HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: DFID's work in Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis, HC 504

Tuesday 20 March 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Mr Nigel Evans; Mrs Pauline Latham; Mr Ivan Lewis; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Paul Scully; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 206 - 284

Witnesses

I: The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for International Development and Minister of State for the Middle East at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Richard Montgomery, Director of Asia, Caribbean and Overseas Territories Division, DFID; Patrick Moody, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt MP, Richard Montgomery and Patrick Moody.

Chair: Good morning, everyone. This is our final oral evidence session as part of the International Development Committee's inquiry, in which we are looking at DFID's work on Bangladesh, Burma and the Rohingya crisis.

Q206 **Paul Scully:** Thank you, Minister, for coming along, as ever. When we were in Bangladesh recently, we met families in the refugee reception centre, which is newly set up in Cox's Bazar, who had freshly come from Burma. They had experienced the murder and abduction of family members by the Burmese military only days before. We ended up speaking to them individually. What is the international community doing, and what can it do, to stop the continuing violence against the Rohingya?

Alistair Burt: First, Chair, thank you for the opportunity to speak. I have Patrick Moody from the FCO and Richard Montgomery from DFID with me, so we will deal with the questions between us on technical and political matters.

The violence in Burma has been declining, but it is still going on. The majority of people have already fled. We have seen the report of the special rapporteur. We have seen the response of the spokesperson for the international monitoring group this week. The circumstances that

have been described are absolutely appalling. Efforts continue to be made with those in Burma, both to get in there and see what is going on, and to make representations that the violence has been unacceptable to the international community and should cease.

The provisions put forward by the Rakhine advisory commission and the newly created advisory board in relation to that should be followed as the way forward for the people of Rakhine. There can be no return of refugees until there is security and a guarantee that they will be returning to a safe environment. The continuing violence is a scar on all of us. There is no doubt about that, and we will continue to make whatever representations we can in relation to it ending.

Q207 **Paul Scully:** Something that one of the psychiatrists or psychotherapists told us when we were there, looking at some of the children in their schools, was that there is a lot of coercion. There is a move towards coercion rather than actual violence. The threat of violence was based on what had already happened, so it was almost as if you did not need the violence because of the fear of what might happen, or the conditioning, I suppose. We are still at the point where the military seems to be acting with impunity. Where are we with diplomacy? Has it failed? Is it continuing? Where are we in terms of targeted sanctions and other actions? Are they still on the table?

Alistair Burt: As far as diplomacy with Burma is concerned, this Government have made determined efforts to reach the leadership of Burma, in terms of its responsibilities. You will be aware that Aung San

Suu Kyi has recently been to the ASEAN conference and been in direct contact with the Foreign Secretary in terms of what the civilian element of the Government can do in relation to this. Has there been a failure of the international community in relation to the Rohingya? I suppose the short answer is yes, in terms of what has happened, but there has been a remarkable response from the international community post the events, in order to seek a way forward.

We must be very clear: the failure lies principally with the Burmese military, which has been responsible for this, on the back of all the efforts that were made inside Burma—the advisory commission and the way forward that seemed to be possible to deal with a decades and ages-long issue in relation to the Rohingya. There were signs that these cycles of violence might come to an end. There was a pathway forward, and that was lost.

The diplomatic efforts in relation to Burma are manifold. You have a country that is moving from military to civilian rule, from authoritarianism to democracy, from a closed economy to a more open one. None of these things happen overnight. It is a country where there are still ethnic tensions well away from Rakhine. The peace process—the Panglong process—in relation to other parts of the state is still continuing. Those efforts would appear to have some degree of success in moving forward some of those ethnic conflicts.

We can be sure that, if there is a cut-off of the relationship with Burma—if it returns to isolation—those voices in Burma that know that what has

happened is wrong and that wish to challenge what has happened will have no support from us, because we will have cut off the contact. I do not think that is the right approach for diplomacy, so we will continue our efforts. Have they resulted in what we want so far? No, but those efforts will continue.

The setting up of the advisory board, on which Lord Darzi sits, as you are aware, by Aung San Suu Kyi on 22 January is a reflection. I do not think something like that would be happening if it had not been for diplomatic efforts and diplomatic determination. Is it where we want it to be? Is Burma where we want it to be? No, but if we did not press our points, stand up for what we believe and continue to take that message, it would be so much the worse.

Q208 **Paul Scully:** Skipping back to the beginning of the situation slightly, we have had the Salisbury incident. The UK and the international community were able to move at speed on that. Compare and contrast just for a second the speed of diplomatic action on that and the diplomatic action in Burma. What do you think are the reasons for that? I suppose, for the UK, it would be because it is home soil. In terms of the international community, is it part of the strategic nature of Russia and the threat, or are there other factors involved that affect the speed of the international response to the Rohingya situation?

Alistair Burt: I am not really sure if there is a direct comparison here. What is clear in relation to the situation affecting the Rohingya is its very long-term nature, and their rejection by a significant proportion of the

population of Burma—their identification by them as something very different.

As I mentioned before, there is this pattern of cycles of violence that have happened in the past and have been settled, and then there is a determination over time to resolve the issue. We have been engaged with the issue for some time—with the work on the advisory commission, the recognition that this issue had to be settled. Constitutionally, it had to involve the self-identification of the Rohingya people. The United Kingdom was engaged in the process of the commission. We knew and understood the risks to the Rohingya people. I am not sure anyone could have anticipated the actions of the military following the publication of the commission and the incidents that took place then. I am not sure anyone could have predicted the scale and the ferocity of it that we have seen.

In terms of protecting people afterwards, the response has moved incredibly quickly, with the extraordinary response in Bangladesh, and the efforts of the Bangladeshi people and the international community, in which the United Kingdom has played a leading part in looking after people there. For 650,000 people to now be there, so many of them having moved in an extremely short period of time, shows that it was a remarkable response from the international community.

I am not sure if there is a direct comparison between the violence that took them there in the first place and what we have seen in Salisbury, beyond a sense of this: if the international rules-based process in which

we are engaged is falling away, we are all at risk. What has happened in Burma is unacceptable. The actions of the military are unacceptable. There are the breaches of international and humanitarian law, the issues that the special rapporteur is commenting on, the things the United Nations has taken against. Clear breaches of international law will only lead to a situation in which no one is safe anywhere.

That same argument is applied with those who may countenance the use of chemical weapons in Syria—responsible for the dismantling of the joint investigative mechanism in relation to chemical weapons. To that extent there is a connection. We are at the cusp. If international rules do not hold, worse is to come.

Q209 **Paul Scully:** You mentioned Lord Darzi, and I know Mark Field has spoken to him at length. He was talking about the fact that they did not think Rakhine was in any way safe for Rohingyas to return. How are they expressing that to Aung San Suu Kyi, who is saying that they should return?

Alistair Burt: How is who expressing it?

Q210 **Paul Scully:** How would Mark Field and Lord Darzi express the opinion that it is not safe in any way, shape or form for Rohingyas to return to Rakhine state, when Aung San Suu Kyi is looking at ways of having them return, without any assurances of safety at the moment?

Alistair Burt: Very directly. The Foreign Secretary has recently spoken to Aung San Suu Kyi, as people are aware. We have no problem in

communicating those messages as directly as you would expect. The long-term intention of all in the Government of Bangladesh and of Aung San Suu Kyi to see the return of the Rohingya is clear from the agreement that was signed. However, there is a long way between the signing of that agreement and the conditions that need to be present for that to be safe. We have no hesitation in expressing that directly to Aung San Suu Kyi.

Q211 **Paul Scully:** The US senator, Bill Richardson, has resigned from the board that Lord Darzi sits on in Rakhine state, saying it is a whitewash. What is Lord Darzi's position on this? Does he think the same?

Alistair Burt: If you look into this, you will find there were some personal and very individualistic reasons for the resignation of Mr Richardson. I do not think that they should be seen as a reflection of the work on the advisory board, which has only really just got started. We will look at its conclusions and its work quite separately from that. Although Lord Darzi's position is not a UK Government position and he has no accountability to the UK Government, we are quite confident in his judgment as to the work of the advisory board. It will be judged, of course, by its effectiveness in due course. We do not believe that the resignation of Bill Richardson is necessarily something that should feed into a wider concern at this stage about the board.

Q212 **Mr Lewis:** Good morning, Minister. We have seen, essentially, the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya community from Burma. That is what has taken place. If we said that we would tolerate ethnic cleansing

anywhere in the world, people would look on us with amazement, frankly. I just want to get to this issue about constantly referring to the actions of the military, which I think everybody would totally agree with. At the end of the day, is there any evidence that Aung San Suu Kyi has sought privately to stop the military behaving in this way? Is there any evidence that she has made statements publicly that have been sufficiently strong to condemn the behaviour of the military in relation to the Rohingya community?

