

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: [Crisis in Yemen](#), HC 696

Wednesday 1 February 2017

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Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Fiona Bruce; Stephen Doughty; Paul Scully.

Questions 1-38

Witnesses

[I](#): Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP.

Examination of witnesses

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Chair: I would like to welcome the former Secretary of State for International Development, Andrew Mitchell.

Q1 **Paul Scully:** Could you tell us about your visit to Yemen? Do feel free to make an introductory statement, but we just really wanted to know who facilitated the visit, what you saw, who you met and what your overall thoughts were.

Mr Mitchell: Thank you, Mr Scully, and thank you, Mr Twigg, for inviting me to return to your Committee. I was in Yemen just over a week ago. I visited at the invitation of Oxfam and the United Nations. I thought it was important someone went, and no Minister can go at the moment because of the security situation. Indeed, I was rung up on a number of occasions by the Foreign Office to make it clear that I was “on my own”. I thought someone ought to go to look at the humanitarian situation there because it has been described as the forgotten crisis. It is not easy to get in without Saudi permission. There is no commercial way of getting into the country. I went in on a United Nations aeroplane. I went there to see for myself what was happening on the ground. I was able to go the capital, Sana’a, and then to make the five-and-a-half-hour journey up to Sa’dah in the north, which has been very extensively damaged in the bombing.

I am extremely grateful to the United Nations and Oxfam for facilitating the visit, and I yield to no one in my deep respect for the staff of Oxfam and the United Nations, who are working there in extremely difficult circumstances.

As well as visiting in Sa’dah the 800-year-old mosque, which is neither Shi’a nor Sunni—it embraces a wider population than that—the school that had been destroyed, the hospital from which Médecins Sans Frontières have had to pull out, I was able to meet the Governor of Sa’dah and see for myself what had happened to the local government buildings and so forth that make up Sa’dah.

In Sana’a, I was able to meet some of the leading political figures amongst the Houthis and in the GPC, the party of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and also see for myself what was happening. I visited the funeral parlour where very large numbers of people were killed, and which was destroyed in a bombing attack during the funeral of the father of the Interior Minister.

I had a reasonably good look on the ground. I visited the British Embassy, which is shut, but I was able to report to the Foreign Office that the Embassy appears to be undamaged so far. I came away with some thoughts about the future, some considerable concerns about the state of British policy at the moment, and great anxiety about the humanitarian



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situation in Yemen, because Yemen is under siege. It is being besieged from the air, sea and land. People are not so much starving in Yemen, but they are being starved. This is an area where the United Nations says there is an acute danger of famine. I saw widespread evidence of malnutrition and deep food insecurity. It seems to me that, if we are to avoid a famine, it would be just as well for the policy governing Yemen at the moment, both at the UN and in Britain, to be reviewed.

Q2 Paul Scully: Kevin Watkins from Save the Children went recently and wrote about his visit. He talked about his belief that 40% of children were acutely malnourished. From what you are saying, you have obviously seen it at first hand. Is that a figure you feel chimes with what you have seen? Is it that sort of scale?

Mr Mitchell: Yes. In the hospital, I was able to see the work that was being done on malnutrition and talk to the doctors who were dealing with the cases of malnutrition that came to them, and they are escalating. I would very much agree with that. The United Nations say a child is dying every 10 minutes in the Yemen at the moment.

Q3 Paul Scully: Is the aid getting through to those who need it? What are the barriers, if not?

Mr Mitchell: There are acute problems. Some aid is getting through. I visited two camps that Oxfam is running. They are dealing with people who are right at the bottom of Yemeni society, who are internally displaced. They have been able to get, as Oxfam so brilliantly does in the most extraordinary situations, water and sanitation to these people, but they have also been able to secure their safety by restoring water and sanitation to the nearby towns. Of course, that has given the 5,000 people who were being protected by Oxfam in the two camps I visited in between Sana'a and Sa'dah a degree of protection, as a result of the work Oxfam is doing there.

Paul Scully: That is very interesting. Thank you very much.

Q4 Chair: We are going to move on in a moment, Andrew, to some of the issues about UK policy, but let me ask one question first of all. At the World Humanitarian Summit last year, the UK committed to pursue a "whole of aid" approach for responding to humanitarian crises. Did you see evidence that DFID is trying to address the underlying development issues as well as the immediate humanitarian crisis?

