

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK at the United Nations Security Council, HC 930

Tuesday 15 July 2025

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Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Alex Ballinger; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Uma Kumaran; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 68-107

Witnesses

I: Lord Collins of Highbury, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Freya Jackson, Director for Multilateral and Human Rights at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Collins of Highbury and Freya Jackson.

Chair: This morning, the Foreign Affairs Committee is holding an evidence session for the UK at the United Nations Security Council inquiry. For this session, we are joined by witnesses from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We are very pleased to see you. Thank you both very much for coming. Could you introduce yourselves for the record?

Lord Collins: I am Lord Collins of Highbury, a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I am the Minister for Africa, multilaterals—the UN included—and human rights.

Freya Jackson: Good morning. I am Freya Jackson, the director in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for multilateral and human rights.

Q68 **Chair:** Lovely. We went to New York and spoke to people at the United Nations, so we have a certain amount of insight. We are relying on what we learnt there, and obviously we have had a certain amount of oral evidence in front of us and some written evidence, but it is really good to get an opportunity to put to you some of the things that we have learned.

I will start with a general question. How does the UK make the most of the skills and alliances—networks—of elected members in the UN Security Council, and what is it reasonable to expect of elected members during their two years on the Security Council?

Lord Collins: I think you are right to frame the question by saying what expertise they have, because they have a huge amount. I will also say that, in terms of experience and making the most of that two-year period on the Security Council, it is not easy, because you are going into something and it is very difficult to create a much longer-term continuity. So what we do in the Foreign Office—I have been personally involved in this—is that we meet all elected members at the beginning of their terms or before they take their role up. I also meet the outgoing members at the same time, to talk about shared experiences and how we can help in terms of making the most of that two-year period. I do that in London, but we also have a system of internship, so we offer many of those countries that have been elected the opportunity to put someone in our team to develop skills and experience, and New York does the same. I don't know whether you want to add anything, Freya.

Freya Jackson: Normally I or my deputy visit each of the countries of the incoming elected members. We normally undertake a programme of between one and three days, depending on how detailed they want to be in going into the files. We take a team of experts with us and we discuss their priorities. It really depends on how much expertise the country has. Some of them may have been on the Council multiple times before—six or



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seven times in some cases. For others, it may be the first time, and they might have much smaller capacity in their Government. So we try to tailor what we offer to them.

I think the thing that they appreciate from us, or what they tell us, is that we go in in a very open-minded way. We don't go to impose our view of the different Council files, but more to offer just background, given that so many of these files have been worked over years—decades in some cases—and they might be coming new to the background of that.

Lord Collins: Fundamentally, it is about how we show those countries that we are absolutely committed to the multilateral system and how our commitment can help them to deliver during their period on the Security Council.

Q69 **Chair:** I probably should have asked this before. For people who are watching, who might not know, do you mind just explaining—I could do so, but let's hear it from you—what the composition of the Security Council is? There is a certain number of permanent members, and then how many others? Do you mind just explaining that?

Lord Collins: There are five permanent members and 10 elected members. The permanent members are us, France, the USA, Russia and China. The elected members are elected on a constituency or geographical basis. Africa, for example, has three members. We often use a shorthand for that—the A3. Europe is divided, I think, into west and east.

Freya Jackson: Yes. There is one each, additionally, from them. There are normally two from Asia and two, I think, from the Caribbean and Latin America.

Q70 **Chair:** When we were there, they were in the middle of the elections, and it seemed as though although it had been agreed who the people or the countries would be, they were still trying to make sure they got the maximum number of votes in order to give themselves maximum authority. I think that was the feeling.

Lord Collins: Yes. Sometimes in these constituencies there is no contest, because of the way the nomination process is; sometimes there is agreement in the constituencies about whose turn it is. But sometimes there are elections, and as you say, it is not just about credibility. Even before that whole process, declaring that you are a candidate is quite important.

Q71 **Chair:** By the sounds of your answer, you don't have this, but I will ask. Is there a structured way—is there a threshold for the minimum number of countries that you are going to be working with? It sounds like you just try to approach all of them and see what it is that they want.

Lord Collins: It is two-way traffic. What we are trying to do is also put forward the United Kingdom's interests and, as I said, our commitment to the multilateral system and explain why that, particularly the rule of law, is important. When we engage, we do want to understand their agenda and how they will deliver their period on the Security Council, but it is also



about how we can—I often say that the importance of the Security Council and the UN system is as a convening power. It is about bringing people together, even people we would not necessarily agree with. It is important to make the case and make the arguments, particularly in situations such as Russian aggression in Ukraine; we know the situation on the Security Council is polarised because Russia is there, but we still strongly make the case. There are other areas where we do that and win people over.

Raising issues in the Security Council does not limit our exercise. I spend a considerable amount of time at the General Assembly, so it is about how we engage there, and also in Geneva at the Human Rights Council. All our activity across the United Nations architecture has a positive influence at the Security Council.