The final point is on the history of sanctions, diplomacy and all the rest of it. We had a policy of isolation and sanctions towards Burma. We changed that policy to engagement and sanctions towards Burma. Then, within about two years, we entirely normalised relations with Burma, prior to the military demonstrating serious radical reform. As a consequence of that, there were major business benefits for the US and possibly for the UK as well. In retrospect, was that normalisation giving entirely the wrong message to a regime that has behaved in such an appalling way? Is there not a case for going back to the principle not of isolation, but of sanctions?

Alistair Burt: There are two questions there. First, in relation to Aung San Suu Kyi, it is the view of the British Government that she needs to speak out against the atrocities that the military has perpetrated in Rakhine. There is more she could do to ensure the civilian Government act in ways that would address the situation, including allowing humanitarian access, setting out a pathway to citizenship for the

Rohingya, setting out a clearer vision for the conditions under which refugees would be treated on return, addressing constraints on freedom of movement for the Rohingya and ensuring media freedom is protected. The Foreign Secretary has consistently urged her to use her moral authority and leadership to ensure that the Rohingya refugees can return safely.

In relation to the first question, I think we all recognise that her position is one of difficulty, as an element in a Government with a civilian and a military element. The Foreign Secretary has been clear in asking her to do more, but it is a difficult balance.

That gets on to the second one, of how you help and assist a state in moving forward, and how you assist the voices in a state that want to see something different. I will ask Patrick to make a comment in relation to this, if I may. As I indicated before, we take the view that this is a state under decades of military rule, authoritarian government, no democracy and the like. It does not change overnight. The judgments you need to make, in terms of encouraging that, whether it is an easing of the sanctions, and then whether sanctions are re-applied, are genuinely complex and difficult, as you know extremely well.

As always, there is a pathway between complete disengagement and complete re-engagement. We still believe in the work of both DFID, to address those in the poorest circumstances and conditions in Burma, and those who wish to take Government and business in a different direction. The importance of business is not negligible and it is not necessarily

solely related to benefit to Britain. All around the region, when you visit Vietnam, Bangladesh and other areas around the place, you see the vibrancy of the private sector and what it means to the development of people, individual choices and the sort of things that make changes in the nature of governance and the relation between governed and governance, as you move away from autocratic systems. This is all worth doing. That has been the reason for movement.

Is it too much too soon? Bearing in mind what the military has done in Rakhine, it is easy to make that challenge. It is about the longer-term impact, whether that is the direction that Burma wants to take and whether there is any evidence that it is moving in the right direction. Plainly, there are still questions to be asked about this now, and there are probably dates in the future at which to consider whether it has achieved its objectives. Patrick, is there anything in relation to that relationship?

Chair: Be very brief, because we are running rather behind. We are still on question 1 of 12. We are going to need slightly shorter answers to the other questions.

Patrick Moody: I will be very quick. I would agree with the Minister. It is worth bearing in mind that the Rakhine advisory commission's recommendations, in microcosm, for Rakhine, but equally applying to the whole of the country, draw attention to the need to bring together socioeconomic and political development as a whole, to take forward the kinds of transitions that the Minister was talking about. In terms of moving on sanctions, there have of course been moves to restrict the

travel of senior military. At the last European Council, there was agreement to now look for proposals for targeted sanctions against senior military figures, so there is a switch in approach.

Q213 **Mrs Latham:** I want to move on to the sexual violence that is going on in Burma. In November last year, DFID told us the UK had sent two members of its PSVI team out to assess the situation regarding sexual violence against the Rohingya, and that the UN fact-finding mission was building up a body of evidence. In the recent reply to our report, you say you are now moving ahead urgently to implement the assessment and recommendations of the PSVI team, but that the UN fact-finding mission did not have a mandate to collect or preserve evidence.

Most recently, Mark Field assured the House, "We are doing our level best to ensure that there is a full collation" of all the evidence of violence and sexual violence. "We must be patient and recognise that this is a painstaking process". Who exactly is collecting or has collected evidence that could actually be used in criminal proceedings, such as the ICC, by the Rohingya against the Burmese perpetrators?

Alistair Burt: There are two things about this. First, the concerns about gender-based and sexual violence cover issues in the Rohingya camps. We support considerable provision designed to help those refugees who are there, whether it is safe spaces or psychological support and the like. I am happy to go into that further, but your question was not about that.

Q214 **Mrs Latham:** I accept that, but who is it?

Alistair Burt: Your question was about Burma and the issues there. It is vital that any evidence gathered is collated in the proper way. It is vital that it is available for accountability uses in the future. We are seeking to do that. We are funding one of our implementing partners—

Q215 **Mrs Latham:** Who exactly is doing it, and what are they collecting?

Alistair Burt: Let me ask Richard, who deals with the issues in detail.

Richard Montgomery: The main people collecting it are the UN fact-finding mission, under Chairman Darusman. They gave their oral statement on 12 March and are likely to give their final report in September, I believe. They are the main people we are relying on to provide documented accounts.

Mrs Latham: You have not seen any yet.

Q216 **Chair:** Sorry to interrupt, Pauline. In your response, you told us that that fact-finding mission does not have a mandate to collect or preserve evidence.

Richard Montgomery: I understand from the oral statement that it is collecting it.

Q217 **Chair:** Is that without a mandate, or outside its mandate?

Richard Montgomery: If I am wrong, I apologise, but we will have to go back and—

Q218 **Chair:** It was the Government's response to our report that said that.

Richard Montgomery: Sorry, which document was that?

Q219 **Chair:** The response to our Committee's report.

Alistair Burt: I have the statement from the chairperson from just last week. He says this: "We and our teams have made many visits to the region, each of several weeks. We have now conducted over 600 in-depth interviews with victims and witnesses of alleged human right violations and abuses". He says: "We are in contact with people and organisations who are keen to share their information, including the raw data for their research, and we have received a number of formal submissions".

This fact-finding mission is doing that work. They said they are focused on establishing the facts and circumstances of alleged human rights violations and abuses in Myanmar since 2011. They have clearly taken on the work of talking to those victims in order to prepare the information that will be needed in the future.

Q220 **Mrs Latham:** Four months ago, DFID told us that the UK had sent two members of the PSVI team out to assess the situation regarding sexual violence.

Richard Montgomery: That is right.

Q221 **Mrs Latham:** Is taking four months an urgent way to implement the collecting of forensic evidence of sexual violence, when the UK guidance says it needs to be collected within a week?

Alistair Burt: My understanding is that the experts made recommendations of how this was to be done. We have funded capacity

building for Bangladeshi partners on investigation and documentation of sexual violence to international standards. This is not something you can instruct people to become experts in overnight. That work is being undertaken, and we have played a significant part in relation to that. Of course the work needs to be done. It has to be up to standard. It has to be up to a standard that will face testimony and challenge in court, should that be the case in the future, but it is not quick work, I suspect.

Q222 **Mrs Latham:** If it has to be collected within a week, that is pretty quick, and we are taking four months. What evidence can be collected at this very late date to bring the perpetrators of crimes against humanity to justice, six months after many crimes were committed? What evidence can be submitted to the ICC?

Alistair Burt: There are two things. First, let me deal with the evidence. It is clear from the fact-finding mission, and what the chair says in relation to that, that the work of gaining evidence by talking to people who are victims and putting together the stories is really a vital part of this. My relationship with this, as you know, comes from ICMP and the work that it has done in Srebrenica, the Balkans and all that. Some 20 years after that, court cases were taken where the facts and evidence produced were able to secure conviction. There is a process to be gone through. It may take time, but it can be done.

The ICC reference is difficult. As we know, Burma is not a party to the ICC. That means a reference could only come from the UN Security Council. It is our judgment at the moment that it will not do so, because

some members of the UN Security Council will not back such a reference. That means we have to prepare for perhaps another tribunal. Who knows where this will be in some years' time?

The collection of evidence is oral as well as physical. I am no expert here, but I suspect physical evidence of what happened in Myanmar as people were fleeing, some months ago, will be almost impossible to gather, particularly because there is no access to those areas from Bangladesh. It has to be the oral work that is done. There is evidence of that being done now by those who are responsible for it. That is how the information is put together. The chair references 600 interviews, 600 contacts and the like. That is how the information is put together for this work.

Q223 **Mrs Latham:** That is not a huge number, given that there are nearly a million fleeing.

Alistair Burt: I cannot answer for that process, I am afraid.

Q224 **Mrs Latham:** Finally, what success have you had in engaging with the commission on missing people?

