



International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Non-inquiry session)

Tuesday 30 April 2024

3 pm

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Members present: Lord Ashton of Hyde (The Chair); Lord Bruce of Bennachie; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Crawley; Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie; Lord Grocott; Lord Houghton of Richmond; Baroness Morris of Bolton; Lord Robertson of Port Ellen; Lord Soames of Fletching; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 19

Witnesses

I: The Rt Hon Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Sir Philip Barton, Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of witnesses

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton and Sir Philip Barton.

Q1 The Chair: Good afternoon. Thank you very much for coming, Foreign Secretary. I know that you have come a long way especially to be with us; we are very appreciative. Welcome to Sir Philip as well.

This is a one-off session that we are holding in public. It will cover a range of foreign policy topics. It will be streamed live on the Parliament website and a transcript will be taken; we will send you a copy of the transcript afterwards in case you need to make some small corrections. I remind Members that, if they have any interests that are pertinent to their questions, they should declare them. I should mention that my wife is a shareholder in BAE Systems.

We do not have much time. There may be a Division. If there is a Division during this meeting, I will adjourn for 10 minutes. If we could go through the Division Lobbies as quickly as possible and come back without talking to too many people, that would be great. I am afraid that I may have to interrupt you, Foreign Secretary, in order to give everyone a chance to ask a question. As I say, we are grateful to you for coming; we appreciate that you are very busy.

We are going to start, probably unsurprisingly, with Israel and Gaza. Lady Morris will ask the first question.

Q2 Baroness Morris of Bolton: Thank you. Foreign Secretary, I echo the welcome of our Chairman; in doing so, I thank you for all that you are doing in Gaza to secure a lasting ceasefire and the return of hostages and to ensure that aid gets to those who need it most.

My question is about the protection of aid workers. In asking it, I declare my interests as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Jordan, Kuwait and the Occupied Palestinian Territories—a role that you, Foreign Secretary, kindly appointed me to in 2012—and as the president of both the Palestine-British Business Council and Medical Aid for Palestinians.

At the beginning of this month, the world was horrified by the killing of seven World Central Kitchen aid workers in Gaza—three of them British—but, in the past seven months, more than 200 aid workers have been killed and some 500 have been injured. On 18 January, a 1,000-pound smart bomb was fired at the residential compound of Medical Aid for Palestinians, which is a British charity, and the International Rescue Committee, a US-registered non-profit that was housing local staff, their families and the emergency team, which included British doctors. The coordinates of the house had been shared with the IDF. Although there were injuries, no one was killed, luckily. An investigation by the Israeli Government and the IDF has so far come up with six different explanations for how this happened. Given the confusion here, can we have confidence in any internal investigations or should we be seeking an independent inquiry?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: First of all, you are right to be very concerned about this particular episode. Obviously, the whole situation in Gaza is deeply concerning and the loss of life deeply regrettable. I raised this occasion, which happened on 18 January, with Prime Minister Netanyahu on 24 January and with Minister Gantz on 6 March, but we have never had a proper, satisfactory explanation. That is very concerning because it goes to the bigger picture, which is that the arrangements in Gaza for deconfliction have not been effective enough. As you say, on this occasion, the co-ordinates were apparently given to the IDF so it should not have been hit—but it was, and we never got a proper explanation.

On your question about whether we can have any confidence elsewhere, all I would say is that, when it comes to the tragedy of the World Central Kitchen attack and the loss of life, the early signs are that it is a proper investigation. Two people have already been fired and the Israelis have admitted that there were both systemic and personal failures. This can give us some hope that better action will be taken in future, I think, but what happened on 18 January was a warning sign. More should have been done when we raised it at the highest levels and said, “Look at what has happened. You need better arrangements in place”.

Q3 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** Thank you. Foreign Secretary, I want to ask you about UK support for UNRWA. I believe your colleague Andrew Mitchell has announced today that the resumption of future funding support will be delayed by another month until a further report has been issued. This will puzzle some people because, previously—up to the end of April, which is today—the Colonna report had been sufficient for lots of our allies, such as Canada, France, Finland, Australia, Sweden and the EU, to restore funding. We have not done that. Why has the deadline changed? To be fair, you have been a leading voice for putting pressure on Israel to be more co-operative on humanitarian support, but we are not committing to future funding for the main platform for delivering that support. Why are we an outlier among our allies on this question?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I do not think that we are, but that is a fair question. First, we are continuing to keep the pressure on Israel. We identified all of the bottlenecks that were in place. We asked, “Why haven’t you opened the Port of Ashdod? Why haven’t you switched the water back on? Why aren’t we up to 5 00 trucks a day? Why aren’t there more crossing points open for longer?” We have identified those, and we have pushed and pushed. Obviously, President Biden was very effective in getting pledges from the Israelis to do all those things. We now follow, literally on a daily basis, how they are doing on those elements.