Chair: We have certainly heard that. Let us move on.

Q72 **Alex Ballinger:** Some of the respondents to our call for evidence have said that the UK is using its penholder position as kind of an improvement to our international influence, which is decreasing elsewhere. Do you think that is correct? How do you think us being a penholder on all these files helps to improve the UK's influence?

Lord Collins: I don't agree with the first point at all. Don't forget: it is an informal convention. Nobody is precluded from writing a resolution, even on an area where we claim to be the penholder, and that has happened in recent times. Certainly, what we also try to do—I was a strong advocate of this even before I came into government—is to use the United Kingdom's influence as a penholder to support co-penholding, so that we bring people into that process.

The reason why we, and many of the P5—or P3, actually—have so many penholdings is that we are always there. Sadly, many of the conflicts and issues that we are dealing with last longer than two years, so there is a continuity issue. Despite that, as I say, even when somebody does not particularly want to co-penhold—there are reasons for that too: they may not wish to declare themselves or tie themselves to a particular process; they may want to be free—we still engage. That engagement has a positive outcome, not just in terms of pushing our position. It is actually about how we strengthen the multilateral system and the rule of law, which is an important element of our activity.

Q73 **Alex Ballinger:** I agree, of course. Other respondents to our call for evidence talked about the lack of transparency in how the UK conducts its penholding role. Can you talk a bit about how you ensure transparency and consult other members?

Lord Collins: For a penholder to succeed that engagement process is essential, because at the end of the day, whatever resolution you end up with, you want it to be supported. Therefore, you want to have the process of engaging and consulting, and reaching a consensus—often that is considered a bad word, but actually it is fundamental to the UN system. Some people suggest that consensus is compromising too far, but actually, in most of the products that we have produced over the years, building



that consensus has had a positive impact. I certainly don't understand the question of transparency, because we are very open and transparent about how we engage and ask people to co-penhold, or even be part of that process.

Freya Jackson: I think that is exactly right. One of the reasons that Council members are quite happy for us to penhold, perhaps more on average than others, is partly because we are seen as a fair and honest broker. It is also because we make a real effort to bring in the different countries, and in fact different regional organisations, that have a particular interest in that issue. For example, on Sudan, we worked very closely with the African members of the Security Council as well as the African Union and others in the region who have a stake in that, to make sure that we have the best chance of bringing forward a consensus resolution. It varies issue by issue and there may be some issues where you might start in a smaller and tighter group. It really depends who you think are the players who you need on board to have the best chance of getting a successful product.

Chair: I think that Abtisam is going to come back on some of those in a minute, but I want to go to Edward next.

Q74 **Edward Morello:** We received some written evidence to this inquiry that raised concerns about whether or not there was a lack of coherence between the team in New York and FCDO country-level teams—with the suggestion that that can result in a lack of joined-up working on things such as conflict resolution and stabilisation. My first question is: do you recognise that characterisation, and is that a fair criticism? If you do, what steps is the FCDO taking to ensure that the in-country team and whoever is working on that country brief at the UN are co-ordinating?

Lord Collins: I don't recognise it at all. In fact, I think one of the positives has been the way that in-country teams inform the discussion, and often the dialogue, that we have in London and that is communicated very much to the teams in New York or Geneva. There is very strong co-ordination and a level of communication which I am extremely happy about. Even in areas where we are not the penholder—the classic example is DRC and Rwanda: the teams in DRC and Rwanda are constantly communicating with me as the Minister for Africa. I also feed that in, so that when issues crop up at the United Nations we have a whole picture.

Q75 **Edward Morello:** Is that line of communication always via London, or does it exist directly between country teams and the team in New York as well?

Lord Collins: It is important it is communicated via London, but it does not exclude that in urgent situations we will seek to get immediate information from our team in-country. Freya may want to come in on that. We don't want a bureaucratic process there. The system works extremely well and is very fast.

Freya Jackson: I will say a word about how that process operates. Again, it varies a bit, issue by issue, but say that there is a particular situation in



a country that we wanted to bring to the attention of the Council: it might be that our Mission in-country is what has alerted us to that, or it might be the global news, or that somebody in New York has suggested it. If it had come from the country, they would come to the UN desk. They might, of course, copy in our colleagues in New York. We would then consider if it is a policy that we want to take to the Council. Then we would instruct our colleagues in New York accordingly to start early conversations to see what might be done and seek their advice on it. They would then later come back to us for firm instructions on what to carry out.

That can also work in reverse. For example, perhaps there is a case where there is a mandate that needs renewing: then New York might come to us and say, "This needs renewing, the deadline is here, and this is our advice on it. What do you think?" They would also possibly copy in the country as well, and if they had not, we would bring them in. You would have a conversation, and you might bring in thematic expertise. We might use our peacekeeping team, and perhaps also our conflict department to take a collective view. Then those instructions, and possibly some draft text or comments on the text, would go back out to New York. The process will go backwards and forwards like that until you get to the point of voting instructions.