Alistair Burt: I have spoken to Kathryne Bomberger about this. Their expertise is available when required and needed. They are currently working in a whole variety of different areas. They have not specifically been commissioned to work in this area, but that expertise, along with the expertise of others—they are not the only people in this particular area—is available.

Q225 **Mrs Latham:** There are a lot of missing people.

Alistair Burt: Yes, there are.

Q226 **Mrs Latham:** There are hundreds of thousands of missing people. So the commission are not engaged in that at all.

Alistair Burt: No, not at present.

Q227 **Chair:** Can you keep us updated on that, Minister?

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Q228 **Chair:** Going back to the issues that Pauline was raising at the beginning of her questions, last Monday at the UN Human Rights Council, the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Burma, Yanghee Lee, called for the creation of an independent investigative body to "investigate, document, collect, consolidate, map and analyse evidence of human rights violations and abuses". She said this master database could then be used as the basis to put the individuals who gave the orders and carried out violations against individuals and entire groups on trial, either in the ICC—and I understand your point on that—or in tribunals. Is that something the British Government would consider supporting?

Alistair Burt: Yes, very much so. For reasons of brevity, I will not go into it. Yes, we support many aspects of her work and her recommendations. We are actively looking now at how we can help her put some of these into practice.

Q229 **Mr Sharma:** Good morning. In June 2016, the Government told the

Lords Committee on Sexual Violence in Conflict that the PSVI team of experts "currently consists of 74 experts", of whom 43 were women. In evidence to us earlier this year, DFID told us that, following assessment in 2015, the team of experts was "streamlined to better meet needs" and "currently consists of 39 independent experts", of whom 26 were women. Was the figure of 74 provided to the Lords in June 2016 a trick of timing or simply an error?

Chair: The 74 figure has bemused us somewhat.

Patrick Moody: In my understanding, it is 38.

Q230 **Mr Sharma:** It is not even 39. You said 38.

Patrick Moody: These things can expand by one or two, but it is essentially 38 or 39. We will have to come back to you on the 74 figure.

Chair: We have really struggled with this. The 74 figure, as Virendra said, was the figure the Government quoted in 2016, but consistently we are now given the figure you have just given, which is about half that figure.

Q231 **Mr Sharma:** I do not know whether you will be able to answer this. You can give us the full answer in writing later on. Did the 2015 review also change the team's remit from doing to advising, or was that always its role? Lord Hague clearly thinks it has been downgraded.

Alistair Burt: I do not think there has been any downgrading of this. Pursuing accountability for sexual violence in conflict is now a major strand of what we seek to do, following William Hague's work. The

recognition of this issue in conflict has been extraordinary since raising it. The teams needed both to investigate and to provide the evidence necessary must be expert, must be in place and must be trained. You have to have the sense of what is achievable among the population you are dealing with.

I went through the statement on fact finding by the chair of that, talking about the work that they are doing, in terms of interviewing those who have been involved in it. That work is ongoing, and we are engaged with that. You need the experts and the specialists involved to do that. We are doing it. There is no suggestion of downgrading from the UK Government.

Q232 **Mr Sharma:** With respect, Minister, I believe that the 74 figure was right. I believe that now it has reduced to 39 or 38—we do not know the exact figures. When there were 74 members of the team, they had a remit. When you come to half, the remit must be changed—the terms of reference must be changed. As to whether they are changed for streamlining, I do not want to use the word myself. But, certainly, Lord Hague also feels that when the figure is reduced to half, the work must be downgraded—unless you can prove it is not downgraded.

Alistair Burt: Let me just say this: the core principle of any response to sexual violence cases is to do no harm. Considerable harm is done by uncoordinated, unsupported, unskilled documentation and investigation. The PSVI international protocol team of experts and FCO-supported NGOs

have been front and centre at raising standards and building local responses that minimise harm to survivors.

Justice efforts must not rush in at the cost of re-traumatising survivors. There are risks of some of the work potentially doing harm. That is why it has to be carefully controlled and people carefully trained to do the job. That is what we are doing. We will come back to you on numbers, but what we are pointing out is that, from all the evidence we have and all the experts who work in this, there are risks. Pouring people in to look for things is completely the wrong way.

Q233 **Mr Sharma:** We are not disputing that. I am saying that, when you reduce those numbers, the positions, and the rights, whatever terms of reference you set must change. From there, what were the thoughts behind bringing it to half? What was taken out and what was added into it?

Alistair Burt: We will provide the answer.

Q234 **Chair:** Can you provide it? Virendra is right. Basically, either it was never 74, in which case we were given wrong information two years ago, or it was and you have cut it in half. One of those things must be what has happened. It would be very useful to have that clarification.

Alistair Burt: Of course, yes. I do not know the specifics.

Q235 **Chair:** Thank you. Can I move us on now to the issue that we published a report on today? That is the immediate humanitarian situation in Cox's Bazar. The UN has suggested in a report published last week that almost

a further $1 billion is needed over the coming year just to provide for the most basic needs for the Rohingya refugees who are in Bangladesh. Can you tell us how this money is going to be raised and what contribution the UK plans to make to it?

Alistair Burt: Yes. We have already provided £59 million since August last year. This latest proposal is connected with the joint response plan launched in Geneva this past week. It is targeting 1.3 million people in total, and that includes over 300,000 of the host community. The target is $951 million. In the past, the responses to the appeals for the Rohingya have been good. We would expect and hope that to be the same again. We are a leading donor, we have been a leading donor, we will be a leading donor again. Since this was published on 16 March, we have not got our figure ready. We will be making a contribution to this appeal. They are right: there is more money needed, and we will provide it.

Q236 **Chair:** As you know, we have expressed our appreciation for the UK's swift and significant support for the humanitarian effort. Let me ask now about the issue that is the focus of our report today. That is the forthcoming rainy season, with rain, cyclones and monsoon over the coming months, and the preparedness of the camp. It was perhaps the biggest takeaway that we, as a Committee, took from our visit to Cox's Bazar two weeks ago. Can I ask, in particular, what progress there is on efforts to get permission from Bangladesh to relocate the most at-risk refugees to safer land in the Cox's Bazar area?

Alistair Burt: There are two things. First, there is a great deal of work being done in terms of preparation for the cyclone season. We have all recognised that this was coming along. That preparation is in different respects. In the camp itself there are efforts to shore up defences, cover against landslips and the like. There are efforts to make sure that the sanitation facilities that are very low lying are improved so they do not get washed away and add to the risk of disease. There are efforts to make sure that we have stockpiles available of the emergency coverings that are needed. Those are in Delhi and in Dubai.

We have worked out how quickly things can be got to Cox's Bazar, because there will be a point at which the weather changes sufficiently to allow stuff to come in. Stockpiling things there, in the place itself, runs the risk of them being washed away. We have all those preparations in place.

We continue to appeal to the Bangladesh Government for further land allocation. We think it will be necessary to do this. We have not had an indication yet from the Bangladesh Government of what they intend to do. As you know, they believe that moving to the island is a possible solution. We have expressed concerns about that, but we are working through them. There are minimum standards that need to be met in terms of the conditions for people to be moved to. We want to ensure that is the case, whether that is on the island, whether that is with further land allocations and the like.

It also merges into the long-term understanding of what is going to happen here. Whatever agreement might be made about the return of refugees, I think we are all expecting that this will take longer. Over time, if there is to be further space in the camp, it can be achieved by further land allocations and moving people. We are continuing to press the Bangladesh Government in relation to this.

Q237 **Chair:** Thank you for that. We were told by the agencies on the ground in Cox's Bazar that there is a significant amount of land that is available and accessible to which the relevant refugees could be moved, so that this really is a question of will on the part of the Bangladeshi authorities. Is that a correct understanding?

Richard Montgomery: There are negotiations going on for about 500 acres. Kutupalong, which you saw, is about a 3,000-acre plot.

Q238 **Chair:** We were told, of the 500 acres that have been identified, only about a quarter is habitable. Is that your understanding?

Richard Montgomery: That is one assessment, yes.

Q239 **Chair:** Is it an assessment that you share?

Richard Montgomery: There are negotiations going on, and the UN is having that dialogue. It is leading the dialogue on behalf of the international community. I do not think it takes away from the fact that, if a cyclone hits in the coming months, the amount of land available that is accessible and usable in the short term, in time for this particular season, is quite limited, if there is any. We are all deeply concerned

about the risks of the cyclone season. You will have seen yourself some of the heavy works that the Minister has outlined. More work is being done to pre-position supplies and heavy moving equipment to do remedial works if there are heavy rains or a cyclone hits. The bottom line is that we can do only a limited amount at the moment.

Q240 **Chair:** I know that Minister Mark Field raised this with the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh last Thursday. In the House I asked Mark, during his oral statement, whether at some point the Prime Minister might consider speaking to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. Is that something that the Government would consider?