Mr Mitchell: The problem is that DFID cannot operate on the ground in Yemen. There are no British officials at all there. There is no one at the Embassy; the Embassy is shut. I remember, when I was Secretary of State, that safety considerations were acute for us. There was a vehicle with several British officials in it, and a rocket-propelled grenade went through the back window and landed on the brush ground beyond the road upon which the vehicle was travelling.



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There were acute worries and, as a result of those worries, the British Government have withdrawn all staff. There is some difficulty in being able to do development, as opposed to humanitarian relief, at the moment. I certainly saw evidence on the ground of Britain's humanitarian work and heard from many people, including those in the Houthi administration in Sana'a, the admiration for Britain's humanitarian support.

Of course, the problem—here we come to the apparent internal contradictions in British policy on Yemen—is that DFID and other agencies are trying desperately to get aid, support, food and medicines in through the port of Hudaydah, through which 80% of the imports into Yemen come. The efforts to get shipping in there are intensive, yet we are also loosely part of a coalition that is bombing Hudaydah and that has disabled the five cranes that are essential for unloading the vessels that another level of the British Government is trying to get into the port. This is one of the areas where the internal contradictions of British policy come into sharp relief.

Q5 Chair: We will return to that in a moment. Let me just raise another issue. Last time you were with us before the Committee was with Clare Short early last year, and you raised a concern about the unintended effects that counterterrorism legislation can have on the ability of NGOs, particularly Muslim ones, to work effectively. Is that an issue in Yemen in the same way it is in Syria?

Mr Mitchell: It would be if there was a greater ability for NGOs to work there. The same issues arise wherever there are these fraught situations.

Q6 Stephen Doughty: Andrew, the BBC reported last week that the Ministry of Defence is now tracking 252 allegations of humanitarian law violations by the Saudi-led coalition. Obviously, we accept that there are violations on both sides of the conflict, but given the UK's role with Saudi Arabia, is it time for a fully independent investigation, given the delays or the lack of investigation there seems to have been on so many of those?

Mr Mitchell: I completely understand why we have said that, in the first instance, the Saudis should investigate these allegations, but in the end, if you stand back, such investigations are only likely to carry credibility if they are seen as independent. I do not want to belittle the issue, but it is like marking your own homework. In a sense, the wider community will not believe a one-sided investigation by the people who are the alleged perpetrators. That has to be carefully borne in mind.

Also, a second point is that we live at a time when international humanitarian law, for a variety of reasons that we need not rehearse, is under extraordinary pressure. For those of us who believe strongly in an international rules-based system in humanitarian law and want to see that built up and not degraded, that also emphasises the importance of having an independent and credible investigation of these breaches.



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Q7 Stephen Doughty: Did you hear anything on your visit about evidence being collected for investigations by the coalition or, indeed, on the other side, evidence being presented by some of the humanitarian organisations you visited, and others, that has not been considered or adequately responded to?

Mr Mitchell: I do not know the extent to which it has been responded to, but one of the most extraordinary contradictions I saw was when I was up in Sa'dah, where there were posters up in Arabic and English saying, "The Americans and the British are killing Yemeni people." There was a feeling of antagonism and hostility. I visited the demining group's headquarters there, funded largely by the British taxpayer and led by a former British Army officer. Again, you have this extraordinary contradiction, where the demining work and the defusing of unexploded ordinance is being funded by the British taxpayer and led by a British team.

Q8 Stephen Doughty: Given what you just said about the posters you saw—we are clearly doing some amazing work, and DFID is funding some amazing work—and that contradiction, let alone the moral consequences and the consequences for the individuals in Yemen, is there a risk here to our own reputation and our own national security by continuing with this confused policy towards Yemen?

Mr Mitchell: The policy needs to be redirected. It needs to be updated, if you like. There is that issue, though, and I can exemplify it in two ways. The first is that when I visited the school in Sa'dah that I was able to go to, the school had been almost completely destroyed. Within the circumference of the school, there were children being taught in tents, largely funded by the British taxpayer, with textbooks which were largely funded by the British taxpayer.

