



Oral evidence: [The FCO's human rights work in 2013](#), HC 551

Tuesday 8 July 2014

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Members present: Sir Richard Ottaway (Chair); Mr John Baron; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Mark Hendrick; Sandra Osborne; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 52-112

Witnesses: **The Rt Hon Baroness Warsi**, Senior Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Minister of State for Faith and Communities, Department for Communities and Local Government, and **Rob Fenn**, Head of Human Rights and Democracy Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave evidence.

Q52 Chair: May I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee? This is the second of two evidence sessions in the Committee's inquiry into the Foreign Office's human rights work in 2013. May I add my usual caveat that this is not a human rights inquiry by the Committee, but a critique of the Foreign Office's human rights report, and that, as such, our questions are directed in that way?

I welcome our two witnesses. The first is Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, the senior Minister of State in the Foreign Office and Minister of State for Faith and Communities at the Department for Communities and Local Government. With her is Mr Rob Fenn, the head of the Human Rights and Democracy Department. I warmly welcome you both. Thank you very much for coming along.

Baroness Warsi, we have seen the emergence of a clearer definition of what is meant by "countries of concern", which seems to be based on internationally respected human rights indicators and indices. Which indices did you use in determining the countries of concern, and why were they not published with the report?

Baroness Warsi: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. Clearly, the report evolves every year, and the process we have with the Committee helps us in evolving the report. We have been discussing the issue of countries of concern at these hearings for a number of years. You will recall that it was this Committee that said we should have some sort of criteria published, against which to assess the issue. The suggestion last year was about what we base the criteria on, and how we measure. That is when we moved on to a second phase of looking at independent indices and measuring countries against them on a RAG rating. We did not publish a list of indicators and indices, but I have a copy of them here, and I am more than happy to pass it to the Committee. It may well be something that we could include in next year's report.

Q53 Chair: That would be very helpful. Can we refer to it?

Baroness Warsi: Yes, you can.

Q54 Chair: That is very helpful. It is much appreciated.

There is real feeling of déjà vu here. I started by asking you why countries are or are not countries of concern. I do not know whether this is a fight we have to have every year, but as usual we do not have Bahrain, Ethiopia, Rwanda or Egypt on the list. There seems to be ample evidence of serious failings in those countries. Could you say why you still resist being concerned, or seriously concerned, about them?

Baroness Warsi: If you will allow me, I will answer that first of all by going back a few steps to what the human rights report is all about. It is probably done, in many ways, differently from reports in some of the other countries that have quite extensive human rights work. It is not like the report in the United States, which, effectively, is a snapshot of the human rights of every single country at that moment in time. Our human rights report is much more targeted. Because of that, we have to identify a number of countries of concern. Over time we have, as I have just said, developed a process by which we identify those countries of concern. I am confident—much more so since even last year—that that is now much more independently verifiable, and there are criteria, but at the end of that process, which includes the RAG rating and the indices that we have introduced, there is an element of what I call human intervention, and that takes a number of different forms. First of all, there is the report from the ambassadors and high commissioners in the country who, of course, have a much more sophisticated and nuanced understanding because of their experiences. Then there is the desk and the officials here who deal with these countries on a day-to-day basis. Then, of course, there is ministerial involvement.

You mentioned a couple of countries, and perhaps I can take the issue of Egypt. These matters go to the highest level; that particular decision was taken at the highest level, by the Foreign Secretary. At that stage, we did not feel we needed to include Egypt as a country of concern, but we felt it should be a case study. That effectively means that every six months, it will be reviewed. These matters will be kept under review; as you have seen, an additional country of concern—the Central African Republic—has been added this year, and countries of concern are removed. The case study process is an alternative way of dealing with this.

Q55 Chair: Has Kazakhstan come over your radar? We have reports from Freedom House, Human Rights Watch and Transparency International that there is a continuing deterioration of human rights in the country. The example I give you is that of Mr Mukhtar Dzhakishev, who was the head of the state nuclear company. His trial was conducted in secret, against all the norms that we would recognise and approve. Does Kazakhstan register on your Richter scale?

Baroness Warsi: It does. I am also the Minister with responsibility for Kazakhstan. Indeed, even before the Foreign Office role, as Minister without Portfolio, I had a responsibility for work across central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Human rights work is an integral part of our relationship with Kazakhstan. You will be aware that the relationship between the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan has, over the years, become much stronger and

much broader. There was a prime ministerial visit, of course, last year. That relationship broadening and deepening has allowed us to tackle some of these issues. We have quite specific work on human rights that we are doing in Kazakhstan. If you would like me to, I can go through that, or I can write to the Committee with details of it.