Alistair Burt: I know it is still being considered. What I can say is that both the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development have written directly to Sheikh Hasina, setting out these further concerns. We have a very good and very strong relationship with the Government of Bangladesh. I do not think the Committee should be in any doubt that the Government of Bangladesh and the Prime Minister know the UK's views about every aspect of this, including praise for Bangladesh and how it has coped with the pressures, but also concerns about further issues—whether it is access of NGOs, whether it is making sure the health supplies are there, whether it is in relation to the space, or whether it is in relation to preparedness for monsoon and cyclone. You can be sure they know about this, and it is at the highest level.

Whether or not there is a need for a PM-to-PM call, there is no doubt that the Foreign Secretary and Development Secretary have both been

extremely closely involved with this personally, and have made sure that the UK's concerns are well communicated to the Government of Bangladesh.

Q241 **Chair:** Minister, you have slightly anticipated my next question, which is on the work that is being done to encourage the Government of Bangladesh to grant more practical visas and permits to NGO staff seeking to work in the camps. This is an issue that has been raised with us repeatedly. How is progress on that?

Alistair Burt: Again, we do our best in relation to this to make the case for those who are applying to go. As I am sure the Committee is aware, there are 50 international NGOs and 40 locally based NGOs working there. There are a lot of people to get in and out. We are respectful of a sovereign state's right to handle its visas and to make sure that the people who are coming in are right to be working in their camps and in their area. Anything we can do to help and assist, we will do, but, as I say, we respect and understand the rights and obligations of Bangladesh to handle this extraordinary crisis, as it is doing.

Chair: We are going to move on now to some of the other issues relating to both Bangladesh and Burma.

Q242 **Paul Scully:** Forgive me if I dash off shortly after this question, because I have to go and speak to Mark Field in Westminster Hall about Tamils. We went to Bangladesh to look at the wider work of DFID, but of course the Rohingya situation was paramount. I just wanted to look at the wider

situation in both Burma and Bangladesh and ask you the general question of why we work in those countries on the scale that we do, with them both being within the top 20. Does it reflect the index of global poverty? The probability of successful impacts? Our historical relationships even, given our long ties with those countries? Or trade and investment reasons? I was just wondering if you can look at why we have that size of budget and work.

Alistair Burt: I will do so. Bearing in mind the constraints on time, I will try to be brief, so I will shorthand it to a degree. The countries are very different and are in very different states. Bangladesh is regarded as something of a development success story. It has moved its financial status. It reached lower middle-income status in 2015. In 2016, its GNI per capita overtook that of Pakistan. This is a country that does well, in relation to a vibrant civil society. It has seen poverty rates fall rapidly and a dramatic rise in female employment. But some 37 million people still live in poverty, with 21 million of those living in extreme poverty.

In relation to Bangladesh, therefore, our programmes are designed to help and assist the poorest, but to continue the progress being made in the overall development of a vibrant Bangladesh, in order to improve its status still further. There is work done to make sure its education and health systems are more sustainable. There are good reasons to work there. There are good relationships with the United Kingdom and a very strong bilateral programme.

Burma is in a different situation, as mentioned earlier, recovering from decades of authoritarian and military rule, and plainly in a very different governance and internal structural situation. Again, our work is directed towards the poorest in Burma, with £110 million worth of development aid, as you are aware. No financial aid goes to the Government. No financial aid goes to the military. Programmes are designed, as I indicated earlier, to improve the processes in terms of education. I visited the health service in Yangon, again directed towards the poorest, but also with a wider eye to the development of Burma and the return of Burma towards democracy and a more open economic system, which will benefit all the people.

Therefore, our bilateral programmes are related to doing that, but there is still extreme poverty. UK aid has helped over 620,000 people to gain sustainable access to clean water and sanitation, helped 49,000 children to get a decent education, and improved nutrition for over 438,000 children under five, and for women and girls.

The programmes in both states are designed to cover that, and we feel these programmes have real value for the people we are trying to assist and the overall prospects for both Bangladesh and Burma, although we recognise they are very different states.

Q243 **Paul Scully:** Can I ask what role the Governments of Bangladesh and Burma have in our strategy there?

Alistair Burt: We cannot work in either of these states without the agreement of the states, but we devise the programmes. The programmes are all delivered through NGOs and various agencies that DFID contracts with. The Government are aware of the programmes but have no say in what we do or what we do not do, provided we have access in there. That is the way country programmes work.

Richard Montgomery: There is a difference between Burma and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, it is a very transparent, multi-donor arrangement. Every two years at least, there are major conferences about Bangladesh's development programme and how the international community supports that. The last one was in January this year. There is a great deal of appreciation of the Bangladesh development strategy being something that the international community would not contest as such. A lot of the reforms the Bangladesh Government, civil society and private sector want to make are things that we can easily get behind.

They are very focused. They were focused on the MDGs, for example. Some people would argue that two MDGs were slightly off track. Others would say only one failed. For the rest of them, Bangladesh met all the MDGs. It is a big success story for donor co-ordination.

In Burma, the aid co-ordination mechanisms are not so coherent. There is no national-level dialogue. There are a number of sector groups, and the Government have set up a Ministry that does some co-ordination among donors. There is a division of labour emerging in Burma between the big financial institutions—the ADB and the World Bank—and non-

traditional donors such as China and India, that are focusing on a lot of infrastructure investment, or what you would call hardware. The traditional donors, and a lot of the donors that we would see as like-minded, are focused more on the softer side, so better government, more accountability, civil society support, health and education, and targeting the poorest. There is a division of labour emerging in Burma. The UK, as, I think, the second largest bilateral, is trying to shape that dialogue, along with other agencies.

Q244 **Paul Scully:** David Cameron told a US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations last week that we should be looking at stopping aid in corrupt countries. Burma and Bangladesh feature pretty low down in the corruption indexes. I am wondering what your feelings are about the situation.

Alistair Burt: The point of engagement is that, if you can see something useful and good to do, for as long as it makes a difference, you should consider doing it. You should also always consider the impact of loss of engagement and what that means. There are difficult choices in all this. As we have discussed on the Floor of the House many times, if the United Kingdom wanted to confine its relationships around the world solely to those who share, profess and deliver on our values, we would have a pretty tight range of mates, at the end of the day. We know that.

Accordingly, what is the point of engagement? The point of engagement is those with whom there are real difficulties on occasions. There is a point beyond which you cannot go, and things you cannot do—hence no

financial aid to the Government of Burma, no financial aid to the military of Burma. There are other places where aid is given, sometimes to those organisations that are responsible for keeping order in a country, because you train those who need training. We do not provide training to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, for example, because they do not need it. You provide training and engagement with those where the circumstances are more difficult.

That is how we feel. As I say, we will put Bangladesh to one side and look specifically at Burma. The arguments about disengagement with Burma are very clear. In a state that has seen this happen within its own borders, where it is quite clear that an element of the state, the military, has been responsible for the atrocities that we have seen, it is a very easy question to raise to say we should cut off the contact. If we do, those voices that want to be part of something different and that struggle to be heard, those who have sought change in Burma, and those who are working with the poorest in the most difficult of circumstances, where they need health, sanitation and education, would just have to find it elsewhere. If we were not there, who would be? Those are the reasons for engagement.

Q245 **Paul Scully:** Chairman, I know the Minister will be aware that I have often talked about looking at the country of Burma holistically because of the different tensions around there. In terms of Bangladesh and its Vision 2021, to become a middle-income country by 2021, assuming it meets that objective—and it is going great guns to get there—what would

happen to the DFID programme at that point? How might that change?

Alistair Burt: My broad view is that you work towards sustainability. Of course, a lot of the work that we do in aid is designed such that, at some stage, people will be moved off aid, or it will change its tack and be provided in a different way. I do not think we are there yet, but as things go on, programmes change and develop. All our programmes are constantly looked at to make sure that they are keeping pace with the changing nature of the country being assisted. When there is greater sustainability in health programmes, for example, you look at a different form of health programme that will provide sustainability in a different area. That is broadly the process.

Richard Montgomery: In a sense, our programme is already transitioning, because we used to provide more financial aid in Bangladesh in the social sectors, and that is reducing, as the Government of Bangladesh have devoted more resources to it and others have come in. The transition is happening, but my caution is that we should not let it happen too quickly, because there are risks of reversals. It is a long-term process.

Q246 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** You have spoken a few times about the voices struggling to be heard in Burma, Minister. I am struggling to identify the voices that are struggling to be heard. It seems like there are no voices at all in Burma against what is happening in Burma. Can you identify to me what those voices are? You have said it two or three times now: our programmes support the voices that want to be heard against what is

happening in Rakhine state, et cetera. We heard evidence last time about Aung San Suu Kyi being very complicit and knowledgeable, in the sounds that she is giving, about what is happening.

