



ORAL QUESTION
15th September 2015, 2.37 pm

*Asked by **Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead***

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the situation in Burma in advance of the first general election in that country since 2010, which is due to take place in November.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Anelay of St Johns) (Con): My Lords, although there remain unresolved issues around Burma's constitution, which continues to need reform, the elections in November 2015 have the potential to be a milestone in the country's transition to democracy. We continue to press the Burmese Government to ensure that the elections are credible, inclusive and transparent, and underpinned by freedom of expression and respect for human rights. The UK is funding technical advice to the election commission, voter education and monitoring.

Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead (Lab): Does the Minister share the widely held concern that hundreds and thousands of Burma's ethnic Rohingya have had the right to vote taken away from them and have been denied the right to stand as candidates for elections when they occur? When 25% of seats in Parliament are reserved for the army and generals predominate in the Government, where is the evidence of that promised transition from military rule that we heard so much about? In the light of these realities, do the British Government still believe that it is possible for those elections to be considered free, fair or credible in any way?

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: My Lords, we should recall that this is an opportunity that has not been available since 1960 for people in Burma to have a vote in a free and fair election. A lot of effort has been put in by countries such as the UK and all our partners to provide that opportunity for people to vote—after 55 years. We have made sure that we have done all we can to support correct voter registration, helping the election commission, but the noble Baroness is right to point out the serious matters that remain. We have consistently called, in public and in private, for the elections to be inclusive of all Burma's people. That includes those who have had their white cards removed. If not now, it should be soon—not a matter of when.

Baroness Cox (CB): While recognising the enormous significance of these elections, is the noble Baroness aware that I recently visited the Thai-Burma border and Shan state, where I met refugees from Kachin and Shan states, where fighting with the Burmese army continues, displacing tens of thousands of civilians? What measures have Her Majesty's Government taken to ensure the success of the national ceasefire agreement and to support credible, free and fair elections in Kachin and Northern Shan states, where the fighting continues?

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: My Lords, the noble Baroness is right: fine words from politicians need to be backed up with practical work. The UK is a leading member of the Peace Support Group. We are supporting the dialogue towards a national ceasefire agreement by funding experts who have direct experience of these matters to assist the process. We are putting our money where our mouth is: we are the largest bilateral donor to Kachin State and we announced a further £13.5 million for humanitarian work there in 2013. In addition, we have earmarked £3 million of flexible funding to support the peace process. It is practical work, but one has to have a long-term view and not give up in difficult circumstances.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD): My Lords, we are well aware that the British Army has close relations with the Burmese army, and is currently providing training. The Burmese army has been running the country for too long, and factions within it are clearly not prepared to give up. That is part of the problem that we face. Will the Minister tell us how we and other defence representatives in Burma are working with the Burmese army to persuade it that civilian control is what it also should observe?

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: The noble Lord is right to raise that matter. Clearly, our engagement has been nothing to do with combat training. As the noble Lord is aware, we discussed these matters when I worked with him. The Burmese military remains a clear political force in Burma. It is right that we should encourage and support reforms so that there is a completely civilian Government in future. Our defence engagement with the Tatmadaw is aimed at encouraging it to support the reform process through a programme of defence education work that is limited to non-combat education courses focused on the core principles of democratic accountability, international law and human rights.

Lord Tebbit: My Lords, does my noble friend recollect that a couple of years ago, in this House, our noble friend Lord Lawson observed that a prerequisite of a democracy to work was that there should have been the rule of law for 100 years? Does she think that that is so, and, if so, has it been established yet in Burma?

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: My Lords, I have just arrived here from launching the Magna Carta partnerships, which is a new FCO fund to promote the rule of law. I thank my noble friend for raising that point. I am impatient: 100 years would be too long to wait for the rule of law in Burma or elsewhere. We all, as parliamentarians, have a role to play. Our voices can ring out around the world. Let us make sure they do.

Baroness Nye: My Lords, everyone shares the Minister's hope that the elections will be fair, credible and inclusive, but, while the military still has a veto over constitutional change as a guarantee of the 25% of parliamentary seats, is denying Aung San Suu Kyi the opportunity to stand for president, and is banning opposition parties from criticising the military or the constitution during the election campaign, is it not time for the British Government to suspend military training by the British Army until Burma stops the recruitment of child soldiers and the use of rape and sexual violence against ethnic women by the Burmese army?

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: My Lords, there are a lot of important points in that question, but the underlying issue is whether we should cease our training of the military. The training is education to persuade the military that constitutional reform is not only right but necessary, and necessary now. She is right to point out that the constitution as it stands prevents the ability of Aung San Suu Kyi to stand for election because she has foreign-born children. That kind of provision should be amended.

Lord Alton of Liverpool: My Lords, during a visit last week to the Karen refugee camps and the Karen State, I was reminded by many Karen people of the statement by Lord Mountbatten of Burma that the Karen were our bravest and most loyal allies during the Second World War. Some 110,000 of them are in the refugee camps to this day, from a war that began in 1949. Will the Minister tell us whether we are now close to signing a permanent ceasefire and whether Her Majesty's Government are able to help with the permanent decommissioning of weapons throughout the Karen State, the restitution of land and the resolution of the other remaining outstanding issues? Will she call for those in the camps to be given the chance to vote in the forthcoming elections?

Baroness Anelay of St Johns: My Lords, we have made it clear that the franchise should be an inclusive process. However, to try to answer one other question key to the points made by the noble Lord, in welcoming the continuing peace process we are under no illusion how difficult it is. We have committed £3 million in flexible funding to support that peace process. That is to address intercommunal violence through the Peace Support Fund. It is only through such practical work that we can lead by example. I do not expect this to be a short process but inclusivity is vital to the success of the elections.