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House of Commons

Tuesday 14 December 2010

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Sri Lanka (Red Cross Operations)

7. Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): What recent reports he has received on the decision by the Sri Lankan authorities to end the operations of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the north of that country. [30265]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alistair Burt): The Government are aware that the Sri Lankan Government have asked the International Committee of the Red Cross to close

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two centres in the north of the country. We are also aware that the ICRC has, after a review, already closed down its own operations in Mannar.

Siobhain McDonagh: The removal of the Red Cross from the predominantly Tamil area shows contempt for a renowned international non-governmental organisation and will seriously inhibit much needed aid and assistance. In light of the comments made by the new cardinal of Colombo-that there is a dangerous trend of ethnic Sinhalese moving into Tamil areas-does the Minister agree with me that the real reason for removing the Red Cross was to allow for Government-supported demographic change to go unchecked by independent monitors?

Alistair Burt: I am not sure whether I can speak for the Government of Sri Lanka in explaining how they made their decision, but it is certainly true that the international community listens extremely carefully to the voice of the ICRC as an independent monitoring body, and its unavailability will therefore have to be compensated for elsewhere. The Government have consistently pressed Sri Lanka to live up to its offer of post-conflict reconciliation, but moves such as restricting access to detainees and any

restriction of the work of significant non-governmental organisations will make that process rather harder.

Mr Lee Scott (Ilford North) (Con): One of the valuable tasks performed by the ICRC has been investigating the disappearance of young children throughout the Tamil community and trying to repatriate them with any relatives who are still alive. Will my hon. Friend look into the possibility of pressing for that valuable work to be allowed to continue?

Alistair Burt: I will ask our posts in Sri Lanka to consider it carefully. The fact that more people need to return to the areas from which they were removed is another measure of the steps that are necessary in the post-conflict resolution, and although we have seen a great deal of progress over the years, more needs to be done.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): As the Minister will know, recent additional footage from Channel 4 has shown Sri Lankan forces executing civilians at the end of the conflict. He described the ICRC as an independent international monitor, but, as he will also know, there is serious concern about the continued lack of independent and transparent investigation of alleged war crimes in the country. Have Ministers urged the Sri Lankan Government to support a properly independent inquiry with international involvement, and did the Secretary of State for Defence also raise those points in his meeting with the Sri Lankan President earlier this month?

Alistair Burt: Our Government have made very clear to the Government of Sri Lanka that any process involving the examination of war crimes or other issues must be credible and must have an independent element. We suggested recently that those appointed to a United Nations panel should be the interlocutors with whom it would be wise for the Sri Lankans to be involved in an effort to influence the international community. They have the first responsibility in dealing with the inquiry,

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but if there is to be credibility in the international community it is essential for there to be an international element, and for the issues that have been raised recently to be looked into extremely carefully.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome and agree with what the Minister has said, but I urge him to go further in pressing the Sri Lankan Government to accept international involvement in order to increase the credibility of the report.

The Minister did not answer my question about whether the Defence Secretary had also raised the issue, and I must press him for clarity. The Sri Lankan Ministry of External Affairs has said that the President and the Defence Secretary had

"discussed areas of assistance to Sri Lanka",

and that

"There was agreement that the friendship between Sri Lanka and the UK should be strengthened".

Will the Minister tell the House what status that agreement has, and whether all Ministers are taking every opportunity to press for a credible investigation of war crimes?

Alistair Burt: The interest taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in Sri Lanka dates back to his time as a junior Foreign Office Minister in 1996, when he helped to broker a ceasefire in the conflict that was taking place then. He has retained that interest, and it is very helpful to the Government as a whole to have an interlocutor with such long-standing relationships.

The United Kingdom Government are united in respect of the issues that we raise with Sri Lanka. That process involves helping the Sri Lankan Government to understand what the international community requires, in monitoring what is currently happening, in access of NGOs to detainees, in further reconciliation following the conflict, and in providing opportunity for independent experts to be involved in the inquiry. The Defence Secretary fully understands and appreciates that united position.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): Given the strong all-party interest in the House in human rights in Sri Lanka, will the Minister reassure us that conversations are continuing with the Commonwealth and its secretary-general to ensure that they do not step back from their active interest in human rights issues generally and Sri Lanka in particular?

Alistair Burt: I am sure that is the case, and may I say in passing that we welcome the recent visit of a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association group to Sri Lanka? I have already met representatives who were on that trip. The visit shows the Commonwealth's strong interest in Sri Lanka's continuing development post-conflict. I was greatly appreciative of the efforts made by Members of this House in going on that trip and reporting back, and I am sure that they will report back to the House more fully at a later stage.