You will know from visiting schools that children tend to become animated when they are reciting nursery rhymes or something like that. These children did become animated and punched the air, and I asked the translator what they were saying. The translator said, "They are saying, 'Death to the Americans, death to the Saudis.'" Out of deference to you, they have not said the third of their stanzas."

Stephen Doughty: That is extraordinary.

Q9 Chair: You have said today and you have said in press interviews since your return that British policy on Yemen is contradictory and inconsistent. What needs to change in British policy?

Mr Mitchell: Just reverting to the last question, when I met the Houthi leadership, who are obviously on the other side from Britain in this conflict, they said something that was confirmed in my meeting with the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In spite of Britain's involvement in the coalition, because of Britain's deep historic roots in the area and deep knowledge of the area, they would accept British mediation to try to end the conflict and secure a ceasefire. That also paid a pretty eloquent



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testimony to Britain's position in the area. We should take that opportunity, because otherwise this is a conflict that is going to kill enormous numbers of people and do great damage not just in the Yemen—where a famine is pending, according to the United Nations—but more widely in the region. It will have a big effect on our own relations with this country.

We should seize this opportunity, first of all, to try to ensure there is a ceasefire and then, under UN auspices, become involved in chairing the Yemeni-Saudi talks. Once the ceasefire is secure and if those talks are able to make progress, then we move on to the far more difficult area of Yemeni-Yemeni talks, where again Britain has some relevant experience. The gains that have been made in Somalia resulted from the former British Prime Minister's conferences on Somalia in 2011 and 2012. We have an understanding of what you need to do to build a bottom-up political consensus, and that is what is required in the Yemen. It is extremely complicated, but there are some foundations upon which to build. In my view, Britain has a diplomatic role to play in that.

That is where British policy needs to go. We have influence with the Saudis, of course, because we have a deep and important historic relationship with the Government of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has legitimate security interests in all of this. Britain is in a position, if Brexit has not deprived us of the bandwidth to act, to make a contribution in bringing peace to the Yemen now.

Q10 Chair: A lot of the domestic controversy in Parliament and in this country has been around the issue of arms sales. What is your view on the arms-sales issue? Does it have relevance in respect of moving forward politically in the way you have just described?

Mr Mitchell: I do not really have a view. Let me explain. I am not in favour of an arms embargo, because the Government of Saudi Arabia will get the weapons they require in any event. We have some influence—I do not want to overstate the case, however—by dint of having sold them the weapons in the first place.

The weapons that are particularly contentious are, of course, the cluster munitions, which are horrific and which, as we see in other parts of the world, do enormous damage. These weapons were sold more than 30 years ago to the Saudis. They are beyond the time period in which they can be safely used in any event, and they were sold at a time when cluster munitions were designed for very different circumstances to the way they are being used by the Government of Saudi Arabia.

We are not only signatories to but were a moving force behind the international arms trade treaty. We should use all our influence to ensure these weapons are not used anymore.

Q11 Chair: One of the final acts of the Obama Administration was to refuse a licence for a particular arms sale to Saudi Arabia. Often the debate here



is polarised between suspension or embargo on the one hand, and just carrying on on the other. Is there a case to look more critically at some of the fresh applications from Saudi Arabia in the light of the Yemen position?

Mr Mitchell: As I say, cluster munitions are what has caused particular offence. I have never called for an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia. I understand and respect those who take a very different view to mine, but there is something difficult about politicians waving their moral consciences at the expense of thousands of jobs in Lancashire.

Leaving that on one side, my principal point is that the Saudis will get the munitions in any event. We have marginally more influence if we are responsible for selling the munitions, not least because of the international arms trade treaty.

- Q12 **Stephen Doughty:** Just to follow up on that, I do not have the exact quote here, but when the Foreign Secretary was in a House of Lords Committee the other day, he seemed to suggest that he felt we were only just marginally on the side of complying with our obligations under the arms trade treaty. As somebody who was involved previously in giving DFID's view on arms export licences, are you satisfied that enough consideration is being taken of humanitarian consequences in our arms export licensing regime?