Q76 Edward Morello: On that broader conversation of where staff are, we had the Perm Sec and Foreign Secretary come and give evidence to the Committee fairly recently and both talked about decisions ahead on staffing as a result of the budget that the FCDO is looking at, going forward. They also both expressed a desire to have more people in-country. My question is: is the UN team in New York currently staffed at the right level? Could we do more with more staff there, or are we doing too much, and are staff better placed elsewhere? Is there a risk that multilateral organisations such as the UN get deprioritised in favour of putting more expertise in-country?

Lord Collins: I don't think that is the case. I think what the Foreign Secretary has said, and I think what the Government have said, is about the importance of the multilateral system and the international rules-based order. That is reflected in our commitment, in terms of making sure that New York, and the multilateral system, are properly resourced. We have an incredibly strong team in New York. They are very capable and very able to deliver on our agenda. I think there are currently between 110 and 130 staff based in New York—

Freya Jackson: Exactly. The size fluctuates a little bit.

Lord Collins: The size fluctuates depending on the issues and how we respond, and I think there are between 20 and 30 focused directly on the Security Council.

It is easy to assume that there is a separation and that somehow what we do in New York does not relate to our in-country staff. In fact, it is the opposite. For every issue that I have particularly been focused on, whether Sudan or any of the issues in Africa, I have seen it in operation in New



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York. We are very agile in being able to respond and properly resource. So I don't think it is a question of weakening New York in favour of in-country staff—far from it. They inform each other.

Q77 Edward Morello: The Perm Sec was talking about the cuts to director level and below. Do you envisage a headcount reduction in New York as a result of these overall departmental staffing cuts?

Lord Collins: The Perm Sec is responsible for these issues, and certainly I think the 2030 agenda is one where we are ensuring that the structure is agile enough to respond to the issues that we are confronted with. Maybe employers tend to say this, and I don't want to be accused of being an employer, but I think actually what Olly is focused on is ensuring that the FCDO is fit for purpose and agile enough to be able to respond, and I don't see our multilateral staff—I think we might even see it strengthened in some respects, but I don't see this as a cost-cutting exercise; it is about making it more efficient.

Q78 Aphra Brandreth: Back in March, we heard from the FCDO that the impacts of ODA cuts on the UK's voluntary contributions to the UN were still being worked through. I just wondered whether you had worked through that now and could provide any detail, particularly if there are any voluntary programmes that will now have to be cut.

Lord Collins: The straight answer is that we are still working through those, because we have made commitments for the current 2025-26 period but many of the programmes have a longer life than that. One of the things that we have been focused on—I think that Jenny Chapman has given evidence to the IDC on this—is that we have prioritised the multilateral system particularly, whether it is Gavi, the Global Fund or even the World Bank, because every £1 we spend on the World Bank multiplies—I think it is the equivalent of £14. So we have seen that as a priority, but a lot of the more detailed programmes are still being worked on, so I cannot give you a direct—

Q79 Aphra Brandreth: So when might we expect to hear that?

Lord Collins: I think some will be by the autumn, won't it?

Freya Jackson: I think it is anticipated to be published before the end of this month for this financial year, and then into the autumn for the multi-year planning.

Lord Collins: Yes, for the multi-year ones.

Q80 Aphra Brandreth: You have touched on this a little bit, but, if we do need to make cuts to some of the voluntary contributions we make, what do you perceive the impact might be on the UK's reputation as a reliable partner at the UN?

Lord Collins: First, whatever the needs of reducing ODA, and we know the reasons for that, I have been a very strong advocate of ensuring that development is not restricted to ODA. I think there are more tools in our toolkit. Actually, the UN system is in the same sort of situation. When you



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were in New York, you no doubt heard about UN80 and about the Secretary-General's move to modernisation. From the focus of that agenda, there is no doubt that there is a financial catalyst for change, but the change should be absolutely about efficiency and impact.

Most countries in the Global South are concerned about that too. I spent a considerable time visiting African countries, and we had a consultation on our approach to the continent. The positive thing about that was that they really understood we were listening, not talking, and focusing on their agenda. The two issues that I heard from every African country is that they want to diversify their economy and add value. We have huge resources to deliver on those two things, which are not ODA-related. I am not saying ODA is not important, but in terms of effecting that change, that is going to be our focus over the next four years.

Q81 Aphra Brandreth: Thank you. I appreciate that, but we have received written evidence that expressed concerns that where the UK is a penholder—perhaps for a specific issue or country—and is reducing ODA spend, that might lead to us failing to meet some of our own, self-imposed commitments and embolden other countries to follow suit and step away. Do you have that concern?

Lord Collins: I do not. Freya is pointing out to me that we are the fifth biggest payer of assessed contributions each year—that is regular budget and peacekeeping. That will not be affected by the ODA cuts.

Freya Jackson: It is only the voluntary contributions.

