**Burma**

***Question***

**2.44 pm**

*Asked by* ***Baroness Cox***

To ask Her Majesty’s Government what is their assessment of the current situation in Burma with particular reference to the Rohingya, Shan and Kachin peoples.

**The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government & Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Warsi) (Con):** My Lords, we welcome that the Burmese Government and ethnic armed conflict groups will establish a joint committee to draft a nationwide ceasefire text, but remain concerned by low-level fighting in Kachin state and Shan state. We are troubled by UN reports that at least 40 Rohingya people were killed in Rakhine state in January and by constraints imposed on Médecins sans Frontières. We have pressed for improved security and accountability, co-ordination of humanitarian assistance and a solution on Rohingya citizenship.

**Baroness Cox (CB):** My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness for her Answer, including her expression of concern for the suffering of the Rohingya people. Is she aware that I visited Shan state recently and Kachin state last year, and that in both states, despite ceasefires, the Burmese army continues to carry out military offensives and atrocities, including the killing, rape and torture of civilians, while the Burmese Government continue their expropriation of land, theft of natural resources and displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians? Will Her Majesty’s Government not consider more robust responses? Many Burmese people and advocacy organisations such as Burma Campaign UK, in its recent report, *Downplaying Human Rights Abuses in Burma,* are concerned that the British Government are making trade and investment such a priority that the Burmese Government can continue to kill and exploit their own people with impunity.

**Baroness Warsi:** My Lords, as ever, the noble Baroness comes to these questions with probably the most up-to-date information available. She is absolutely right that, despite ceasefires having been signed, there is still concern about real human rights abuses happening in Shan, about fighting in Kachin and, of course, about the appalling situation in Rakhine. We take these matters very seriously. They have been raised in the most robust way at the highest level, by the Prime Minister, when President Thein Sein visited the United Kingdom, and most recently by me about a week ago, when Ministers from the national planning committee were here, as well as representatives of the chamber of commerce and the director-general responsible for all investment coming into Burma. I did not hold back in any way in making very clear to them our view that responsible business can happen in Burma only against a backdrop of human rights being observed.

**Lord Avebury (LD):** My Lords, have we asked the Burmese Government directly why they are not providing adequate protection and relief for the 140,000 Rohingya displaced victims of ethnic cleansing in Rakhine state but are instead expelling humanitarian organisations such as MSF, which provided health services to these victims of the Government’s failure to protect them? Secondly, why does the FCO’s quarterly report on Burma as a country of concern play down or omit these and other human rights violations, such as the tolerance of hate speech?

**Baroness Warsi:** I assure my noble friend that the discussions in relation to Médecins sans Frontières are ongoing. We have huge concerns about it being probably one of a handful of NGOs that are providing health support in Rakhine. Those discussions are ongoing and I will certainly report to the House once we have made some progress. The quarterly report stated: “More needs to be done to tackle hate speech, which continues to inspire violence and intolerance across Burma; we continue to lobby the Burmese government to tackle these underlying issues”.

We continue to raise these matters. As to humanitarian access, my noble friend will be aware that there are certain parts of the country which, unfortunately, due to fighting, we cannot access, but we continue to press the Burmese Government to allow us access in those areas where there is no fighting.

**Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead (Lab):** My Lords, how does the Minister respond to the report of the outgoing UN special rapporteur for human rights in Burma last week, in which he concluded that human rights violations against the Rohingya people could amount to crimes against humanity that should be the subject of an independent international inquiry? Will Her Majesty’s Government support these well founded recommendations?

**Baroness Warsi:** We support a lot of the work that is being done by the special rapporteur. In that report, which he presented to the Human Rights Council, he felt that technical assistance was required from the international community for any investigation to be transparent, credible and acceptable. I know that the noble Baroness does a large amount of work in this area and continues to campaign. Of course, we will continue to press the Human Rights Council for a strong resolution on human rights against Burma.

**Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB):** My Lords, the noble Baroness will be aware that the forthcoming census in Burma is largely funded by the United Kingdom. Has she seen the calls by a number of non-governmental organisations that it should be postponed, not least because in Rakhine state, and other states where there are large ethnic minorities, it could certainly be a flashpoint for further confrontation. Will she at the very least ensure that, should the census be conducted, it will not be used to further distort the ethnic tensions in Myanmar?

**Baroness Warsi:** The noble Lord is right. We have provided about £10 million to ensure that the census is conducted in a technically sound way. We have also helped with the mapping exercise. We have concerns about the census, which is due on 28 March. This Friday will be census night and there will then be a period of 10 days when enumeration will take place. We have concerns because of the 135 officially recognised ethnicities—Rohingya, for example is not included—but we take some comfort from the fact that we have gained agreement from the Burmese Government for independent observers to be mobilised during this process. We hope that the option to self-identify will be used by the Rohingya community to be properly enumerated.

**Lord Triesman (Lab):** My Lords, the noble Baroness has said that these issues are raised with the Burmese authorities vigorously and frequently and I know that to be the case. I am sure that these efforts are appreciated. To ensure that these issues do not drop between any cracks or rely on a single sentence to capture them, should we not adopt in the quarterly report a traffic light system under which countries that persistently abuse human rights are shown to all of those who read our reports around the world as red, those which are making progress as amber and others as green? As we take comfort in some progress, I sometimes feel that we have lost them on our radar.

**Baroness Warsi:** As the Minister with responsibility for human rights, I constantly keep under review how the quarterly and annual reports on human rights are presented, how we can present them better and how we can better judge countries that are making progress. I am starting to see the first drafts of the human rights reports which will be published later this year. They will include a great deal of detail on Burma, both as a country of concern and in relation to specific human rights abuses.