

# Refugees and Migrants from Asia and Africa

## *Motion to Take Note*

Moved by **Lord Alton of Liverpool**

9<sup>th</sup> June, 2015

*That this House takes note of the displacement of refugees and migrants from Asia and Africa and to the long-term and short-term measures to address their plight.*

### **Baroness Cox (Crossbencher)**

My Lords, I also congratulate my noble friend on initiating this timely debate and on his characteristically comprehensive and compelling opening speech. It is with a heavy heart that I report the findings from my recent visits to Burma and Sudan, where I met many hundreds of refugees and forcibly displaced people. I focus on these areas as they are largely inaccessible to international aid organisations and are off the radar screen of the international media.

In Sudan, the Government continue with their aerial bombardment of civilians and ground offensives in Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan, the latter states known as the Two Areas. For example, in May, the South Kordofan Blue Nile Coordination Unit reported that an estimated 180 bombs, including four cluster bombs, and about 300 shells were dropped on civilian locations in the Two Areas, killing and injuring civilians, destroying livestock, and deliberately targeting crops, markets, hospitals and schools. In Sudan, there are an estimated 3.1 million internally displaced persons: 2.5 million in Darfur and more than half a million in the Two Areas. Some 3.7 million people in Sudan face crisis and stressed levels of acute food insecurity, and that number is likely to reach 4.2 million during the July to September so-called peak lean season.

In Burma, I was pleased to report positive developments following a visit to Chin state in February, but a subsequent visit has sadly revealed that military offensives by the Burmese army continue to cause mass displacement and great suffering in Shan and Kachin states, despite ceasefire agreements and peace negotiations. More than half a million people have fled to neighbouring countries, and more than 600,000 have been internally displaced.

Furthermore, the Government are encouraging unscrupulous mega-developments, including

dam-building and mining, creating displacement of local populations without adequate consultation and sometimes with no compensation, causing further large-scale displacement. For example, according to International Rivers, in one project alone, 60,000 people have been forcibly relocated by the Ta Sang-Mongtong dam on the Salween river.

Conditions in the camps for displaced people are dire and worsening. Flooding has recently caused food shortages and the destruction of shelters in the camps for the Rohingya, many of whom, as we know, have risked and lost their lives as they flee from violent attacks on their communities and unbearable conditions in the camps, as highlighted by the noble Baroness, Lady Kinnock. On the Thai-Burma border, in camps for the Shan and Kachin IDPs, problems abound with health risks such as the rise of dengue fever and severe food shortages. For example, the daily allowance for IDPs in Kachin state has been cut to the equivalent of less than 20 US cents a day. It is not possible to live on that, and the Kachin Peace Network claims that only 17% of the basic needs of IDPs are currently being met. We have visited these camps and seen the conditions.

In this context, the decision of the UK Government and DfID to refrain from providing any cross-border aid to civilians trapped behind closed borders in Sudan and to reduce cross-border aid to community-based organisations working across the border in Burma, other than the Thai-Burma Border Consortium, is immensely disturbing. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that more than 50% of IDPs in Burma are in non-government controlled areas and are therefore not receiving any aid from the Burmese Government, aid channels or international NGOs. It has always been the policy of my own small NGO, the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust—HART—to work with local, community-based organisations which can reach people who are trapped in these situations and which do not withdraw in times of danger and insecurity. We visit them regularly and have seen again and again how these organisations are highly effective at delivering aid to their people in greatest need. We receive comprehensive reports and are continually impressed by their accountability. These CBOs provide food, medical and educational supplies, and they are trusted by the local people. I hope, therefore, that Her Majesty's Government and DfID will reconsider their position on working with such community-based organisations.

In conclusion, perhaps I may highlight three priorities that are essentially similar for both countries and ask the Minister how Her Majesty's Government are responding or will

respond to these challenges. The first is the urgent need to end the impunity with which the army and the Government in both Burma and Sudan continue to perpetrate military offensives and human rights abuses against their own civilians: in Sudan in Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan; and in Burma against the Rohingya, Shan and Kachin peoples.

The second priority is the need for the international community to promote political solutions which will bring genuine peace and justice for all civilians. While Her Majesty's Government are supporting the political process with regard to forthcoming elections in Burma, many ethnic national peoples fear that this will not bring justice for them. In Sudan, too, it is immensely hard for the people suffering there to see any effects of Her Majesty's Government's interventions to bring the Sudanese Government to account for their continuing genocidal policies in Darfur and the Two Areas.

The third priority is the need for immediate, urgent short-term interventions to relieve the suffering of these displaced civilians, especially those trapped in areas where their Governments do not allow access to humanitarian aid. I sincerely hope that the Minister will be able to offer reassurance as to how the United Kingdom will contribute to the international community's duty to protect these civilians, and provide life-saving humanitarian aid to the refugees and displaced people currently dying at the hands of their own Governments in Sudan and Burma.