Lord Collins: Other P5 countries pay significantly less. We have been looking at how that ODA is organised. There are several priorities that the Prime Minister has already committed to: Sudan, Gaza and the occupied territories and Ukraine. They are the priorities that we have been absolutely committed to and focused on.

For other areas of ODA, what we are not going to repeat, and have not repeated, is applying cuts in ODA immediately, with no proper planning or downsizing. Those previous cuts caused huge damage to our credibility and commitment, because programmes were literally stopped midstream. One minute people were delivering a programme and then they were told they were finished and sacked. We are not doing that and maybe that is why some people are frustrated about the news about that. Instead, we are working through these programmes and ensuring that we plan any withdrawal from them so that there can be proper planning.

Q82 Aphra Brandreth: You have touched briefly on the contribution made by other P5 countries. We know that the US is substantially reducing its support. Has the UK considered whether we might redistribute any of our funds across any programmes or agencies in response to that?

Lord Collins: The reality is that the scale of the US cuts is not something that we can match. What we can do is work with others collaboratively to ensure that priorities are determined, and we are doing that, particularly



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in terms of the Global Fund. We have led the way on Gavi and the Global Fund and have got quite a lot of support for that.

Q83 **Chair:** You said other members of the P5 are paying considerably less than we are. Who are they?

Lord Collins: I am talking about the voluntary side.

Q84 **Chair:** Okay. Not the compulsory element?

Lord Collins: No. There are some late payers, but that is another issue. As you are aware, there has always been the equivalent of cash-flow problems because the payments could be delayed. On the voluntary contributions we pay more than China and France.

Q85 **Chair:** Right—on top of the amount that we have to pay otherwise. Is the amount that we pay dependent on the size of our economy, in terms of the obligatory payments?

Lord Collins: The assessed contributions?

Chair: Yes.

Lord Collins: You can explain that better than I can, Freya.

Freya Jackson: I am certainly not an expert, and there are people who are deeply expert in this area—

Chair: I only need a couple of lines.

Freya Jackson: The scale of assessment basically relates to the size of your economy, and it is negotiated every few years to adjust. That is why at the moment the US and China are the largest payers, and by the next time it is assessed, the two of them combined will be about 50%. The oddity is that there is a cap. The US Congress imposed a cap, if my history is correct, to stop the US paying more. Otherwise, I don't know what it would be paying, but let's say it would be 75% of the UN—don't quote me on that one. They capped themselves so that one country did not end up paying for the vast majority of the UN. But still, as the Minister said, the fact is that those two countries, neither of which have a perfect record of paying on time, certainly cause something of a financial liquidity challenge to the UN.

Q86 **Chair:** I see. Perhaps they feel that if they host the UN, that is a contribution.

Freya Jackson: One of them.

Q87 **Sir John Whittingdale:** On the question of the US contribution, there is now an element of doubt about the extent to which the US is going to maintain it. Have you had any conversations about the impact that reductions in the UK's contribution may have, alongside potential reductions in what the US is willing to support? If those two countries both reduce, what impact will it have on the programmes they are funding?

Lord Collins: With the important areas of peace and security and the Security Council, the contributions are to the peacekeeping missions. Certainly, there has been press speculation about US support for those. We have heard State Department people say that this is not the case, and that there is no final plan or budget. We have engaged in trying to ensure the broadest possible support for some of those missions. Some of them are successor missions; for example, in Somalia, we now have the African Union stabilisation mission—AUSSOM. We also had the predecessor there. We are trying to ensure that there is a wider contribution to those missions. Freya, do you want to say anything more on that?

Freya Jackson: While we determine what exactly our budget allocations can be, we cannot be overly open in our conversations with other countries and other bits of the United Nations. One of the pieces of work that we did, taking into account the initial cuts that the US made on the voluntary side, was to look at which areas are too big to fail—that is how we deemed them—given that we cannot backfill everything financially, as the Minister said. The four areas identified were humanitarian need, global health, climate finance, and the global financial system. We have been doing a deeper dive into those areas to look at exactly what that funding will be, and I expect that to be represented in the ODA figures that come out.

Chair: Abtisam, you have just five minutes. Do you want to ask about either Sudan or Yemen before you run off?

Q88 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Thank you, Chair. I will start with Yemen. What is your assessment of the UK's suitability to be the penholder for Yemen?

Lord Collins: I think that our suitability is reflected in our ability to get things agreed and supported. That has been quite positive, in fact. We have had 47 UN Security Council press statements, we have built consensus on 13 of 16 UN Security resolutions on Yemen, and we have co-hosted events at UNGA, which I was present at. Those include a UK-led statement demanding the release of those detained by the Houthis.

It is being pointed out to me that Yemen remains one of the biggest humanitarian crises, with 19.5 million people in need of assistance. We have contributed more than £1.5 billion in ODA since the conflict started in 2015. I want to emphasise that in terms of our penholding role and the Security Council role, we have been successful in getting a consensus. Just recently—I think it was in November—we got a consensus on the maritime situation, supporting the Government of Yemen to enable it to protect its sea borders. I think we have been committed in the role. I would not use the term “successful” because the humanitarian situation is still dire.