Alistair Burt: I would be pretty unwise to give you a list of people in Burma.

Q247 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I get that, but has the Department identified those people. Are you working with them explicitly, or are you just hoping that they will come naturally?

Alistair Burt: No. It is a perfectly fair question, but you will understand my caution. In the situation that they are in, to say that there is a widespread movement of concern about what has happened to the Rohingya is wrong. As we know, one of the issues we have all identified about the culture of Burma is that the support for the military action is very strong. There have been years of telling people about the other. We have all experienced this in other parts of the world. It would be wrong to suggest that there is a mass movement against that, but there are elements that we are working with in relation to that.

In terms of the changes in Burma, there are reasons why the military changed its profile and moved towards a civilian Government. There is the support for Aung San Suu Kyi and her movement when she was imprisoned. There are those who moved and wanted to move towards democracy, and those who support the Rakhine advisory commission and realise there has to be a different answer. Those voices are there. There

are the voices in Parliament—not the 25% of those who are nominated by the military, but those who are there for other reasons.

Our estimation is that there are those who are looking forward to a further development in Burma, but, necessarily, the nature of their system makes it extremely difficult for them to self-identify. Our concern is that, if the voice of people who believe in what we believe in—in terms of parliamentary democracy and Parliament acting as opposition and making people like me accountable—is not there, that process will not continue. It is difficult, and I cannot give you a list, but is it worth doing, and are we confident there are people who want to continue a transition that is already in place? It is not as if the military was still in place and there was a solely military Government. There is something different. That process that has been started needs to be worked with. That is what we believe we can do.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Things have got worse.

Q248 **Chair:** We are going to return in a moment to the specific issues around Parliament. There are a number of specific questions now around Burma, and then we will move to some specific questions regarding DFID's work in Bangladesh.

As you will know, we were refused visas to go to Burma, so we are not able to ask you questions based on anything that we saw, but let me ask you about private sector work that DFID is supporting in Burma. Can you give a bit of an explanation for it? In particular, are the Government

helping UK companies, for example in the garments sector, to set up in Burma via the Business Innovation Facility?

Alistair Burt: I will turn to Richard on the specifics of the last one.

Chair: That is fine.

Alistair Burt: To the general point, let me amplify what I said earlier on. Our work with the private sector is focused on creating jobs, and expanding the economy and moving it away from what has effectively been a military autocracy, a crony-based system, which does not deliver economic development but delivers vast wealth for the few. There is a determination to disempower that sort of structure. We are working on measures that will improve the nature of the economy and make it livelier. We are very determined to see that happening. There will be a benefit to the UK, but principally it is of benefit to Burma, the development of the Burma economy, and of course the politics as well. Once you start having a more liberal economic system, in theory, although China—

Chair: China challenges that assumption, doesn't it?

Alistair Burt: China acts as a slight bulwark against that. Essentially, it is like changing the education system. You get different questions being asked and raised, and that moves the society on. We think the development of the private sector is important in relation to that. But on your question about a specific—

Q249 **Chair:** It was specifically around the Business Innovation Facility. We

looked at the work in Bangladesh with the garments sector. In terms of Burma, I would be interested to hear what the potential there is.

Richard Montgomery: I cannot tell you about that specific question.

Q250 **Chair:** Okay. Could you write to us?

Richard Montgomery: I do not know whether BIF is providing support to ready-made garments, but you are absolutely right: we have experience in this area because of the work in Bangladesh, which has been quite successful.

Alistair Burt: I always feel better if the official does not know the answer when I do not.

Chair: I understand.

Alistair Burt: Then I know it is not that I have missed it and should have been expected to answer it. But we will get back to you on that.

Q251 **Chair:** That is fine, Minister. Let me ask you a different question relating to the private sector work. How do you best ensure that the private sector development work does not benefit members of the Burmese military or their associates by increasing their wealth?

Alistair Burt: I am advised there are robust safeguards. Robust safeguards protect UK funds from misuse and reputational issues, in line with our enhanced due diligence approach for DFID Burma's engagement with the private sector. No UK funding will go directly to the Government, and technical assistance will support reform-orientated

Ministries. There are rigid safeguards to make sure the money is not deflected, as far as I am aware. That is what I am assured of.

Q252 **Chair:** A specific issue relating to that is that our major exports to Burma are in the transport field, road vehicles, et cetera. DFID has acknowledged that individual members of the military have major economic interests in transport. Perhaps, Richard, you can tell us a bit more about some of the due diligence that is done to prevent those military figures benefitting personally.

Richard Montgomery: I am not aware of us facilitating investment in the transport sector with existing companies. I would have to write to you for that and find out from the team precisely what is happening. You are absolutely right. The transport sector is one of the sectors where we know that the Tatmadaw have major open or covert interests.

In terms of our due diligence, this is about digging into not just the partners we work with but also the downstream partners that they work with or that are included in our programmes. There is a facility that we have brought in that does that digging for us. We also have that in the UK, by the way. When we enter into contracts with large contractors, we have a facility behind the scenes that does due diligence. I think everybody would accept that is sensible to have.

In terms of stepping up that work in Burma, we need to make sure that we develop a database and have a register that enables us to cross-check, the more and more due diligence that we do. We have had this in

place for several years, actually. The team assures us that it has a build-up of knowledge about the different people that we work with and their downstream partners, which means that we have quite a lot of background information on people's economic interests and how they may or may not connect to some of the front companies for the Tatmadaw. If you want to ask about a specific sector, like what we are doing to facilitate British investment in transport, I would have to get back to you.

Q253 **Chair:** It would be helpful if you could. Thank you very much.

Richard Montgomery: We can, certainly, if it is the transport sector that you are interested in.

Q254 **Mr Evans:** While none of us would want to punish people because of some rotten Government that they may have, irrespective of which country it happens to be, do we have people on the ground in Burma looking at ensuring that there is no shrinkage in the system?

Richard Montgomery: Shrinkage in the system?

Q255 **Mr Evans:** Shrinkage used to be called shoplifting, which is basically the Government dipping in and making sure that they benefit from the aid, as opposed to the people.

Richard Montgomery: No UK aid goes to the Burmese Government. The three biggest projects that we have in Burma include our humanitarian work, which you are probably very familiar with, and two special-purpose vehicles that are like trust funds. One of those is run by

the World Bank, and one has been set up independently. All our work on health, which is one of our biggest projects, goes through a World Bank-managed trust fund, the 3MDG fund. The livelihoods and food security programme is a special-purpose vehicle set up to manage not just our money but money from other donors. In a sense, we have quarantined it from the official Government system. Of course, there are some donors and multilaterals that will provide finance to the Government, which, in principle, includes UK taxpayers' money. Whenever the World Bank lends, that is 15% of our money in IDA.

One area that we have been involved in is public financial management. That is technical assistance to do fiduciary risk assessment, to look out for whether people are dipping into funds. We cannot provide full safeguards. Our aim is to encourage a direction of travel that enables budget transparency, accountability by budget committees in Parliament—which have only been going for a couple of years, so they are still learning the ropes on that—fully transparent accounts and audit systems that enable them to trace things. It is classic public financial management. We have been involved in providing some soft grant money, alongside other, bigger players like the World Bank, which are trying to improve these financial systems. It is in the interest of the Government to do so, because other forms of credit and commercial lending will rely on budget transparency.

For us, we have been discussing with the Secretary of State how we make sure we are working on the right things in Burma going forward,

given that there have been these atrocities. One of the focuses that we want to give is on building the capacity of the seven states and divisions rather than just central Government. If we are to do that, we need to have some remit to engage with the central Government, because that is where a lot of the money comes from. If we want to build the capacity of states and regions, we need to engage with both the central and the state systems. That comes back to the Minister's point that, if we really want to nudge change forward and back people who want progressive change, we have to have some level of engagement with the Government.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are going to come now to some of the issues on the peace process and other minorities than the Rohingya within Burma. Then I will ask a question about the parliamentary strengthening work that is done.

Q256 **Mrs Latham:** Last week, the Committee heard from human rights activists who had serious doubts over both the peace process and Aung San Suu Kyi's commitment to peace for ethnic minorities. Can you give us your assessment?

Alistair Burt: The peace process is long-lasting. The civil war in Burma is the world's longest-running civil war, and Aung San Suu Kyi has convened the most inclusive peace dialogue since Burma's internal conflict began in 1947. There have been two recent peace conferences in 2017; a third conference is planned in 2018. There was agreement on 37 points. We have provided practical support to the peace process,

delivered through the multi-donor joint peace fund and peace support fund, as well as technical advice and assistance. We are supporting a £34 million, multi-year project focused on the Thai-Burma border, aimed at meeting the humanitarian needs of refugees and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to reintegrate when they return home.

