



BARONESS COX
Oral Question on Sudan
30 April 2019

Baroness Cox: To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their response to recent developments in Sudan.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con): My Lords, since President Bashir's removal on 11 April, the United Kingdom has engaged with the protest movement, opposition parties and the transitional military council to encourage all to agree a process for a swift and peaceful transition to civilian rule. We are also working closely with international partners and welcome the leadership of the African Union in its clear push for a political transition. Sudan's long-suffering people expect their leaders to seize this opportunity for change.

Baroness Cox (CB): My Lords, I thank the Minister for his encouraging and sympathetic reply, but is he aware that I visited Sudan 30 times during the war waged by President al-Bashir and witnessed personally the scale of brutality and suffering inflicted on the Sudanese people, while the UK Government allowed his regime to continue its genocidal policies with impunity, to the dismay of the Sudanese people? What are Her Majesty's Government now doing to help to redeem Britain's reputation by giving substantive political and humanitarian support to those valiant, peaceful protestors across Sudan who have suffered a brutal response from the military Government, including at least 67 killed, many injured and hundreds arrested?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: My Lords, of course I recognise the important role that the noble Baroness has played over the years in Sudan. I am sure that we are all grateful for the situation that is now emerging there. As the noble Baroness will know, the United Kingdom has supported Sudan with humanitarian aid to the tune of £30 million, and we continue to target humanitarian aid to specific regions of the country. I assure the noble Baroness that the issue of impunity for those who have committed crimes has been raised at all levels, including with the current transitional military council. We remain committed as a Government to the ICC, and we believe that any indicted criminal under the ICC should be brought to the ICC.

Lord Clarke of Hampstead (Lab): My Lords, following the street protests—especially those that took place between December 2018 and early 2019—hundreds of people were locked up. Can the Minister tell us if there is any evidence that these people are still incarcerated after the changes that have taken place? Secondly, can he say whether there has been any evidence of maltreatment during their incarceration in custody? I would be grateful if he could answer those two points.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: My Lords, the noble Lord is quite right to raise that issue. My understanding is that political prisoners have been released by the transitional military

council. On the question of what or how they suffered, I am sure that in time their testimonies will be accounted for and appropriate action will be taken. The head of the transitional military council has also emphasised the importance of upholding justice systems within Sudan.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, while we should do everything possible on the humanitarian side arising from these events, as the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, urges—not just in Sudan but throughout the Maghreb, where Algeria and Tunis also spring to mind—can we be careful about the political side? The Minister mentions engagement. Can he and his colleagues bear in mind that our political engagement, involvement and intervention in Libya were not a dazzling success?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: My Lords, I think we have learned the lessons of previous engagements. As far as Sudan is concerned, my noble friend will be aware that the United Kingdom is one of the troika of nations—together with the US and Norway—which have been leading the diplomatic engagement. Aside from Bashir, we have dealt with other members of the Administration, and I assure the noble Lord that we are working with, for example, the forces of the declaration of freedom and change, which is made up of professionals, trade unionists and other civil society leaders. During the time of Bashir's regime too, we dealt directly with civil society leaders who have played an important role in ensuring that all communities in Sudan, most notably the persecuted Christian communities, see their rights being restored.

Lord Chidgey (LD): My Lords, western Governments have supported the forces of freedom and change, but Sudan's key Gulf lenders back the military council, while African states have called for more time for the army to hand over power to civilians. There are wider issues coming into play, such as Sudan's support for the Saudi-led coalition war in Yemen, the deepening economic crisis and the call for Sudan to join the International Criminal Court, with the repercussions of that, but surely the priority has to be the ongoing humanitarian challenge. What assistance are the Government mobilising, particularly to address the food crisis and malnutrition in Darfur and the Kordofans? What plans do the Government have to address the expected increase in returnees to South Kordofan and Blue Nile, putting pressure on already stretched resources?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The noble Lord is right to raise the issue of humanitarian aid. The two regions he mentions are exactly where aid is currently being directed. He mentioned the broader issue of other partners. We are working very closely with the African Union and we have also engaged directly with the Emirati Foreign Minister and the Saudi Foreign Minister, Mr Jubeir, on the situation; my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary has had calls with both of them. It is my understanding that those two countries have already pledged £3 billion of humanitarian aid.

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, I welcome the statement by the troika saying that the transitional military council must move as speedily as possible to civilian rule. As the Minister knows, transitions can be extended and extended and extended. What is the United Kingdom doing to ensure that this transitional military council remains transitional and that we make every effort to ensure a speedy move to civilian rule?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I totally agree with the noble Lord: the word “transitional” is key. In our dealings with the African Union, the suggested timeline has been three months. We take encouragement from the new leader of the transitional military council and from the protests that continue to take place. There has been a reaching out: the individuals who were of deep concern to the protest movement have been removed from the military council; and there is direct engagement with the opposition forces. Having visited Sudan and seen the suppression of press freedom and of the freedom of minorities, I think we take great encouragement from the fact that those protests and that engagement continue, and the military has ceased from intervening to suppress the protests.

Baroness Afshar (CB): My Lords, are the Government aware that everything that Sudan is doing goes directly against the teaching of Islam? As a retired teacher of Islamic law, I can tell noble Lords that Islam recognises women as independent, both financially and personally, and in terms of the decisions they make for themselves and their children. In fact, women are entitled to payment should they choose to breastfeed their children. What the Sudanese Government are doing goes against every conception that Islam has of women; it is anti-Islamic. They really ought to be discouraged and not given any funds.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I am sure that the noble Baroness is referring to the previous regime. In view of the time, I will just say that there is a Koranic verse, “La ’ikraha fi al-din”, which means that there is no compulsion or coercion in faith. That should be understood not just by the new regime and Government in Sudan but by all Islamic Governments around the world.