Q89 **Abtisam Mohamed:** The words of the former UK ambassador to the UN were very different from yours. He said that the pen was actually “paralysed” in the UK's hands and that very little has taken place. As a result of this, Oman is now working very closely with Saudi Arabia to develop a road map for peace, and the UK is not present there. Is there any way that the UK might consider sharing the pen with another country?

Lord Collins: The whole point of the penholding role is to build a consensus and bring people into the dialogue.

Q90 **Abtisam Mohamed:** What are your reflections on the fact that it might seem paralysed, and that the UK has done very little?

Lord Collins: I would not have used the term “paralysed” myself. There are many conflict situations in which the UN might be able to facilitate dialogue but may not be the main forum for that dialogue. There are many conflicts in that situation. When we can get regional players engaged and committed, that is what we will do. I do not see these things as exclusive, to be honest. There is a humanitarian situation and a conflict situation, and there are different routes to achieving change. I certainly would not agree that we have been paralysed; I just think that there are always opportunities to bring in others, particularly regional players. We certainly know the impact of Saudi Arabia in that conflict.

Q91 **Abtisam Mohamed:** A number of resolutions relating to Sudan have been put forward by the UK, but there are some who say that the UK is not in the inner circle when it comes to Sudan, and that again, discussions are happening externally. To what extent do you think that we have been successful there, and what are your reflections on what more could be done?

Lord Collins: A lot more can be done. I think that our role as penholder has been, particularly in the Security Council, to try to ensure that Sudan is not omitted from the global agenda. We have constantly raised it. Of course, last November we had a potentially successful resolution that we co-penned with—

Freya Jackson: Sierra Leone.

Lord Collins: Yes, Sierra Leone. President Bio was part of that dialogue. But of course, it was vetoed by the Russians, which I think was an unforgivable veto because it was a political one. There was no interest on Russia’s part to do that. However, it did not stop us then asking, in terms of the protection of civilians, what next steps we could take. That is why, I think, the Foreign Secretary convened the Sudan conference. Of course, that conference was co-hosted by the African Union. Our commitment, constantly, is how we engage, how we convene, and how we bring others into the equation.

Q92 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Are there accountability measures where resolutions have not been enforced?

Lord Collins: Actually, that is a really good point, because in relation to Sudan, although the Russians vetoed the Security Council resolution, we went back to Geneva and ensured the extension of the fact-finding mission in Sudan. The remit of that fact-finding mission was extended to ensure exactly that accountability. There was evidence-gathering so that people know that they will be held to account for their actions in Sudan. Protection of civilians did not stop because of the veto. We took our case to other parts of the UN architecture. The fact that the fact-finding mission

has been producing reports does lead to much stronger points of accountability.

Q93 Abtisam Mohamed: What about things like arms embargoes and potential sanctions—have they been explored?

Lord Collins: We have a UN arms embargo on Sudan. One thing that we have been consistent about in relation to Sudan is condemning all external players who fuel the conflict. Wherever they are from and whoever they are, we do not think that they should be interfering in the conflict. We have been very clear about that. We certainly do have a UN arms embargo in place, particularly as a consequence of Darfur, and there are accountability measures in relation to Darfur, but I think we need to do more and we need to raise awareness of it.

Q94 Chair: Can I take you back to Yemen? A few years ago, was it not a contradiction that we were on the one hand the penholder and supposedly looking for peace in Yemen, and on the other hand we were making such profits from selling arms to Saudi Arabia that we were one of the main parties to the war?

Lord Collins: I repeat what I said before: being a penholder does not necessarily mean that you make efforts to resolve the conflict. What we have to do is welcome all avenues that may result in the conflict being resolved. A classic example, even now, is the dialogue. France is the penholder on DRC. What I have been very keen to promote in relation to the conflict in eastern DRC is to focus on African-led initiatives, particularly the African Union, SADC and the EAC. That will lead to a much more sustainable long-term solution. But the US has intervened and brought the parties to Washington, and there has been an agreement there.

Q95 Chair: Hang on. I was asking you about the central contradiction between being a major arms supplier to the war in Yemen at the same time as finding peace in Yemen. In defence of that, you were giving us the example of France and the DRC. What is the contradiction in France being the penholder for the DRC?

Lord Collins: I don't know—the simple fact is that conflicts are always very complex and there are regional players. Even in relation to Sudan, we try and get regional partners to be engaged in that dialogue. I think in terms of—

Chair: I am asking about France and DRC.

Lord Collins: Well, in terms of Yemen, at the time I think we were very clear about the use of weapons in Yemen. We were very clear at the time about that. The Labour Opposition was very clear. I think you were shadow Foreign Secretary.

Chair: I was very clear about it, yes.

Lord Collins: And I think I was in your team at the time.

Chair: You were.