On UNRWA specifically, when that happened, it was pretty horrific to know that people working for UNRWA had taken part in the 7 October attacks. Two report processes were set up. One involved Catherine Colonna, a former French Minister, looking at the workings of UNRWA and the sort of things that needed to change. The second involved the Office of Internal Oversight Services—the OIOS—looking at the actual case itself. As I think I said right at the beginning, I would like to see how both

reports are progressing before we recommit. I said that knowing that UNRWA has plenty of money to keep it going because it is a vital platform in Gaza; there are not many other ways of getting aid around, as you know. So I think that that is perfectly reasonable.

We have not particularly changed our deadlines. We have said that we want to see at least the early parts of both reports—preferably both reports in full—because, not just in the important terms of doing the right thing but in parliamentary terms, I think that a lot of colleagues in both Houses will want to hear that UNRWA is properly policed and properly run, with proper oversight; that it vets its staff appropriately; and that what happened on 7 October with their participation could not happen again. That is the thinking.

Q4 Lord Wood of Anfield: Can I ask you about an aspect of Israel's prosecution of the war against Hamas? There have been reports—I should stress that, at this stage, they are only reports—of mass graves at Gaza's Nasser Hospital. There are reports of bodies, including those of women and children, that have had their hands tied or been buried with hospital gowns on. Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser at the White House, has called for an investigation; the UN Commissioner for Human Rights has also done so. What have Foreign Office investigations revealed about this and what action are you taking?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: We have not had any investigations—we are not capable of doing that because we are not in Gaza—but we have said that this needs to be investigated. It is extremely disturbing. I am very nervous about going beyond that because I think that, with some previous events in this conflict, people have jumped to conclusions too quickly. It has had an enormous impact on social media and elsewhere. We need the Israelis urgently to get to the bottom of what happened before going further.

Q5 Lord Grocott: I know that this is something with which you are well familiar and that you have commented on, Foreign Secretary, but we all know from experience that, when this dreadful war comes to a conclusion, the chances are that the world community will move on to the next crisis and the fundamental problems of Israel and Palestine will go on the back burner and will not be addressed. My question is about post-war reconstruction and governance. What reassurance can you give us that serious thought and consideration are being given, and plans put in place, by the international community to decide how Gaza will be governed and where the money for the reconstruction is going to come from?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I was in Saudi Arabia yesterday meeting with Foreign Ministers from Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. I should say that actually I have quite a lot of confidence that this will not slip off the front pages when this conflict is over because all the neighbours, friends of Israel and Palestine come to the same conclusion, which is, of course: we want to bring the conflict to an end, we have got to deal with the threat of Hamas, and you have got to have

moves towards a secure Palestinian state but also a secure Israel. I think so many parties to this understand that there is no long-term peace, security and stability in the Middle East without a solution to the Palestinian question. So if you look at, for instance, what the Saudis are trying to do with this normalisation deal with Israel, that is obviously a huge step for Saudi Arabia and a big step for Israel, but part of it would be the creation of a Palestinian state and a horizon towards that basis.

Again, if you talk to the Egyptians and the Jordanians, and, if you talk, frankly, to other Europeans, there is an acknowledgement that huge efforts were made around the time of Oslo and all those things that you will remember. Latterly, there was a sense that it was just too difficult and it could not get done and we should focus instead on getting aid to the Palestinians and all the rest of it. Without solving this problem, we are never going to get the long-term peace and security we need. So I have some confidence that actually there is fresh commitment to try and get this sorted from all the friends of the region.

On the issue of reconstruction, what has to come first is trying to build up the concept of what happens after the conflict ends, which is what we were talking about yesterday. How do you build up the new Palestinian Authority, the technical Government they have created? How do you get it back into Gaza? Having got it back into Gaza, how do you help it with the reconstruction work? How do you deal with the issue of security on day one after the war is over? All those things need to be solved. Of course, everyone is thinking that we are already talking to people about reconstruction and who pays and for what and all the rest of it, but it would be quite hard to really progress those conversations until people know the war is over, who is running Gaza, how is it working and the rest of it. But a lot of work is going into that.

Lord Grocott: So much as well is invested in a two-state solution. I cannot remember how many Foreign Secretaries of both parties have had that "get out of jail free" card, to say we want a two-state solution. Obviously, recognising Palestine is absolutely fundamental to that. I just wonder, and I do not want to be too pessimistic, but this committee seven years ago did an inquiry into the Middle East. It said: "On its current trajectory, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is on the verge of moving into a phase where the two-state solution becomes an impossibility and is considered no longer viable by either side. The consequences would be grave for the region".

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: You are right. Also, to reinforce that, first of all, it was getting harder because of the settlement-building by Israel in the West Bank. Technically creating the Palestinian state has got harder. We have to think about that. I support the Abraham accords, which was a number of Arab states normalising their relations with Israel, and that was a positive step forward, but some people looking at that thought, "Oh, well, we can sort of create peace between the Arab world and the Israeli world without fixing the Palestinian problem." That was a mistake. You have to fix the Palestinian problem. Now it has got harder

but is not impossible. So we have to use the horror of what is happened to try and push forward this agenda. As we do so, there can be a tendency to think that recognition sort of brings about the state. It does not. Recognition is an important part of helping to give the Palestinians a perspective towards statehood but it does not create a state just by everybody recognising it. You have got to set out the things that actually create a state, a Government and their ability to govern. There must be agreement in some way with the Israelis about their security. That is because a two-state solution cannot happen unless the Israelis feel secure in their own state. All these things are linked but there is more purpose behind it than for a while and we must not miss this opportunity.