Mr Mitchell: We do have the toughest export licensing regime in the world by some way. When I had partial responsibility in this area, I was certainly very conscious that was true. Of course, we have the judicial review coming up any time now. It will be interesting to see what the courts decide in the light of what they have heard.

- Q13 **Stephen Doughty:** When the Saudi Foreign Minister came here, he was quite candid and frank in the two sets of conversations he had with MPs. I cannot remember who was at the meetings, but what would your message be to the Saudi Government? They claimed they were going to pursue these investigations and they were going to take the concerns very seriously. Ministers have now suggested their patience is wearing thin. What would be your message to the Saudi Government at this time?

Mr Mitchell: My message would be one that is respectful of their abilities to carry out these investigations. I am quite sure that if Saudi Arabia says it is investigating these things, that is correct—but I would point out to them that the problem is that they are unlikely to carry international credibility, because they are marking their own homework. That will not give them the sort of credibility in international circles that they would wish.

- Q14 **Fiona Bruce:** I apologise; I had to slip out for the earlier part of the meeting. If I ask a question that has already been addressed, please forgive me. You wrote in your article in *Middle East Eye* that you had found fragments of UK marked bombs by a school. Could you tell us



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more about that?

Mr Mitchell: I have already described my visit to the school, and I pointed out the inconsistencies in British policy. On the one hand, we were funding textbooks and the tents in which children were being taught, and I was shown British-marked munitions in the school. They may or may not have been used; I was shown them on school premises. It does underline that contradiction, however, about which I wrote.

Q15 **Fiona Bruce:** Do you sense that we might be seeing a shift in UK Government policy towards Yemen in light of this kind of information?

Mr Mitchell: I hope so. The Foreign Office is keeping the matter under review. I urge that the policy be changed into one of much greater neutrality, not least to capitalise on the deep historic links that Britain has in the Yemen and in this part of the world.

If, Chairman, I just expand a bit on that, we have here an international regime that we are supporting, led by President Hadi, who cannot visit his own country. He is the only President I have ever come across who has to make an official visit to his own country. He sometimes visits Aden, but he is living in a boat kindly provided by the Emirati Navy, offshore from Aden, and he is staying in a hotel in Riyadh.

From my investigations, this is a regime that has no support at all on the ground amongst any Yemenis. We have learned the hard way that you cannot control a country from the air. I very much fear the Saudis are bound to lose this contest. Their appetite for involvement will be greatly outlasted by the different forces within the Yemen who are there on the ground. They are supporting a regime whose leader has no support at all on the ground in Yemen. It seems to me that the Saudi Government might well, at this point, wish to consider whether there are alternative options to the ones that they are pursuing.

Chair: We will pursue that in the next line of questioning. I will let Stephen lead on that.

Q16 **Stephen Doughty:** Turning to the other side, you were speaking about your other meeting with the Houthis. What appetite do you feel there is from them for peace talks, settlement or a ceasefire, and for them stepping back from the activities they have undertaken, the atrocities they have committed?

Mr Mitchell: The Houthis were very clear. In meetings with the Houthi President and the Houthi Foreign Minister, who is an accomplished and compelling Minister, they were clear, first, that they were open to British mediation. They have also had approaches from the Russians. They were equally clear—and this is an important point—that the suggested close relationship with Iran has been overstated.

Apart from making it clear that they would welcome British involvement in the negotiations for a ceasefire, they were quite open—this is



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something that was confirmed by the former President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the GPC, his significant political party in Yemen—that as their opening offer on the ceasefire, they would withdraw their troops and weapons that are inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and they would accept a 20 km demilitarised zone on their side of the border.

My own observations would be that the Houthis are in complete control in Sana'a, the major city in the north and the capital city of the country. They did not dismantle the existing structures when they took over; they sit on top of them. It is said by authoritative sources that I saw and met there that they are gaining a reputation for promoting stability, and they are cracking down on aspects of corruption. In all those respects, it seems to me that the Houthis will be extremely difficult to dislodge. As part of moving on and trying to secure a ceasefire, we need to recognise the position on the ground.

Q17 Stephen Doughty: You mentioned the suggestion that, possibly, the relationship with Iran has been overblown. You firmly believe the Houthis are pursuing their own objectives, their own vision for what they want, rather than being somehow led by Iran attempting to turn this into a wider regional conflict.