Lord Collins: What we have done as penholder is to look at how we can promote a UN-led process with a more sustainable, long-term political settlement. That ultimately has to be the goal, but we know that there are other players in Yemen, including Iran. That is something that we have to be focused on. I do not think it is a contradiction, actually. If your objective is to obtain a long-term political solution, you get people together. Maybe it is my old trade union background. At the end of the day you need a settlement and an agreement.

Q96 **Uma Kumaran:** One in four countries report a backlash on women's rights, according to the UN's latest report, "Women's Rights in Review". Do you think the United Kingdom is doing enough to raise the profile of women, peace and security at the UN Security Council in the face of attempts by some countries to block progress on gender equality?

Lord Collins: I think this is fundamental. It is 25 years since resolution 1325 and we remain absolutely committed to the agenda. We are working with all our allies to increase women's participation and incorporate gender perspectives in all of our UN peace and security efforts.

As a country I think we can be proud of our leadership on the WPS agenda. That includes the commitments made by the previous Government. This has been a long-term project, and we are absolutely committed to it. Certainly, I remain very committed to ensuring delivery of the national action plan that was agreed by the previous Government, just over 90% of which has already been implemented. I do think we need to think about how we can refresh that plan and how we can respond to some of the efforts to roll back.

Sometimes it can be about how we frame the debate. Harriet Harman and I were in New York at the Commission on the Status of Women—by the way, having Harriet Harman as our envoy for women and girls is another important element of the Government's approach. What we want is to be absolutely focused on impact and how we deliver on that agenda, and not be trapped by a debate over certain words. We are absolutely framing the debate and building alliances to ensure delivery of it but, no doubt, there are attempts to roll back.

Q97 **Uma Kumaran:** Do you think they are accurately communicating the situation that women in war zones are facing? I was in the west bank earlier this year and met a group of Bedouin women. They are facing very acute challenges and problems as women, whether access to sanitary products or medical care or childbirth—the list goes on. Does this come through in the high-level discussions?

Lord Collins: I think it absolutely does. I am also the special envoy for the prevention of sexual violence in conflict, and one of the things I have done is to try to convene bodies, but also to ensure that it is the voices of survivors that are heard. In the General Assembly we organised a number of events, particularly on Sudan, where we had women survivors talking about their experiences. I do not think there is any replacement for that.

It is their voices that need to be heard. Throughout our activity it is about ensuring that those voices are amplified and heard within the UN system.

Q98 Uma Kumaran: It has been 30 years since the Beijing declaration and platform for action, which was billed as the most visionary road map for women's rights. However to put it into context, of the 18 peace agreements concluded in 2022, only one included a woman's representative as a signatory. What does that say about the UK's leadership for the women, peace and security file at the UN Security Council? Do you think we have made progress in those 30 years?

Lord Collins: I think we can do a lot more. We invited women civil society leaders and humanitarian experts from Syria, Sudan and South Sudan to brief the UN Security Council. That is another fundamental change in the system. We now get people before the Security Council to talk about their own experiences, so it is not political leaders or Government leaders speaking. I think that has been a really important point. As special envoy, I convened the international alliance on the prevention of sexual violence and ensured that there were those voices, particularly in terms of DRC and the rapid escalation of violence there.

However, I think you are absolutely right: how do we use the UN system to ensure that in those dialogues, even if they are taken outside of the UN system as we talked about earlier, women's voices are involved? The evidence is there: when women are involved in peace talks, they are more likely to succeed. There is strong evidence for that. Luke Pollard, the Armed Forces Minister, and I meet regularly to talk about how to ensure the full implementation of the national action plan and our agenda for women, peace and security.

Q99 Uma Kumaran: I was reading a fascinating report by UN Women yesterday. There is an estimated £420 billion a year shortfall in the funding needed to achieve gender equality. That is a huge sum of money, and states cannot do it alone. Outside of the UN Security Council, how is the UK using alternative diplomatic routes and channels, including regional organisations, to ensure that the women, peace and security file advances?

Lord Collins: We are doing that working through allies. You make an interesting point. That figure is astronomical. When you judge that amount, you think it is impossible. Of course, we have funded the equality fund with £33 million and we have been supporting more than 1,000 women's rights organisations. Why I have been such a strong advocate for civil society organisations within the UN is that, often, they are the changemakers; they are the human rights defenders.

I often say that the most important ingredient of a healthy democracy is a vibrant civil society, particularly when human rights are under attack. When it comes to women's empowerment and support for women, civil society and trade unions are absolutely fundamental to change.

One of the things that we have changed since being in it is that now we have a team in the FCDO working with trade unions. Now we are not only



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supporting women's rights organisations but working on how women can be more active in their trade union. In Geneva I did the same. I am absolutely clear: do not leave it to politicians.

Uma Kumaran: Thank you. Can I use this opportunity to plug an exhibition I have about the match girls' strike of 1888? I urge everyone here to have a look at that after you leave. It is about women fighting for their rights.

Lord Collins: I know the story very well.