The Chair: Staying in the same region but intimately connected: Lady Crawley, you have a question.

Q6 **Baroness Crawley:** Thank you, Chair. It is good to see you, Foreign Secretary. So much of the instability in the world leads back to Iran and its proxies. You said in this House on 5 March that you could not recall such a dangerous time in international affairs in your political career. We welcome the Government's emphasis in the new sanctions against Iran on targeting threats on UK soil, contravening shipping and the Iranian drone programme. But many of us across party, within Parliament and outside, remain perplexed as to why the Government is still refusing to proscribe the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation. You are a very active Foreign Secretary. You know that the IRGC is the leading edge of both internal repression and external violations against Israel, Arab states and western interests in that part of the world. Yet, despite that and allies of ours having a different view, there is a reluctance in the Government to move against the IRGC.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I will answer that very directly. All the things we need to do to put pressure on Iran and make sure that where they act illegally we can act against them are in place through our sanctions regime that we have enhanced, and we have sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety. I asked law enforcement, police, intelligence services and others: is this extra step of proscription necessary in order to take further action against these people when they do the things that we disapprove of? The answer is no. There is a disadvantage, to be frank about it, from proscription, which is that it would effectively end diplomatic relations. While our diplomatic relations are pretty terse, and I say that with meaning, as someone who has had regular conversations with the Iranian Foreign Minister, we are actually able to have that conversation. When it comes to trying to stop the escalation of the conflict and to delivering a very direct message to the Iranians—putting it in the most blunt way I can—I want to have that conversation myself. I do not want to ring up my French counterpart and say, "Could you message the Iranians with this message?" That is not in Britain's interest. That would not strengthen our approach. In many ways it would weaken it because—even with countries you disapprove of, dislike and see as a threat—you need, at some level, those diplomatic relations to deliver the message, to hear the answer and go back again with another message.

Sometimes I find with countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Iran, they send a message to the Iranians, who then sometimes ring me up and say, "What do you think they meant?" I do not want to be in that position. I want to have that very direct conversation. But I completely agree with the premise of your question about the dangers that we face. This is not a question of facing dangers in Gaza or Ukraine, although that is happening. Think about our own country: in the last few months, we have had the appalling situation of China spying on our Electoral Commission and cyberattacks on Members of Parliament. We had the situation just a few days ago of what is alleged to be a Russian sabotage attack on a warehouse in east London. And of course, we have the situation with Iran where it was effectively paying thugs to try and kill people that work for Iran TV.

If you want a picture of the dangers in the world, you do not have to look around the globe; you can look right here at who is attacking us. That is why, when you add up all the things that the Government have done, we have: the National Security Act, so we can prosecute espionage more effectively; the National Security and Investment Act, so we can be more careful about who invests in our infrastructure; and the forthcoming foreign interest registration scheme whereby we can have a better idea of what other countries might be doing in this country. We have given a boost to our intelligence services—to GCHQ, MI5 and SIS—and the sanctions regime that we put in place. I mean, it is the busiest bit of the Foreign Office; I can tell you at the moment that they are working around the clock because when they are not sanctioning Russians, they are sanctioning Iranians or people from Belarus and elsewhere. So hardening our security system across the piece because of the threats we face right here at home demonstrates that security is the most important thing we need right now.

The Chair: We are going to move away from Israel and Gaza to another difficult part of the world.

Q7 **Lord Robertson of Port Ellen:** Foreign Secretary, my interests are that I am a senior counsellor with the Cohen Group and chairman of the Ohrid Group, who are friends of North Macedonia. I want to ask you about the Western Balkans; this week the news is particularly bleak, with the UN General Assembly discussing Srebrenica and the genocide there. This is leading Serbia to pretty openly foment trouble inside Bosnia and Herzegovina, and give irresponsible—and quite probably illegal—support to separatist elements in Republika Srpska. Do you not think it is time that we intervene boldly and firmly, with NATO and the European Union, to defend the Dayton agreement?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I think so, fundamentally. You are right that is extremely depressing. Serbia and the Republika Srpska are launching a campaign against the resolution that has been put down. They are effectively denying that Srebrenica was an act of genocide and they are labelling suggestions otherwise as "anti-Serb". Russia has today called for United Nations Security Council debate, in which it will claim that the resolution is somehow an attack on Dayton and the settlement.

All of us who remember Srebrenica know it was a genocide—an appalling event, one of the worst things we have seen on our continent in the last few decades. The UK will be voting for the resolution and speaking up for it, and we will be calling out those who oppose it. That is part of defending Dayton and the situation that is in place.