Mr Mitchell: It is a complicated relationship. There are some suggestions that it has happened on isolated occasions, but it would be very difficult for the Iranians to get weapons and support into the country, because the country is being blockaded, so it is not an easy thing to achieve.

Q18 Chair: Can I ask a bit more about Iran? I was really interested in what you said about the relationship between the Houthis and Iran. Must Iran have a seat at the table in any discussions about the future? In the light of what you said, is that not necessarily the case?

Mr Mitchell: I am not sure I have a view on that. Clearly, in negotiations under US auspices—in which Britain was playing a part—between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, it is not clear what the Iranians would have to contribute directly. On Yemeni-Yemeni negotiations, there is only going to be a deal, in my view, if it is from the bottom up and embraces all the different tribes and all the governance in the Yemen. That is how you make progress. It is not easy to see a direct reason for Iranian involvement. Clearly, it is something the Saudis would abhor.

Q19 Chair: You spoke previously about President Hadi, a President who has to make an official visit to his own country. Is there an alternative political leadership on his side of this conflict that might have more credibility with the people of Yemen?

Mr Mitchell: The leadership of Yemen has to come out of these talks. There are clearly at least four distinct parties, probably more, that would be party to those talks. However, it would be a grave and continuing error for the international community to try to fasten on their choice, rather than allowing that choice to emerge from this bottom-up process.



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Q20 Fiona Bruce: Could I ask about the disparity in aid and funding that has been given to Yemen rather than, say, other parts of the world in not dissimilar difficulties? First of all, regarding the UN appeals, which are significantly underfunded, with a new appeal coming up soon, what more could be done to get funding? How could the international community become more involved?

I should say this has really been quite a long-running problem, has it not? I was first alerted to the problems in Yemen by Save the Children, who came to see me as a Member of this Committee and said, "There is a desperate need for aid there, which the public and the UK media seem to be largely unaware of."

Mr Mitchell: Ms Bruce puts her finger absolutely on the issue. Part of it is that this has been a conflict and a humanitarian situation totally eclipsed by Syria. Secondly, that eclipsing is reinforced by the fact that no journalists can now get into Yemen. The only way in is really by plane, and by UN plane. The air is controlled by the Saudi Air Force. There is also a blockade, which is also about information coming out of the country. The BBC has had a team in there, but such access is very unlikely to be repeated in the near future.

Part of the problem is that the crisis is eclipsed by other, more prominent reporting, principally on Syria. Secondly, it is very difficult to get information out of Yemen. What I can tell the Committee, however, is that the United Nations, who are extremely good at understanding and evaluating these things, warn that a famine in Yemen is imminent. There are four famines pending in the world at the moment, and it will be for the international community to try to arrest these famines before they get going, or pick up the pieces from the appalling, terrible consequences that will result.

The problem is that, unless there is a change of policy in Yemen and a greater international understanding of what is happening there, very large numbers of people are going to die in a country where, as I say, the United Nations estimates that a child dies every 10 minutes.

My point is that Britain has a role to play in correcting this, because of our deep historical links. It is a test for Britain now as to whether or not, as I said earlier, we have the bandwidth as a country, given Brexit and everything else that is going on, to focus on this and make our contribution. Britain holds the pen on Yemen at the United Nations. It seems to me that United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216 needs, at the very least, to be updated.

Q21 Fiona Bruce: In other words, you are saying that should be the probe to our conscience in this country: that we have these historic ties.

Looking internationally, with regards to American attention—obviously, we know that the amount of aid America can provide in such situations can often dwarf all others—the *New York Times* has said that "Conflicts gain sustained American attention only when they provide a compelling



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story line that appeals to both the public and political actors...That often requires some combination of immediate relevance to American interests, resonance with American political debates or cultural issues, and, perhaps most of all, an emotionally engaging frame of clearly identifiable good guys and bad guys." That is a very interesting statement to make, is it not? Many people here, and possibly internationally, really do not understand what this is all about. That is a problem, is it not? Can I also ask whether you see that particular statement as having a particular resonance in light of the change in presidential tenure in America?