Q100 **Phil Brickell:** The Committee travelled to New York earlier this year to meet the UN Secretary-General to talk about his UN80 Initiative, which looks at modernising and reforming certain aspects of how the United Nations operates. What are your hopes for that workstream that the Secretary-General is leading?

Lord Collins: The United Kingdom very much welcomes the Secretary-General's initiative on reform. It is about delivering a modernised, streamlined and prioritised UN. One of the very first things they were looking at was the multiplicity of mandates, particularly where those mandates often cut across each other. They are going through a quite radical exercise, using AI I think, to do the first sweep of how they can establish that. There are a number of processes. The first is administration and how the back-office services can be reformed, brought together and more efficient—all the things you hear from organisations that face the sort of challenges that the UN faces.

I think we can also be strongly radical about this. Often in the past when the question of reform has come up, it has been very difficult to make change. Change has often been delivered through addition, but this time around, we need to focus on impact. When I spoke to the Secretary-General's—I don't know what you would call Guy Ryder—

Freya Jackson: He is an Under-Secretary-General, and he is in charge of the process.

Lord Collins: Yes, he is in charge of the process. I have sat down with him on a number of occasions to talk about this. Obviously, the financial situation is a catalyst for change, but it should not be the only reason for change. What we are trying to do is include other countries in the debate to talk about how greater efficiency and greater impact should be the outcome. Guy Ryder and I go back a long way to when he was first at the TUC. He is from a very good background, and I can see that he is focused on delivering this change for the benefit of all member countries.

Q101 **Phil Brickell:** We have heard evidence about the mandates that you mentioned, and about how sclerotic the United Nations can be. Set against that backdrop, we have seen rising bilateral efforts on conflict resolution, driven by states such as China, Turkey and Qatar. We have also seen nascent multilateral organisations emerge over the last one or two decades, such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation. How relevant do you think the United Nations is to this day?



Lord Collins: My opening comments were about the incredible convening power of the United Nations, and the simple fact that everyone is around a table is really important. The United Nations has been responsible for supporting a lot of those regional bodies. I do not think you should underestimate the importance of, for example, the African Union. Other countries may seem to want to engage; I am not going to be exclusive about this, if a country can contribute to peace and security.

I recently had quite lengthy discussions with Turkey about its engagement. We have a partnership with Turkey, and Turkey is a long-term ally through NATO. We were looking at the respective positions in the Sahel, which potentially has huge security issues that could particularly have impacts in both west Africa, in countries like Ghana and Nigeria, and north Africa.

How do we work collaboratively and co-operatively on both security and development? I think that development is the other side of the equation from security. If you do not support countries to develop, you will end up with even greater security crises. I welcome a lot of these initiatives and co-operation. Where they prove to work, we should continue to support them. Often, if they are countries that are just making political statements but not delivering on the ground, they will not succeed.

Q102 **Phil Brickell:** This Committee previously heard that there is an increasing drive towards supporting humanitarian relief, as opposed to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, because the latter is, frankly, too difficult to work through in the United Nations. To what extent do you think the UN has got the balance right between those two key initiatives?

Lord Collins: I don't think they are an either/or. Obviously, peacekeeping is a result of conflict, and peacebuilding is to avoid conflict. What we have to do is ensure that we devote sufficient resources to peacebuilding. A key element of peacebuilding is exactly what I have mentioned: it is not just simply getting a bunch of people around and saying, "You have to be nice to each other." It is about how you focus on economic diplomacy and economic development. Many of the causes of conflict are often related to conflict over limited resources, as well as jobs, and we are absolutely focused on that. Did you want to add anything, Freya?

Freya Jackson: It is a fact and a reality that the UN is spending more on humanitarian relief than peacekeeping, but quite often what the Council is doing by way of conflict resolution depends on the geopolitics of the day—at the moment, that is particularly difficult. If you look across the UN's history, you will see moments when it has waxed and waned in its activity, and some of that relates also to the Secretary-General and where they want to put their emphasis. We would still see the Council as having a very valuable role in endorsing the peace deals that have been created by others, and there have been lots of examples of that in the past. The UN is quite often not the foremost broker of a deal—that is done by a regional organisation or a set of players—but those countries bring it to the Council to endorse it and perhaps put in a mission to support the maintenance of the peace that has been reached. That is a very valuable role.

Q103 Chair: I feel like you are agreeing with what Phil is saying: that it has been a long time since the United Nations actually brokered a peace or initiated a peacekeeping force. Instead, increasing amounts of money seem to be spent on humanitarian aid, when the purpose of the United Nations, at least initially, was to ensure peace. That was supposed to be its primary role. It seems to be changing over time. Would you agree with that?

Lord Collins: No; I think I agree with Freya that it is a cyclical thing and dependent on the geopolitical situation. We had many years of the cold war. I read Mark Lyall Grant's evidence to you, where he said that there was a "golden age" of the United Nations immediately after the Cold War and before the current situation. I am inclined to agree with that, but the geopolitical situation impacts the ability of the United Nations to act.