If you stand back, what are we ultimately trying to do in the Western Balkans? We are trying to give these countries the chance of stability, growth and prosperity, and a western Euro-Atlantic perspective, if that is what they choose. You will know Stuart Peach well—he was the chair of the NATO Military Committee—and he does such a good job. It is one of the areas in which you really need an envoy; he scoots round from Prime Minister to President, and back again, in order to do exactly as you suggest.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I am suggesting to you that we perhaps need to do more. We have reduced the initial deployment to Bosnia; it was 65,000 a while back, and year on year this progress has been maintained. It is now reduced to EUFOR and we do not even play a part. This committee made a recommendation that perhaps we should be considering it, but do you not think that we should perhaps be a bit more robust?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I do; it is a very good point. So far, as well as going to North Macedonia, I have been to Kosovo, where I spent some time with KFOR. I came back and contacted the NATO Secretary-General, and said I think we needed to do more on KFOR. We needed to be stronger and bolder; we needed, as you will remember, to take the restrictions off some of the troops from different nations that are there.

On EUFOR and Bosnia, we are not part of it. You might well be right that it should be boosted, but that is a matter for the European Union to think about. I think there is a strong case for it, as does Stuart Peach. Our role in the Balkans is, obviously, to talk to everybody, but our military role is focused on KFOR. The disadvantage of joining in with EUFOR as a third country is that you can take part—and many countries do—but you are not involved in the design of the mission, so it is a slightly less satisfactory situation than being in a NATO mission, as we are in KFOR. I am happy to talk to you more if you think that there are more things we can do. We are concentrating quite a lot on our economic support, on the counternarrative to the poisonous Russian messages that are being spread, and on the political horizon for those countries and their work in NATO. If there are more things you think we should be doing, I am very happy to listen. On EUFOR, I am a bit sceptical. We are going to make a contribution; let us do it in KFOR, where we can do it properly, rather than EUFOR.

The Chair: On that subject, Lord Soames.

Q8 **Lord Soames of Fletching:** Foreign Secretary, this is further to Lord Robertson's question. I know that you agree that the foundation of peace

and security is deterrence. Will you once again agree that we must do what we can to deter the threat of aggression, or violent secession, in Bosnia, without which, frankly, there is no space whatever for political manoeuvre and settlement?

On the question of what we could do, you said that Britain will vote at the UN in an appropriate manner, but would you agree that it might be helpful if you and our European and American partners issued a statement expressing unwavering support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity, sovereignty and multi-ethnic character, and the imposition of sanctions to address any anti-Dayton actions?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: We often do issue statements, either through the G7 or the Quint, which is made up of the five key countries. We can do that, and I think that is a very good suggestion. Be in no doubt, we absolutely support Bosnia's territorial integrity and, as you say, the multi-ethnic nature of that country's make-up, and its European horizon, towards which it has made a very clear decision. We call out the work of Dodik and others who try to play a malign influence. I have very frank conversations with the Serbs; I have met President Vučić twice, and had frank conversations with him about what they are doing in the region and the importance of respecting other countries and their sovereign choices.

Q9 The Chair: Thank you. I wonder if you can help us with an inquiry which mainly relates to defence and the influence of the Ukraine war. Can you let us know your assessment of the role of diplomacy—and UK diplomacy—throughout the war in Ukraine? What lessons have the Government drawn from their diplomatic engagement to date?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: That is a very broad question. First of all, it predates me, but the way the UK got behind Zelensky and Ukraine was absolutely magnificent. It was the right thing to do and Britain still gets a lot of credit for it. When you go to Ukraine and meet people, they say, "You are our number one supporter", and you say, "No, no—surely America is". They say that we are number one because we were there first and helped when they most needed it.

So, there is the military aspect, but the diplomatic aspect is very important—obviously Foreign Secretaries always say that. You are trying to garner the greatest possible support and if I look at my list of the five priorities for my job, everything we do, along with NATO and G7 Foreign Ministers, is about priority number one, which is Ukraine. It tips over into quite military issues because the specific campaigns are things like the international agreement to use the immobilised Russian assets, on which we are making good progress; to secure additional military supplies for Ukraine and stimulate UK and European defence industrial production, on which there is good progress; and to drive progress towards Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, and again we are making progress on that. Trying to build the coalition that backs Ukraine, across Europe and NATO, and across the United States and Canada, is a very big feature for us. One of the things I have tried to do is to go repeatedly to the United

States and talk to US senators and Congress representatives, and meet with everyone I can, including former President Trump, to bang the drum and make the case that this is about their security as much as European security. Diplomacy does play a big role; Ukraine is fortunate in having an excellent Foreign Minister in Dmytro Kuleba, who works incredibly hard at looking round Europe to see where there are spare munitions and additional air defence systems. He lobbies all of us hard—me in particular—saying, “Come on, you said you were going to help. Let’s get out there and try and get these Bulgarian missiles or Romanian bullets”, or what have you.

The lesson is that we can be effective if we work in all these forums, and we must continue to do so.

The Chair: Thank you.