Mr Mitchell: The *New York Times* has put it very well, and I agree with what they say. You are also entirely right, Ms Bruce, in saying that it is difficult to identify who the good guys are. Yemen is a place, more perhaps than elsewhere in the world, where alliances shift and change. It is a place that puts real flesh on the bones of the statement, "My enemy's enemy is my friend," because these different parties change around quite a lot.

When Ali Abdullah Saleh was President, he waged war on the Houthis on five or six occasions, and they are now firm allies. Alliances do change, and that makes it all the more difficult to identify who the good guys are. The point is that if you can get a ceasefire, you can get the current situation to end, and you can get a United Nations resolution that focuses on Yemeni-Yemeni talks, then you start to make progress.

The other part of what the *New York Times* article is saying is about public information. People need to know what is happening in the Yemen. At the moment, that is very difficult, but I hope that what the United Nations is saying and doing will come to greater prominence.

Q22 **Fiona Bruce:** We have talked about appeals to the public. Can I ask you about DFID funding? We are aware, for example, of the comparator of the £2.3 billion allocated to the Syrian crisis; a fraction of that goes to Yemen from DFID. Does DFID have the right strategic approach to Yemen, or would you suggest that needs to be rethought, too?

Mr Mitchell: DFID is caught in this fact that the Government's policy is two-dimensional. The physical difficulty of getting food, medicines and vital supplies into Yemen, through the blockade, is very great indeed. As I said, 80% of everything that comes in does so through the port of Hudaydah. DFID's priorities, which are absolutely clear, are caught in the differing priorities of the British Government.

Q23 **Fiona Bruce:** You went out very recently with Save the Children. Some months ago, we had evidence from aid representatives and others that, actually, more aid could be got through, if it were available. We have been hearing contradictory messages. I wondered what the up-to-date position was, or what the impression was that you had.

Mr Mitchell: I was there with Oxfam, but I know Kevin Watkins was there recently with Save the Children. Both these brilliant British charities are doing vital and wonderful work in Yemen. The difficulties



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are as I set out, however: it is getting vital supplies through the blockade and, also, the fact there has not been sufficient international support. Although the Disasters Emergency Committee—DEC—in Britain has launched its appeal, which is going quite well, there nevertheless has not been enough international focus.

Because politicians and Governments inevitably tend to move when there is strong feeling amongst those they represent, because of the lack of information and coverage by the media, Governments and the humanitarian world have been slow to appreciate the full scale of what is unravelling in the Yemen.

Q24 **Fiona Bruce:** I am just trying to understand something here. We are talking about the fact that there needs to be more aid funding, yet you are saying that it could be difficult to get it through.

Mr Mitchell: Yes.

Q25 **Fiona Bruce:** I want to make sure we send out a clear message as a Committee. If we are saying, "There needs to be more funding", people need to be confident that it could be used expeditiously.

Mr Mitchell: The message I would seek to advance is that Yemen is in crisis, there is a need for substantially more humanitarian support, and it will not be possible to deliver that humanitarian support while the country is effectively blockaded. It is important to remember that the Yemenis are not starving; they are being starved.

Q26 **Fiona Bruce:** I have one final question. Again, it is a comparison with Europe. Is there a lack of attention on the part of the public and, perhaps more importantly, the media, because Yemenis are not being displaced to Europe, compared to the difficulties in other parts of the world, particularly in Syria?

Mr Mitchell: I fear Ms Bruce is right in that analysis.

Q27 **Chair:** Can we go back to the evidence you gave at the beginning about Hudaydah? I think you mentioned the position with the destruction of cranes. Could you say a bit more about that and what might be done to address that? That seems to be a big factor in your point about the Yemenis being starved.

Mr Mitchell: I have not visited Hudaydah.

Chair: Yes, sure.

Mr Mitchell: I believe that Stephen O'Brien has visited Hudaydah in the relatively recent past with the United Nations. He has also reported the very severe damage that has been inflicted on the port.

I was really making two points. One was that I was trying to explain the contradictions of British policy, as evidenced by the coalition, which we support, destroying the port and also the efforts of the British



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humanitarian community to get vital supplies into the port of Hudaydah. I was talking about that contradiction.