I was there and met some of those involved in the process. There is always hope if the talking is going on. The determination of all sides is incremental; it is bit by bit. You never know when something is going to succeed. We have other peace processes going on in other parts of the world, but our estimation at present is that it is worth pursuing, yes, because there is no alternative. If it is not pursued, what happens?

Q257 **Mrs Latham:** You just gave us some figures, which I did not catch, but the figures DFID provided said that £50 million had been allocated to supporting the peace process over a five-year period. Two years in to the programme, £15 million has been spent. What would be the trigger to say the programme was not working and to pull it?

Alistair Burt: Well, I have to say that, if people are not fighting, and if people are still talking, I reckon the programme is working. We can see very clearly what happens if peace processes break down and violence returns. As you will be aware from your studies in the region, the different ethnic conflicts around Burma are extremely difficult and long-lasting, but there is an opportunity for any of them to re-spark into significant civil war, as opposed to the isolated incidents that always happen when conflict has not been resolved.

Q258 **Mrs Latham:** Is that like the isolated incidents of genocide?

Alistair Burt: No, that is quite different. The Rohingya are different from Shan and the other areas.

Q259 **Mrs Latham:** They are not fighting back, so it is not conflict; it is murder, but that is okay.

Alistair Burt: No, it is not okay, and you should not say that. There is a difference between what has happened in relation to the Rohingya and what is happening in relation to the peace processes in other parts of Burma. The Rohingya issue is separate. What has happened there is unconscionable, has no acceptance and is not part of any peace process, beyond the fact that the opportunities of the commission and everything are designed to provide some way forward for the country. If the advisory board stops, if the commission stops, I put it to the Committee: what is the alternative? So long as people are prepared to keep talking, we want to support those processes, because that has to be the way forward. Nothing is acceptable about violence, but nor is it acceptable, if there is a chance of preventing it or a chance of finding an answer, to walk away, so we will continue to support the processes so long as there is an opportunity for success.

Q260 **Mrs Latham:** On the £15 million that we have already spent, what evidence do you have that says that has been successful?

Alistair Burt: If it enables parties to work together, if it enables those who have been affected by violence to be reintegrated and to deal with

the issues caused by displacement or whatever, it is successful. The situation in relation to the Rohingya is on a completely different scale and needs to be handled completely differently. I would always say the efficacy of a peace process is ultimately its conclusion, but in the meantime it should ensure conflict does not start again. Conflict starts when peace processes break down. When one party or another says, "We have had enough; there are no points of agreement", which is contrary to where we are at the moment, and then people say, "It is not worth it", sooner or later you have to start the process again. The cost of conflict restarting is enormous—much greater than the money put in to support a peace process, so the evidence of these things working is simply that the talks go on. The Panglong process has been reinvigorated, and Aung San Suu Kyi is carrying that on.

Q261 **Chair:** Minister, we took evidence on this last Wednesday from Fortify Rights and Kachin Relief. Both witnesses basically told us that they have no faith in the peace process. What could be done to restore some sense of faith and ownership for those groups that feel that, essentially, the military is able to impose its will on ethnic minorities regardless of a so-called peace process?

Alistair Burt: We have to remain engaged with those who are working to make a success of this. At any stage in a process, there will be parties who want more and, therefore, will profess not to have any faith in the system. As we all know, if the back channels fall away, if people stop talking to each other, there is only one consequence. I am quite

convinced, with long years in this, as we all have, that the moment you stop talking and do not provide an alternative, you know exactly what is going to happen. The peace talks may be unsatisfactory, they may take time, they may not be giving to every party what they would wish and they may keep an authoritarian force in control for a period of time, but what alternative is being proposed in relation to this?

Q262 **Mr Lewis:** It might be helpful, not necessarily now, but perhaps in writing, to spell out how the £15 million has been spent. It is not a question of saying we should not be engaged in peace processes where we are making a difference; it is how effective the use of that £15 million is. What outcomes has it bought, or what inputs has it bought, for that matter?

Richard Montgomery: We would be delighted to provide more detail. Most of the resource has been used in supporting weaker parties to engage in the peace process—so support to ethnic organisations that are representing a voice that needs to express itself in relation to Government. We can show that we have been supporting some very valid work to keep the peace process going.

If I could add to the Minister's comment, it is not for us, from outside, to say what the future political settlement is going to be in Burma, but there needs to be political settlement. While we saw Fortify Rights and the colleague from the Shan group talking about their lack of confidence, out of 21 armed ethnic organisations, 10 have signed the Panglong peace agreement—two more last year. There are people who are invested in

the peace process. There are parts of the country that are less violent than others, and it is the case that we need to create the conditions in which people see incentives for peace—from both the Government and the military, as well as from ethnic groups. In an ethnically diverse nation, as we have seen in other places, like Nepal or Indonesia, some sort of political settlement deal will need to be done in future years. Whether that comes in the short term or the long term, we do not know.

Investing in the peace process may not have tangible outcomes like a vaccination programme, but it is probably a more important piece of work for the UK Government to be pump-priming than many others that you could see across the world. We would be very happy to write to you on the sorts of things that are provided.

Chair: As Ivan suggests, that would be very helpful.

Alistair Burt: If you are worried about cost, the cost of repairing places after peace has broken down is infinitely greater than putting money into a peace process.

Q263 **Mr Lewis:** Agreed, Minister. Last week, we heard from human rights activists that the humanitarian work DFID was doing in Kachin and northern Shan was a lifeline and was making a real difference. As we understand it, that humanitarian programme is due to end this year. Is that being reviewed? Is there a possibility that that will be extended, with another three-year programme? How does that work? Where are we up to with that?

Richard Montgomery: The short answer is yes. We are also looking at re-orientating some of our health and education work to make sure that we are working more with ethnic organisations that provide health and education. That is something that we have been discussing with the Secretary of State. It is not just about a humanitarian lifeline, although we are helping to provide assistance to about 100,000 people in northern Shan and the Kachin, and in the Thai border camps. Through the livelihood and food security programme, we are also doing work up in these areas on nutrition, on maternal health and on trying to provide opportunities for farmers and people involved in forestry to make better livelihoods. These are, again, incentives for peace in the longer term.

Alistair Burt: We are also helping with microfinance, for people to seek a different sort of livelihood.

Q264 **Mr Lewis:** Okay, so it will not end, but you are currently working on a new programme or an extended programme to look beyond this year.

Richard Montgomery: Yes.

Q265 **Chair:** Let me finish this section on Burma, before we move on to Bangladesh, with this issue of the work that happens on parliamentary strengthening, much of which is funded by DFID. We had an evidence session on this last week. What would be the threshold or trigger point for the Government to consider withdrawing support for the Burmese Parliament?

Alistair Burt: I do not know. I have thought that through as well. The advice and support we try to provide is for those nascent institutions in Parliament, and for the individuals who might be likely to develop the sort of structures that will provide greater transparency and greater accountability, to be challenging and to see Parliament in that role. I suppose a cut-off point is when you realise you are not speaking to anyone who wants to do this and take things forward. That is not my understanding of where the programme is. Accordingly, so long as there are people who are likely to provide some of the challenges and some of the opportunities for the development of democracy in Burma, as part of the transition process that is going ahead, we would like to see it.

We are trying to make sure that the programme is shaped to ensure that Parliament communicates more regularly and effectively on the Government's humanitarian and rehabilitation responses to events, works more closely with civil society, including with Rohingya representatives, and understands more about how other Parliaments have responded to violent conflict. There is still a process going on. I suppose the honest answer is, when you think that no one is listening anymore, what is the point? We have not reached that. As I said earlier, if those of us who believe in these things disengage, where is the other voice going to come from for anyone there who believes in the same things that we believe in and wants to see something different in Burma?

Q266 **Chair:** I welcome what you said about a test, in a sense, being engagement with civil society, and you said "including Rohingya

representatives". Is there any evidence at all of that having happened so far among parliamentarians in Burma? We did not hear any last week.

Richard Montgomery: Anthony Smith has written a letter to you about the three plenary sessions in which the Rakhine situation was raised. We do not know what the content was.

Q267 **Chair:** Yes, and that could be a debate about terrorism, rather than about genocide, couldn't it?

Richard Montgomery: Yes. I do not know about the content.

Q268 **Chair:** Right. We know there are no Rohingya Members of Parliament in the Burmese Parliament. Is there any sense that some of the other ethnic issues we have been talking about today with the peace process get addressed in any serious way in the Burmese Parliament?

Alistair Burt: I do not know the answer to your question, Chair, as I do not cover the programme individually like that, but I will check.