Q10 **Baroness Coussins:** Foreign Secretary, thank you. I want to ask about the BBC World Service. I know from answers that you have given on the Floor of the House that you agree that the World Service is a unique soft-power asset. Would you also agree that, if the current review of the BBC leads away from the licence fee, the Foreign Office needs to rise to the challenge from the director general and resume 100% of the funding for the World Service? Its content, scope and impact will inevitably suffer if it has to compete inside a funding model outside the licence fee when what it really needs is the budgetary resilience to respond flexibly to geopolitical shifts. Perhaps you please could tack on to your answer to that question an update for the committee on what, if any, progress has been made towards establishing a BBC Albanian service, which was one of the recommendations that this committee made in our recent Western Balkans report, to which you gave a rather vague and open response in your letter to us.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: Is the BBC World Service incredibly important and should we continue to have it funded at a good and, I hope, growing level? Yes. I would argue, as I did on the Floor of the House, that there is a perfectly good argument for saying that something from licence-fee payers and something from the Government is a fair way of doing it. Licence-fee payers get something out of the World Service; I do. When Radio 4 goes off at night and the World Service comes on, I leap for joy. Well, I do not, because I am trying to go to sleep, but it is a brilliant service.

We get to access it and the BBC has some advantages by running the World Service. There is some crossover between that and the domestic service. I think the idea of funding out of two pots is good.

I do not know what will happen to the licence fee. I am quite old fashioned. I think the licence fee works quite well and will continue to work well, probably for longer than lots of people think. It is a universal service; we all use it to a greater or lesser extent. When you look at all the alternatives, there are lots of disadvantages so I am quite a licence-fee fan.

However it is funded, it must go on being funded at a generous level and in this contested, competitive world, there is a good argument for saying that we need more independent, respected media.

I have looked at the Albanian service again. Ultimately, it is a decision for the BBC World Service rather than me. Albania is on the brink of joining the European Union. It is a NATO ally. Its orientation in that direction is confirmed.

If I were running the BBC, I might think there are countries in a more difficult situation, such as Moldova. I had a meeting with its Foreign Minister today. The country is really trying to be orientated towards the West, to fight corruption, be a good democracy, a transparent country and all the rest of it. There are other cases where you can see the need and those are the sorts of questions that the Foreign Office has to think about in its work with the BBC.

The Chair: Lord Bruce, we will start but we may have a vote coming up.

Q11 **Lord Bruce of Bennachie:** Foreign Secretary, can I turn your attention to Africa? Can we take as a given that the aid and development budget for Africa has been pretty decimated over the last four years? We did a report four years ago in which we made a number of recommendations and the Government gave a robust response about the importance of Africa. However, whereas four years ago we were spending £3 billion in ODA in Africa, last year it was £925 million. I know you put it back up to £1.4 billion, and I welcome that, but billions have not been spent and will never be spent—

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: There may be a comprehensive answer when we get back from the Division.

The committee suspended for a Division in the House.

The Chair: Lord Bruce was talking about Africa.

Lord Bruce of Bennachie: First, I declare my interests as an adviser to DAI, which delivers development programmes to the UK and other donors. I am also a mentor with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy on parliaments, most recently in the Solomon Islands, which has just had a rather interesting election.

On the subject of Africa—if we take as a given that there has been a dramatic cut in our presence but it is coming back—a lot of damage and disruption has been done. How are you going to rebuild those relationships both in terms of our development priorities and our diplomatic engagement, given the increasing influence of China and Russia?

France has almost been kicked out of its former interests, as has the United States, and Russia is moving in in a very malign way. What are we doing to make sure that the relationships with our partners that have been damaged are restored and recovered and that they have confidence

that we will work with them rather than undermine them? A lot of resentment was caused by the dramatic cuts.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I would say a couple of things. First, we have very good and long-standing relationships with a lot of African countries which we have helped over many years. Secondly, as you said, funding has recovered quite a lot over the last year. The UNCTAD *World Investment Report 2023* named the UK as the largest investor in African countries, supporting more than £2.4 billion in direct investment in the continent.

If you take the picture last year to this year, for Somalia there was an increase from £90 million to £130 million, for Ethiopia £89 million to over £200 million, and for Nigeria £72 million to £120 million. Britain is back in Africa, helping with these key partners and key issues.

Lord Bruce of Bennachie: It is half the level it was five years ago.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I am not denying that. As I said very openly on the Floor of the House of Lords, 0.7% came down to 0.5%, which was not my policy but I have come in and am working with the Government to improve matters. At the same time, we had this big influx of refugees and it is perfectly right and within the rules to spend ODA on that.

It is a big fiscal shock to the country when something like that happens. So we are building back from that position and doing so with a very clear strategy on how we can best help: by recognising that we still see the need for aid, of course, but that many African countries also want to see an expansion of the multilateral development banks. We are seeing that with the extra capital we are putting in and the fact that we are getting them to stretch their balance sheets. Many African countries want to see equity invested; they want risk capital going into businesses. I would argue that BII—British International Investment, formerly the Commonwealth Development Corporation—is best in class. It is doing a fantastic job, again, on expanding and focusing on state fragility.

