to Burma because it benefits them. UK aid cuts weaken those seeking human rights and democracy, and strengthens the military.

12. UK aid cuts to Burma have far wider implications than the tragedy of individual people in need not receiving life-saving aid. It also impacts the UK's broader foreign policy objectives in Burma, which is to promote human rights and democracy. Cuts in aid undermine the UK's own policy towards Burma.

Recommendations:

13. Return to stable annual budget planning, ensuring that UK ministers and officials can pledge more than platitudes at key international meetings and pledging conferences.

14. When assessing which countries are prioritised for receiving UK aid in the face of falling budgets, the wider context of the global role the UK plays regarding those countries must be considered. As the leading country on Burma, increases in UK aid

to Burma have a multiplier effect, and conversely, a negative impact when aid is cut, providing cover for other donors to reduce their aid. The same principle should be applied to all countries where we have a leadership role and can have a bigger impact.

15. Consideration must be given to wider implications and impacts of aid cuts that go beyond individuals left without aid, such as the broader human rights repercussions and whether the aid cuts will undermine broader UK foreign policy towards that country, as they do regarding Burma.