The cranes are essential for unloading the ships; otherwise they have to be unloaded by the people on the ships. I am advised that the cranes have been destroyed. Furthermore, I was told—I do not know whether this is accurate or not—that some American collapsible cranes that had been delivered had also been destroyed. The Committee may be able to find out whether that is correct or not, but that is what I was told when I was there.

The point about the port of Hudaydah is that it is vital for the humanitarian effort, but it is caught up in this confusion I have described.

Q28 Stephen Doughty: I wanted to go to the wider history of our engagement with Yemen and, indeed, the international community. We often talk about early warnings in the humanitarian system. In this country, we have known about the potential for the descent into crisis in Yemen for some time. I recall working on it when I was at the Department back in 2009. I know you, as Secretary of State, took a very keen interest. Obviously, DFID as a Department has been very keenly engaged in warning other parts of Government for some time about the potential for crisis. Why have things got to this stage? How did we get here? How did the international community get here, despite the warning signs that were evident back in the last decade?

Mr Mitchell: Partly, we have been forced to withdraw from Yemen. When I was Secretary of State, I asked Alan Duncan, who was one of my ministerial colleagues in the Department, to keep an eye on Yemen, which he did extremely well. He knows this part of the world probably better than any other Minister in the Government, then or now, and he had an extremely good understanding of Yemen. What we tried to do was ensure that we gave the financial support from the British taxpayer in the most effective way to relieve the hunger and suffering inside Yemen, and I believe we did exactly the right things under Alan's leadership of that.

The problem, of course, was the safety considerations. I remember being very concerned on a number of weekends about the reports of the safety of our staff in the Yemen and the wider humanitarian community. In the end, the decision was made to withdraw. As of today, there are no DFID staff and no British Government staff in the Yemen at all. That makes it extremely difficult. The blockade makes it difficult as well. The Yemeni policy that has been pursued by Saudi Arabia has not developed as the Saudis had hoped, and that is part of the problem today.

Q29 Stephen Doughty: On that point specifically, on balance, has the intervention by the coalition worsened the situation, rather than made it better?

Mr Mitchell: It has manifestly not been successful.



Q30 Chair: I understand that, on Saudi Arabia, last week you said at a conference after your visit that you had been approached by the Saudis to speak to them following your visit. Do you have any plans to meet the Saudis, or even visit Saudi Arabia, as a follow-up to your visit?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, I had an extremely interesting meeting with the Saudi Ambassador in London, whom colleagues will know, because he has been accessible in the House of Commons. I reported to him what I had seen on the ground, and at the moment there is some question of my going to Riyadh to pass on what I discovered to a wider circle.

Q31 Chair: Earlier in your evidence, you spoke about education and seeing education delivered in tents. We are in the middle of an inquiry into DFID's work on education, and part of that addresses some of the issues around education in emergencies. Do you want to say something about what lessons, if any, there are from Yemen for the international system's ability to respond to ensure that children in emergencies still get an education?

Mr Mitchell: Yes. First of all, the British Government, under all three political parties who have been in government in recent years, has prioritised education, particularly the education of girls, and has been a beacon of leadership around the world in that respect. I introduced the Girls' Education Challenge fund as a way of trying to ensure that, where there was state failure, the private sector, the charitable sector and the philanthropic sector could get girls into school.

In terms of the situation in Yemen, the lesson we learned—we learned it in Syria as well—is that the international community needs to do more to ensure, when these appalling refugee situations develop, that children do not miss out on their education. Of course, there is nothing to be said for living in a refugee camp—it is a terrible existence for the most part—but it does mean you have a captive audience of children. Therefore, it is the one place where you can try to ensure they do not miss out on an education.

The international community needs to recognise that part of the relief for refugees, when they are congregating in camps, is not only food and medicine but ensuring that every child who is in that camp receives an education, and is not part of a future alienated generation of people who have lost out so badly, and feel very bitter and alienated by it.

Q32 Fiona Bruce: Connected with that, in an informal meeting that members of our Committee had with representatives from the commercial sector in Yemen, we heard that they were very concerned about the substantial closure of universities and tertiary education there. I would be interested if you could comment on how support could be given by the international community on that challenge. They have very grave concerns about the contraction of the commercial sector in Yemen, which they say is a really big issue. As and when this crisis hopefully ends, there is going to be a feebleness, if you like, which is going to have to be supported. For



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example, they refer to the shutting down of access to banks. In light of that, what, if anything, could the UK Government do now to support and help sustain what is left of this sector, so there can be rebuilding as swiftly as possible after the crisis ends?