On your point about the China issue and the Russia security issue, I would argue that we are addressing both of those with the China lending issue; that is what BII and the multilateral development banks are an alternative to. On the Russia security issue, it is very important for people like yourself who are involved in development to recognise sometimes that we have said, “When it comes to our own country, security is the number one priority and the most important thing you can have. You do not have anything without national security”. Then, when we try to help countries in Africa, there are all sorts of other vital agendas in terms of education, water, food, medicine and all the rest of it.

Perhaps we have actually underinvested in helping countries with their own security. We need to think, as we help other countries, about the way we would want to be helped ourselves. I think that those agendas can all help but I would say, with Minister Mitchell back in charge of

development, with a solid 0.5%, with the work that we are doing with BII and with our White Paper on development, Britain is back doing good work in Africa, winning friends and influencing people.

Q12 Lord Bruce of Bennachie: Why did we cancel the Africa investment summit?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: We had a slight summit overload, to tell you the truth. We have this big EPC summit with more than 50 Heads of State happening in July. There are European elections taking place; they do not affect us, mercifully, but they do affect a lot of other countries. We were sandwiched between a very important conference in Rwanda and another one somewhere else—in Nigeria, I think. It was difficult to get the dates fixed and we just could not do everything so we decided, "Let's do the EPC and do a lot of the African investment work by going directly to the countries and talking to them". I am actually going to visit there in a month or so.

Q13 Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Foreign Secretary, Baroness Crawley reminded us that you have said that there has never been such a dangerous time in international relations. I thank you for the surging that you have done and the energy that you have brought to the role—I am delighted that you mentioned your list of priorities—but I think the committee would like to know how you are setting your priorities. Are you making best use of local knowledge and intelligence? Do you think that our defence policy is still aligned with our Foreign Office priorities?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: On your last point, the move by the Government to say that we will go from 2% to 2.5% in relatively short order—by 2030—is hugely important. It is to the great credit of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary that they have taken that step. It means that there are other things we will not be able to do but it is absolutely the right priority. If you combine the hardening of our security that I spoke about earlier with the 2.5%, you can see a clear government agenda saying, "National security comes first. It's a dangerous world. We need to protect ourselves better". I think that the alignment is extremely good.

Setting priorities is difficult because the whole point about the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is that you have to deal with everything in the world and things can pop up without you foreseeing them. The clear priorities include saying, "Number one is Ukraine. It is the thing that most affects our security. We have to make sure that Putin does not succeed, for Ukraine's good but also for our own".

A secure and stable Middle East is the second priority because it is not just important in itself; it spills over into our own country and our own domestic situation.

The third priority, as I have said, is enhancing security. That is about working together with the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office in thinking about how we can enhance our own security. It is also about making sure that the Foreign Office is playing its role in this whole debate

about immigration. How do we return people who are here illegally? How do we use some of our diplomatic tools to make sure that countries are playing fair with us when it comes to returning people who have no right to be here? In the past, the Foreign Office has sometimes been a bit nervous about that, saying, "We have our arrangements with foreign countries. We do not really want to compromise those by getting into the dirty work of returning people who should not be here". Not any more. We are absolutely part of Team Immigration. If you do not have a right to be here, you should not be here and we will return you; we will use the weapons we have to make sure that your country puts arrangements in place.

The fourth priority is promoting international development and addressing critical global challenges like climate change.

Fifthly, I was very keen to make sure that the Foreign Office is absolutely part of the prosperity agenda and that we are doing everything we can to attract investment into Britain. While I was in Saudi Arabia yesterday, I took time to meet a series of businesses that either have invested in Britain or are thinking of investing in Britain. I think that we have a key role in that.

So how do we work all these priorities? Sir Philip has kindly given me SROs¹ for each of the campaigns that we are running. On the environment, we have decided to target the issue of getting finance for small islands developing states, which are suffering the most. A lot of them are members of the Commonwealth. This is a Commonwealth conference year—it is also the year when the small islands developing states have a conference—so I think that this is the right environmental campaign for us to pick. We have someone helping me with each of these campaigns under the five headings; we can make some progress on them, I hope, if we are energetic and surging.

Q14 Lord Houghton of Richmond: Foreign Secretary, my notifiable interest is as a defence adviser to a company called Thales UK, which you may have heard of.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I am very familiar with it.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I have two questions, both on defence money; I will touch on the Prime Minister's welcome announcement last week and come to that second. First, can you be a bit reflective on the last 15 years? You will know, as would any UK politician, the degree to which we have to an extent disinvested in defence over 15 years. In doing so, we have hung on to the glossy stuff—the totemic symbols of international authority—but we have hollowed out our conventional resilience and, therefore, reduced our deterrent posture.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: Can I interrupt you there? Let us leave the second question for a second. Although we work together very

¹ Senior Responsible Owners

well in government and I respect you, I completely disagree. The first thing is that, when we got into government in 2010—

The Chair: We are going to adjourn for, I hope, less than 10 minutes.