Q269 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The letter from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy said the latest debate, for example, was in response to the IPU resolution. It is lacking evidence that there have been, on its own account, these discussions. One of the things that we asked last week was about what changes in the programme have been made since the initiation of the extended violence in Rakhine state, and I felt as if we got three relatively weak responses back. One of them was the inclusion of ethnic minority voices in Parliament in the discussion. Was it acceptable not to have included them in the initial conceptualisation of the

programme, therefore, if they have only been included since the violence has started? Was it an oversight, in terms of the longer term direction the programme was going in, that it did not include that initially?

Alistair Burt: Again, I was not responsible for the origin of the programme. I take your point. It is a question of responding to local circumstances and moving people on. Maybe it just was not possible at that stage, but it is much more possible now. As we have said, this is all a process. This state is not where we would wish it to be. Public opinion in Burma about the Rohingya is nowhere near where we would wish it to be. We are giving a perspective from where we are. It is very different locally on the ground, so how do you induce change in those circumstances, where there is a culture so very set against it? One thing is to be constant and persistent. The other thing is to recognise there is a timescale, which is not always of an external foundation.

Q270 **Chair:** Before we move on to Bangladesh, I personally feel quite torn, because you make good arguments about engagement. On the other hand, my sense is that we are probably not making much difference at the moment in equipping potentially reformist Burmese parliamentarians to challenge things. Surely there has to be some comeback for what is going on. The arguments you have made that I agree with are that programmes like education and health should definitely be protected, because that is about the most vulnerable and poorest people in Burma. There are probably different views in the Committee, but I personally remain to be convinced that our parliamentary strengthening work is

doing much good at all. Anyway, we will move on to Bangladesh now.

Alistair Burt: All things are flexible, and we would be remiss in our duty if we did not look hard at the possibility of change when it is necessary. The fundamentals, we all agree on. No one wants to carry on if it is pointless, but I will say that a decision of that nature also has consequences.

Chair: I understand.

Q271 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** On Bangladesh now, where we did manage to get in the other week, are the Government concerned by the shrinking of civil society space in Bangladesh, particularly ahead of the elections? We heard reports of arrests of journalists, disappearances and intimidation of journalists in Bangladesh. Have there been discussions with the Bangladesh Government about this direction of travel?

Alistair Burt: The answer to your question is, broadly, yes. There has been a shrinkage of the political space. It is a vibrant, busy society, as we know. The political structure is interesting, with the domination of the two major parties and the running of patronage through the whole society like a stick of rock in relation to all this. It is clearly a vibrant political space in terms of the competition between the Awami League and the BNP. Recently, efforts to close that down, whether in relation to the draft Digital Security Act or challenges to journalists and others, have caused concern. The UK Government raise these both publicly and privately with the Bangladeshi authorities.

Q272 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** What is our official position on the arrest and conviction of the leader of the main opposition party, the BNP, on corruption charges?

Alistair Burt: It is a judicial process that has been gone through in Bangladesh. It has a robust judiciary. It is not for the United Kingdom to gainsay that. We have seen the process; we note the outcome of this. This is a very important issue, but there has been a full and proper judicial process following charges and lengthy investigation.

Q273 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Does it not worry you that there is a danger that it will lead to a kind of tit for tat? If ever the BNP did gain power again, it would seek retaliation, which makes the current Government want to hold on to power even more strongly. It makes democracy less positive, not more.

Alistair Burt: In my experience, what goes around comes around, and that is true in politics as well as in life. It is not for the United Kingdom to tell parties in other countries how they conduct their affairs, but in my experience in the region, which is rather less than the experience I have in the Middle East, memories are exceptionally long—dates and events are remembered. For those who are in power and in office to recognise that there will, perfectly properly, come a time when they are not in office is an important conditioning on behaviour.

That said, full and proper judicial processes are conducted, even if they lead to consequences that one group or another may feel are unfair. The strength of independent institutions is crucial; Governments should not

interfere with them. Of course, in terms of political actions, there is recognition that there may be consequences in the future. That behoves all those taking part in the political process, in any state, including Bangladesh, to conduct their affairs recognising that the wheel goes round.

Q274 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** With the elections now looming and the potential that violence might increase as the elections come closer, or even as they pass and results are disputed, what preparations have we done to try to ensure that violence does not escalate and that we support a peaceful process?

Alistair Burt: Let me say a bit about what we are doing to support the democratic process this year. As I indicated, we engage with all the parties in Bangladesh and, as you rightly suggested, we encourage the sort of dialogue to create an environment that will be conducive to free, fair and pluralistic elections. We make it very clear that the Election Commission has to be allowed to continue its important work unimpeded. DFID is supporting the Asia Foundation to implement the strengthening and promoting of the active citizenship in Bangladesh project. Its goal is to strengthen and promote active citizenship in the democratic space. It is expected to increase informed citizen participation and engagement, and enhance accountability between citizen and Government decision-makers.

DFID is working with the FCO and others to develop an elections roadmap, to help co-ordinate advocacy and programmatic activities. The

sense is that, where we talk about, and work with parties for, an open, transparent process in which there is no acceptance of corrupt practices or anything similar, we can give the sense that the elections will be fair and free and, therefore, that there will be no need to resort to violence or anything else. It is the support of the process that we are following now which we hope will have that beneficial effect.

Q275 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** We visited a programme that we were supporting, where young people from the different parties were being brought together. That was a very positive piece of work, trying to make sure young people got to know each other as human beings, not just as opposing politicians. That is all very positive, and I can say I was impressed with that when I visited.

Alistair Burt: Thank you for saying so. A general point that we could all make is that the polarisation of politics and the confrontational aspect of it are possibly worse than they have been for some time in many different societies. It seems that those who reach out to others, those who talk about consensus and compromise, are the ones who are derided, because it is easier to whip up extremists in any circumstance now. I am not making this allegation specifically in relation to Bangladesh. I say it as a comment on politics generally, whether it is Europe, the United States or anywhere else, or whether it is us. Accordingly, we look for those opportunities where people recognise political differences, and are able to live with them and say, "This is something with which I do not agree, but we must move on and find a

practical way. Many people agree with you, although I do not, so let us find a way to go forward". We have to give space to that and encourage that. In any political discourse, that is as valid and as praiseworthy a sentiment as someone who says, "Here I stand, I can do no other" and who brooks no competition or anything else. There are times to be pig-headed; there are times to listen.

Q276 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Thank you. I could not agree more, I suspect. Bangladesh is not immune itself to ethnic conflict. It is 20 years ago, of course, that the Chittagong peace accords were signed, and there were a number of conditions on those peace accords. One was about land redistribution, and one was about some level of autonomy/devolution, neither of which quite seems to have come about to the fullest extent. There have been recent allegations of Bangladeshi security forces entering certain communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, abusing people there and overreaching their power. What are the UK Government doing to raise the profile of the Chittagong and other indigenous peoples in Bangladesh? Are we offering any support in terms of a process of justice for those people?

Alistair Burt: No, not currently. We heard this exchange and are aware of the suggestions being made. We do not have programmes addressing violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts at present. Our sense was that the pressures that were evident 20 years ago had eased to some degree, but the evidence that you heard has interested us, and we will look at that. There is the possibility of a programme entitled Enabling Pathways out of

Extreme Poverty being extended to the CHT area in the future. That provides some basic help, access to services, work opportunities and the like, so we will have a look at that, but we were interested in what was said, and we will go back and have a further look. At the moment, we do not have any programmes countering violence there, because our sense was that that situation had been eased, but we will look very carefully at the evidence that was presented to you.

Richard Montgomery: Please give us the evidence. We have quite a good track record in Bangladesh of supporting human rights groups. We have an umbrella programmed called Manusher Jonno; I do not know if you were briefed about it when you went. There are organisations like BLAST, the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, which may know of the cases that you are raising. We can find out more, but we do not have that level of detail at this session, I am afraid.

Q277 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Is there any wider consideration of looking at how the peace process more generally, and those conditions of the peace process, are being fulfilled? It has some interesting parallels, of course, with Northern Ireland, and that may be why it is interesting for us to be involved in supporting countries that also have a 20-year-old peace process that might or might not now be coming to maturity.

Patrick Moody: It is a good question, and we will look at it. In terms of a formal review I can give you now, I do not have that, so we will look at that.

Richard Montgomery: Our impression is that, overall, the 1997 peace accord has been a success. Of course, some of the land pressures you are talking about rub up against the Rohingya situation, so let us not pretend that this is a simplistic situation.

Chair: Finally, we have some questions that relate to DFID's work on economic development and skills in Bangladesh.