Mr Mitchell: There are two points. When I was in Sana'a, I received a very sad note from the British school in Sana'a, asking me to do something about the fact that they could not get their exams marked for the children, because of the crisis. They asked me to approach Cambridge International Examinations on their behalf, which I have done since I came back. That is a minor point, but it does just show you the ramifications of the crisis.

In respect of the banks, Ms Bruce is exactly right. I met one of the five company chairmen who import wheat. There is an acute issue of foreign exchange; there is an actual issue of local currency as well. The currency is printed in Russia, and several billion of notes have arrived in the country down in Aden, which underlines the fact that there is a very acute problem. However, there is also a problem of exchange. Because of the blockade, these businesses that import wheat are not able to export the currency they physically hold in order to satisfy the bank, so that they can trade the wheat. That intensifies the food insecurity and emergency that exists in the Yemen.

On both those two points, there are very grave problems. On the second one, the United Nations leadership in Sana'a is acutely aware of this and they are trying to negotiate with the Saudis to find ways of facilitating this currency transfer so vital supplies can be bought. Of course, there is then the secondary issue of getting the vital supplies into, principally, Hudaydah, so they can be distributed inland.

Q33 **Fiona Bruce:** Yes, because most of the food is imported.

Mr Mitchell: Yes, 90% of everything that is eaten in Yemen is imported.

Q34 **Fiona Bruce:** At this stage, the UK Government or DFID are not doing anything to help in an advisory capacity regarding the commercial sector.

Mr Mitchell: There is only so much DFID officials can do, for the reasons I set out. Certainly, however, the United Nations has been very clear with the Saudis about the impact of the blockade on these issues.

Q35 **Stephen Doughty:** I have a large Yemeni community in my constituency, which partly relates to the Yemeni involvement in the shipping industry and the docks in Cardiff. We have also provided a home to people seeking sanctuary from previous conflicts and, indeed, the current conflict. I have helped constituents who fled the current conflict to escape. Are you concerned by the refugee ban that President Trump has instituted and the specific focus on Yemen within that?

Mr Mitchell: That is a wider issue, which I am not sure you would wish me to get into today.



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Chair: We can tempt you. I am happy for you to.

Mr Mitchell: You might, but I am not going to be tempted. Of course, it is largely academic in respect of Yemen, because no one can get out. Earlier, you mentioned the issue of the European press not focusing much on Yemen because there are no Yemenis coming to Europe. That, of course, is the position today—and knowledge of geography reinforces that point—but it may not be the position in the future. The ability of refugees to travel far and wide is increasing every year, for reasons with which the Committee will be very familiar.

Q36 **Stephen Doughty:** I have had a lot of reports, at various points, of Yemenis fleeing across to Djibouti, Somaliland and other places in the Horn of Africa. Are you saying at the moment that your sense is that nobody is getting out at all?

Mr Mitchell: It is very difficult. It is very difficult to get across to Eritrea and Djibouti and so on. If you look at a map, you see why.

Q37 **Chair:** More broadly, in terms of the change of Administration in the US that Fiona referred to earlier on, do you have any sense of what the Trump Administration's approach to the Yemen crisis is going to be?

Mr Mitchell: No, it could cut either way.

Chair: I agree.

Mr Mitchell: From discussions in the Foreign Office, that is also the view there.

Q38 **Chair:** I have one final question. What is the single most important thing the British Government can do now to assist the situation in Yemen?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government, along with its colleagues on the United Nations Security Council, should update United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216. Britain should make it clear that it is tweaking its policy into one of greater neutrality. We should try to use the excellent relations we have with the Saudis and the historical links we have with the Yemen to broker a deal for a ceasefire, to do everything we can diplomatically to secure Yemeni-Saudi talks as a way of unlocking the Yemeni-Yemeni talks, which will have to take place before peace comes to this benighted country.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We are very, very grateful to you for coming to give evidence before us here today.

Mr Mitchell: Thank you.