The committee suspended for a Division in the House.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: Shall I carry on with my rant? All I wanted to say was—

Lord Houghton of Richmond: You are answering a question that I have not yet finished.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: No, but you have two questions, and I want to answer your first one first. All I am saying is that in 2010, the economy was in a very difficult situation. The forecast budget deficit was 11% of GDP. There is no defence and security without economic security, and we made the choice to deal with the deficit and get the economy growing. The results of that were very successful. As part of that, we made some difficult, painful choices: to scrap Nimrod after all the years, money and everything else; and to have several years of an aircraft carrier gap. We made choices. I cannot do the agony for me of saying that the Sea Harriers had to go when I think of the amazing things they did in the Falklands. We made choices. The result of those choices and of then a well-funded defence budget, always over 2% of GDP, means that during those 14 years—I will not give you the full list, although I might—we have therefore commissioned two aircraft carriers, the Type 23s, the Type 24s and the hunter-killer submarines. Think of the air transport. We have the A400M, the new Chinook helicopters and the C17s. Think about not always the most successful procurements but the mobility and fighting ability for the Army. Across all the services, there has been a massive renewal programme because we sorted out the economy, made difficult choices and then we invested. Now you can come in.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I recognise all those difficult choices and I was part of them. What I am asking you is, on reflection though, to accept the fact that the diminution of war-fighting resilience and therefore conventional deterrence is at least a part of the reason that Russia invaded, first, Crimea and then Ukraine. It was a failure of conventional deterrence in Europe.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: No, Putin invaded Ukraine in 2014 because he thought he could get away with it and everyone was distracted by what had happened in Kyiv and, because Ukraine was not a member of NATO, it would not have mattered how many weapons the rest of Europe had. That was not going to deter Putin. If Ukraine had been made a member of NATO, which I supported in 2008 when I was leader of the Opposition, it would have been a different story. You can make all sorts of arguments as to why we should have spent more on defence but the argument that had we spent more on defence, Putin

would not have played around in Ukraine in 2014 and invaded in 2022 is not the case.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I am surprised that you put such a low price on conventional deterrence, when one of the main arguments is going to go on building back the resilience and conventional defence capability of NATO.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I am a huge fan of conventional deterrence. I absolutely believe it to my marrow. But the way in which deterrence needs to work is that you have to have both the deterrence and the alliance to deliver it. That is what our commitment to NATO is all about. The tragedy for Ukraine is it that it was not in NATO. I think that Putin did what he did because in 2008, when he effectively did the same to Georgia, the western response was so weak, not in terms necessarily of military action—that would not have been appropriate—but there were no consequences for Putin of his invasion.

Q15 **Lord Houghton of Richmond:** Moving on to the second question, there is the most welcome uplift of £75 billion over the next six years—however mathematically it was derived, and there is some, dare I say, economic commentary to suggest it is a little bit managed but I will accept that figure. But some somewhat cynical observers will say that it is a touch late on parade because, first, as everybody recognises, this is an absolutely critical year for Ukraine, during which what we are in the process of giving might not make it in time. Also, in truth, the £500 million package for Ukraine is the only thing in the uplift to the defence budget over the next 12 months. So in truth, in the context of a £75 billion package, only 1/150th of it is likely to be spent in the residual timeframe of this Government. Is that not a little slow?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: First, I am not putting a timeframe on this Government. Let us get that one absolutely clear before we start. Second of all, what the Prime Minister has said is that we are going to be spending £3 billion in Ukraine, if you add up the £500 million and the £2.53 billion this year, next year and for as many years as is necessary. You shake your head, but I do not think anyone has noticed that and it is very important they do. That is a multi-year commitment. I would argue that that is the most important thing we can do. I am coming back to your argument about conventional deterrence.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: It is £500 million this year but next year starts in 2025.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: Yes, but the Prime Minister has announced that he is going from 2% to 2.5%, which is hugely welcome. I am amazed, given all the speeches you have given about it, that you are not jumping up and down with excitement at 2.5%. We are a Government who are delivering a really important pledge, which the Opposition will have to match. When they do, it will be a vitally important moment. But when you are spending between £60 billion and £70 billion on defence and you have got a crisis in Ukraine, one of the most

important things you can do is think, "What have I got in my locker that I can give to the Ukrainians to help them in the fight?" If anything, I would argue the other way to you and say that we should try and do even more of asking what we have got in our locker that we can give them, because that is where the fight is.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I am not disagreeing with that.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: You can see the sort of discussions we had within government. They were always very robust and that is important. Nick, you know that I very much respect your views but this is a big, big step.

The Chair: Before this goes completely off the rails, I know that you have to get off at some stage. I am now going to move on, if that is all right, because we have been interrupted a lot. I ask Baroness Crawley to ask briefly her question.

Q16 **Baroness Crawley:** Thank you. Belarus recently, according to Reuters, has changed its position on security. The Government there have said that they would allow Russia to deploy dozens of tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory. Should we dismiss this as propaganda or should we be paying attention?