I come back to my initial point that it is even more important to have the convening power of the United Nations in these circumstances. If we did not have it, there would not be the opportunity for dialogue. We would be even more polarised than the geopolitical situation is at the moment.

Q104 Phil Brickell: On peacekeeping in particular, the Committee heard evidence that suggested that the way the United Nations goes about its peacekeeping efforts is stuck in the 1970s. At a time when the UN has limited resources to draw on, to what extent are the UK Government working with other member nations to drive greater use of technology—drones, for instance—to effectively keep peace and support efforts to that effect?

Lord Collins: That is a good point. We contribute to UN peacekeeping: we support it financially and we contribute forces. A classic is MONUSCO in the DRC. We have contributed £48 million to their budget and they have been operating in very difficult circumstances. They have been very brave. Many UN peacekeepers from South Africa and other supporting countries have been killed.

When I was in dialogue with the Turks, we were talking about the role of drones and other things, particularly in monitoring peace agreements. That has been quite critical. Often, two opposing sides need to go through a process of confidence building because there is a lack of trust. Some of the new equipment can help us to monitor more effectively, so I do not disagree with you. Freya, do you have anything further to add on that?

Freya Jackson: A number of reports about reviewing peacekeeping are going through consideration at the moment. The UK generally has been a strong supporter of reform. We have certainly funded reform and training efforts. In a number of the missions, the types of people we tend to put in are senior people who then help the wider—

Lord Collins: That is a really important point to make. We have embedded some of our military people to ensure that the WPS agenda is applied, and senior commanders in certain places to try to improve that. It is the right question. We need to look at how these forces are able to utilise the most up-to-date equipment to build that confidence, because

their mission is to ensure that whatever peace agreement agreed is maintained. They are not there to fight a war; they are there to keep the peace.

Q105 Chair: You just said, Ms Jackson, that the UK is supportive of reform when it comes to peace and security mechanisms at the UN. Would you support efforts for it to be leaner, downsized? If so, what would that look like?

Lord Collins: You can have the first bash at that.

Freya Jackson: As the Minister was discussing earlier in relation to the Secretary-General's UN80 Initiative, any organisation—including, as you have heard about from the permanent secretary, our own—needs to look at itself and ask itself whether it is making the most efficient and effective use of resources. Naturally, over time we might become less skilled and need to reskill and adopt the latest technologies. I think the UN is a very wide and complicated beast consisting of many entities, including in the peace and security space, and there have been many attempts to reform it. Yes, we would continue to support that process of reform to make sure that it is basically delivering the highest effectiveness for the money that is going in.

Lord Collins: That is what I was going to say: to be more effective. A big organisation does not necessarily mean it is effective.

Q106 Chair: And a small organisation might be more effective.

Lord Collins: It could be. As I said at the beginning, there is a catalyst that is causing the need for change, and that is finance. But I do not think that should be the purpose of this, and that is why the Secretary-General has set it in terms of UN80. How can we be more effective? How do we address the question of multiplicity of mandates, which clearly are causing duplication? There are structural issues about UN agencies. Many years ago Kofi Annan articulated the campaign for "One UN". That is still to be delivered on, really, after all these years, but now I think we have a situation where people will take that seriously.

Chair: That leads us on to Edward.

Q107 Edward Morello: I want to go back a little bit to the point you were making about the relevance of the UN, and how what the UN does reflects the geopolitics of the day but also tends to reflect the leadership of the UN, especially the Secretary-General. We are coming to the end of the present Secretary-General's term; I think he has about 14 months left before a new one will need to be elected. Is it in the interests of the UK to have a more activist Secretary-General—someone more willing to impose themselves on the events of the day? Or is it a bit more in the interests of the UK to have somebody who is more secretary than general?

Lord Collins: I assume that is quoting someone from one of your evidence sessions. For a long time, the United Kingdom has been absolutely committed to efforts to ensure merit-based and inclusive multilateral appointments. By the very nature of the beast, there has been a tendency to say, "It is this country's turn" or "It is that country's turn".



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How do you maintain that broad consensus? That sometimes impacts on the election of the Secretary-General.

Greater transparency, and greater focus on ensuring the best person gets the job, is something that we are focused on. Two-term Secretaries-General tend to spend the first term thinking about how they can get elected for the second term. These are issues that may perhaps impact on their ability. However, Guterres was incredibly successful, in my opinion, in ensuring that civil society voice. He was a strong advocate and actually made sure that the Security Council sessions heard those voices. I think he was absolutely right about that, and that is a positive impact. Particularly with the people he has got around him, I think he is going to play an important role in delivering on UN80, and we should not simply say, "Oh well, we've got a new Secretary-General in 18 months' time". We need to set the agenda now. That might shape who eventually comes out as a successor to Guterres.

Chair: That's it. Thank you very much indeed. It is very nice to see you, Lord Collins. Thank you for your time today. If anything else occurs to you after this session, please do write to the Committee with any further thoughts.