Q278 **Mrs Latham:** While we were in Bangladesh, the Committee visited a skills training programme for the ultra-poor and a garment factory where DFID was also involved in skills training. Some Members had concerns with both of those programmes. The skills training programme for the ultra-poor was thought to be going to close because of the ending of funding by DFID, and the skills training programme in the factory was provided by DFID even though the factory itself was a multi-million pound business. Can you explain the logic behind this?

Alistair Burt: We have been funding the underprivileged children's education programme for about 12 years, and we have been the major donor for most of that. That has been to strengthen our capacity to diversify their funding and make sure they can do better. That is why we are reducing the support to that programme—because, actually, it has been successful.

With regard to the Sudokkho factories, there are strict policies in relation to the employment of children and others, but the programme supports skills development right through the ready-made garment sector. It is

designed to stimulate private sector investment in training for the poor, including women, youth and disadvantaged populations. We believe real advances have been made in terms of regulations and the like, partly because of the engagement of those of us from outside. That is why there has been the determination to follow the programmes, with both individual companies and the sector in general.

Q279 **Mrs Latham:** As we know, there are people out there, like the *Daily Mail*, who do not agree with DFID and the funding. They are likely to ask why the British taxpayer is funding the training of workers for a profitable garment factory in Bangladesh.

Alistair Burt: My first, short answer, before asking Richard, is again to talk about the process here and moving people along, which is not always appreciated by those in the media. You do not get where you are immediately, and sometimes programmes are designed to encourage those who have the resources to place the resources in the right place. It is like the sustainability programmes in health and education. We work in those areas through projects in countries, where we encourage the transfer of funds by the state itself to the areas where we are working so that they become sustainable. The same is true in relation to improving conditions for those who work in very difficult industries, like the garment industry, with all its history in Bangladesh. The process is to start something that gradually moves on to sustainability, either by state or private. That is the theory behind it.

Richard Montgomery: One ought to see it as part of an overarching approach, which is trying to create incentives, both sticks and carrots, for the ready-made garment industry to up its game. I do not know how the *Daily Mail* covered the Rana Plaza event, but that made a lot of people in our country who shop every weekend in Primark, TK Maxx or M&S aware that their garments are coming from factories where women do not get toilet breaks for hours on end or where the level of conditions has been appalling. It is big credit to not just the Government of Bangladesh and international institutions like the ILO, which have run better inspection regimes, but also to commercial companies like M&S and Primark, which have demanded supply chain checks.

These have created carrots and sticks. Factories have to meet new regulations but, in order for them to skill up and meet those regulations, they also need support and a demonstration of what it is like to create better jobs, better conditions for workers, and better employee engagement. Many of these factories never had any sort of employee association and they now have them. Indeed, I hope you got to meet some rather vocal women who are shop floor people for these factories, who help raise standards. Part of the incentivisation of factories to improve the working conditions of their staff is to show them how better training can raise productivity.

I do not think we see this as a sort of long-term handout. We are seeing this as a hand-up to factories to demonstrate that better training is worthwhile. We have ample evidence to show that many factories have

adopted this training and are paying for themselves, and it is no longer funded by the UK taxpayer. The UK taxpayer can be really proud of the way that we have helped, along with many others, improve the ready-made garment industry, which now supports not just 4 million women directly through wages but supports about 15% of the Bangladesh population, if you look at the households that those women are effectively the wage earner for. The ready-made garment sector is a big success story, and both the UK private sector and the UK Government can claim a good deal of plaudits for that.

Q280 **Mrs Latham:** You have just said that it is not a long-term project. How long term do you think this will be?

Richard Montgomery: I cannot answer that, but most of these projects are five years. UCEP is a good example, which the Minister has mentioned. We set this up 10 or 15 years ago. One of my first postings for DFID was in Bangladesh, so I was involved in the original setting up of that project. It is an example of us phasing out. We used to be the majority funder; we are only 10% of the finance now. That is a good example of a sustainable project.

Q281 **Chair:** I want to ask about that, but I want to keep us on the factory issues. We met the ILO and some of the British brands, as well as visiting a factory, and a lot of what you have said absolutely fits with what we heard. One of the concerns was about sustainability. Once the accord, as I understand it, comes to an end and things pass over to the local authorities in Bangladesh, will the systems be in place and will the

resources be there to ensure that some of the advances of the last five years are sustained and, in particular, extended to the types of factories that we were not taken to visit?

Richard Montgomery: There is no turning back now, because of the supply chain expectations of the big companies and the fact that they would be caught out. M&S has a lot of its own and external audit processes, which means that these companies that want to supply to western markets have to show that they are meeting standards. Of course, there is always a risk of some slipping through, but in general I do not think there is any turning back.

Q282 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** You are quite right in that analysis, particularly with the pressure from Mothercare, M&S, Primark and Debenhams, which we met, and which are leading the way on this. We heard that some of the programmes made the factories more profitable in the long run, so would it have been a better solution or consideration to think about low-interest loans rather than, effectively, grants? That might have had a slightly better balance in terms of recognising that it was going to make them more profitable and giving them that step up.

Richard Montgomery: This is a transition that is happening in DFID more broadly. The short answer is yes. The devil is in the detail. We have mechanisms that we call "development capital" coming on stream. The biggest example is CDC, which will be an investor in funds. The short answer is yes, but in the particular case of Bangladesh we were right to move as quickly as possible to create a regime of incentives—

both inspections and capacity-building support, standard-setting and coalition-building—with the private sector. There is good justification for us needing to move quickly into a very fast-growing sector.

It goes back to the question about how we change the use of our instruments in countries like Bangladesh as they become wealthier. In the longer term, we want to be moving towards more of a trade rather than aid relationship with many of these countries. That is why we are investing more in CDC and in other countries. In countries like Pakistan, we have set up funds in which we are basically taking an equity. We are giving a loan or taking an equity in order for them to on-lend to small and medium enterprises, to build their ability to export to blue chip markets.

Alistair Burt: As this Committee knows better than most, development changes. When overseas aid was first considered, it was large amounts of money passed from one Government to another to do "good things" in their countries. We have all learnt a lot since those days, so it changes and, as Richard says, the instruments and facilities that we use change over time. Moving people from where they have been, sometimes culturally, with no interest in some of the things that we value most, is not always the easiest of processes. There is a variety of incentives needed to do that. We are extremely conscious of the need to respond to the UK taxpayer and demonstrate that things are effective, but things are effective sometimes in more ways than purely financial. If lives are saved in the garment industry in Bangladesh because of the work that we do, it is worth it.

Q283 **Chair:** Can I take us back finally to UCEP, the underprivileged children's education programme? A number of us visited one of its colleges in Dhaka, and I have to say I was very, very impressed. Clearly, the UK has played a major role over the years, as you rightly reminded us, in funding UCEP. Is there any possibility of revisiting the timescale for the reduction of funding? As Pauline said in her question, we were told that some of UCEP's colleges have had to close because of the loss of funding. UCEP accepts that DFID cannot carry on funding it forever and that it needs to diversify, but if we can fund it for a bit longer and perhaps help it a bit more with the diversification, that may mean it does not have to close any of its other colleges.

Alistair Burt: As you say, this has been a successful programme. We have worked very hard with the programme to help it expand its donor base so that it is able to carry on. We have a mid-term review next year about how this has worked, and we can make some decisions then. Our funding has been going down, and is going down, but we will look very carefully at the circumstances next year.

Richard Montgomery: There are two things to add. First, it will have the right to apply to a new challenge fund. Whether it is successful or not, I cannot guarantee, because it is a competitive process.

The only other thing I would caution is that we have this dialogue with a lot of organisations, and every time we say, "Okay, we are not going to stick to what we said before, and we are going to give you another piece of funding", we create an incentive for the next round of negotiations

with another organisation. That is problematic. The debate with UCEP has been going on for some years, and we need to give the right balance between pressure and support to get it into a position where it is able and getting funding from other people. In fact, one of the success stories of the DFID programme in Bangladesh is building more sustainable organisations. BRAC started off in the refugee camps of West Bengal in 1971 and is now a global institution providing benefits for millions of people. The UK helped to build that, but we did that by a focus on sustainability: it had to raise its own income and become sufficiently attractive to other sources of finance. I do not want to underplay the conversation we have with UCEP, and of course we will follow up with it further, but we just need to be careful. One of our aims is to build sustainable institutions not reliant on the British taxpayer, and we would like to see it as a success, not as a problem, that we are getting there.

Q284 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Those points are entirely reasonable. I guess all I would say as a final comment is that, having visiting probably dozens of these vocational education programmes, both in this country and around the world, it really was one of the most impressive ones I have seen.

Alistair Burt: We will take that really seriously. You know what you are talking about, and that is a help.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That brings our session today to a close.