I also wanted to talk about the fact that, as you know, several of us in the House are godparents to Belarusian young political prisoners. What effect do you think the government sanctions have had on the regime? Is it hurting them?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: We are aware of President Putin's comments that Russia has deployed tactical weapons to Belarus. At the Vilnius summit, we condemned this announcement and encouraged the entire international community to do the same. Obviously, we are monitoring the situation very closely. It underlines the importance of not just our conventional deterrents but our nuclear deterrents.

On Belarus more broadly, we work hard to work with the opposition to chart a brighter future for the country—I met Mrs Tsikhanouskaya at the G7 Foreign Ministers meeting—and do what we can to sanction members of the regime for their behaviour.

Q17 **Baroness Coussins:** I want to come back briefly on your answer about whether there should be a BBC Albanian service. You said that a number of other countries might have a stronger case, but it is about not Albania but Kosovo, where most people speak Albanian. We are not talking about Albania but Albanian.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I completely get that point. The other answer I wanted to give is that you should not think that the only thing the Foreign Office does in countering Russian narratives and encouraging free media is back the BBC World Service. We do a lot; we have a very big department working with the Kosovans, the Albanians and others on how you counter the Russian narrative, take down the bots

and stop a lie before it is half way across the world, and on how you help train journalists and stand up for free media.

For example, the attack at the Crocus City Hall the other day was obviously an IS attack, but the Russians tried to blame Ukraine. Quite a lot of stuff appeared on the internet trying to blame the UK. There were lots of internet bots with a hand with a union jack around it pushing the terrorists towards Crocus City Hall. That was brilliantly analysed by all our strat comms teams, but the real challenge is how you stop that happening beforehand—how do you take down the accounts, many of which are fake, that are peddling this stuff? Spending money on that is also part of what we do to encourage free media.

Baroness Coussins: Bearing in mind the value we have had from BBC Serbia, would it not be a good idea to give more thought to how to sit BBC Albanian—not Albania—alongside that for Kosovo?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I will certainly think about it. I do a lot to help Kosovo. I have met Prime Minister Kurti twice in the last six months and we do a lot to help them.

Q18 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** The Prime Minister has repeatedly said that he is prepared to leave the ECHR if it interferes in its judgments with the Rwanda policy. The Foreign Office has always maintained, internally and externally, that that would diminish British influence and put us alongside Belarus and Russia as the only European countries not in it. Which side are you on in this debate—the Foreign Office or the Prime Minister?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I am on the country's side and the Prime Minister's side. We do not think that membership of the ECHR is inconsistent with the policy we are pursuing, which I completely support and is necessary. However, I have always said that when the ECHR sometimes does things that are against our national interests, you should stand up and say so, as I did with the issue of prisoner votes, which were completely wrong. It was trying to insist that we had a duty to pass legislation in this House and give all prisoners the vote. That was nonsense. We should stand up for our rights and democracy. We had legislative rights in this place, including in this House, long before the ECHR even came into existence. However, I do not think it is necessary to leave and I hope that it will not be.

Q19 **Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie:** You have recently been to America; we are very glad that it has voted through its support for Ukraine. Can you give us some top-line thoughts on our relationship with America and the implications for the UK over the next year or so?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: The great thing about the special relationship is that it is anchored in quite a deep partnership across the military, intelligence, diplomacy and national security. We have quite often had Prime Ministers and Presidents with different views and political persuasions, but the relationship has always been strong because it is based on fundamental values: seeing the world in the same way and believing in freedom, democracy and the rule of law. We have been a

very reliable partner to them and they have been a very reliable partner to us. I think that will continue.

The Ukraine situation was worrying because the money was not being voted through. The Republican Party was split and quite a lot of people were arguing that they must prioritise the southern border and all the rest of it. There was the argument that it does not need to be either/or—you can have border security and national security; in fact, it is vital that you have both—and I am glad that that argument won the day.

I am very confident going forward that, as long as we keep investing in our defence and intelligence assets and our diplomacy, we will be a very good partner to the United States. There is no doubt in my view that we amplify our strength and role in the world by having those strong alliances.

Baroness Fraser of Cragmaddie: Do you think we can continue to rely on American military might in Europe?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I think we can, because ultimately history shows so clearly that American disengagement in Europe ends in a bad way. Often, it ends in America having to come back and pay a higher price in blood and treasure than it would have done if it had never left. Historical arguments are on our side, but we have a part to play in recognising that we must pay more for our defence. That is why at the Cardiff NATO summit in 2014 I said, “Come on, we’ve all got to pay 2%”. Then I think only three countries did, and we are now at almost 20 out of 32. This new announcement of 2.5% could give us a great leadership role among the big countries—of course, some European countries spend more than that—to combine military decision with the diplomacy of encouraging more countries to do more, which will encourage the United States to see that we are playing our part.

The Chair: Foreign Secretary, I know that you have to go. Thank you very much for coming, as well as Sir Philip—not that you had to do much. We are very grateful and really appreciate it. I am sorry that we could not ask you more.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton: I am sorry about the votes; I hope we have added a bit of time back in.

The Chair: Thank you. We would like you to come back again soon.