Q56 Chair: If you could write to me about it, that would be great.

Baroness Warsi: I am happy to do that.

Q57 Chair: Could I turn to the budgetary aspects of the human rights report? The report says that £6.5 million was spent on programme spending last year, but it does not provide a figure for human rights spending in its totality. Do you have a figure for how much you spend on human rights work in total?

Baroness Warsi: I have a number of figures, but I am not sure whether they amount to the total spend on human rights work, because there are a number of different ways in which we spend on human rights work. Of course, we have the project funding—you have the details of that—which was £6.5 million last year, and we are just about to issue a written ministerial statement about the spend for the year 2014-15. Another FCO programme that supports human rights work and democracy work—we see it in the whole—is the Arab Partnership programme, which has a budget of £40 million over four years. Embassies and high commissions have budgets in-country that they use towards human rights work. There is an element of human rights work in the programmes run by arm's length bodies that we fund, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the British Council, whose last yearly budget was £153.5 million. An aspect of the British Council's work is about interests and values. The way in which we do human rights work is not just pigeonholed into a box of project work; it is much broader than that.

Q58 Chair: I agree. It was a fairly general question, but we are interested in getting a global figure. In what is already a lengthening letter, I wonder whether you can address that point as well.

Baroness Warsi: I cannot give you a final figure for what we are spending on human rights work. It would be an even bigger figure for HMG, if you think of the amount of work that DFID does that has a direct impact on human rights work, the work that MOD is doing, and the conflict work that we are doing as part of the pool of funds among the three Departments. I may be able to go away and come up with a figure for the FCO, but I am not sure we could ever come up with a final figure for how much money we are spending on human rights work, because you would have to include in it all the staff time, the staff hours, the project work, the arm's length bodies, the Arab Partnership, the DFID work and the MOD work.

Q59 Chair: Can you have a stab at it? You never know, you might be rather proud of the answer.

Baroness Warsi: I think we would be. My only concern is that it might be a bit of a finger in the air.

Q60 Chair: Anyway, I take your point, and I hope you take mine as well.

Baroness Warsi: I do.

Q61 Chair: We would like to see something other than the programme spend figure. Can we look at the outcomes? Do you have any clear outcome-based objectives when you start initiatives or interventions in foreign countries?

Baroness Warsi: We start off with thematic priorities. Our six priorities are in the human rights report, and they are usually a good starting point. We then have individual country business plans, which include a human rights element. Even for countries that are not countries of concern, case studies or part of our thematic priorities, we would still be doing some level of human rights work in-country, based on the individual country plan.

Much of the work is evaluated by responses to projects that we are funding on the ground, or that the NGO community is. The projects that we fund centrally based on the six priorities have an evaluation at the end of them, which gives us an idea of what outcomes have been achieved. Some of those evaluations have now been published online.

However, I don't think you can start off by saying, "We are going to achieve this within this time frame," because human rights work is incremental and it does not always head in the right direction all the time. You might make some progress—Egypt is a classic example—and then start to go backwards. Therefore, it is not something you can continuously measure in a specific way. You can measure areas such as the death penalty, for example. We have an annual resolution at the United Nations, which gives us a clear indication of how many countries have signed up to the moratorium and how many have become abolitionists, and therefore we can show progress. However, it cannot always be achieved for some of the other human rights work.

Q62 Chair: Understood. You mentioned that some evaluations are done. Would you like to highlight a real success, and one that has not come up to expectations?

Baroness Warsi: Some evaluations have been published online, but maybe I can give you a personal one relating to Uzbekistan, a country with which I have had dealings since 2011. If you go back to 2011 and some of the discussions around the use of child labour in cotton fields, the issue was usually responded to by our interlocutors in Uzbekistan as follows: first, it did not even happen; secondly, it was not a problem; thirdly, we moved on to "Well, if it does happen, it happens with everybody's consent, and it is a bit of a summer camp."

Then we moved on to much more realistic and frank conversations. Eventually the ILO was allowed to go in, and some real progress has been made over the last 12 to 18 months. There is a real sense that they do recognise that it is a problem. This year, we did not have any children under the age of 16 in the cotton fields. That is what I evaluate as a success, and it is something that I have been personally involved in. We now need to make sure that the follow-on continues.

Chair: Thank you. Sandra?

Q63 Sandra Osborne: One of your priorities is to promote freedom of religion or belief, and rightly so. I believe you chair an advisory group on that, ensuring that various other initiatives are taken. What do you hope to achieve through the new emphasis on this work,

and do you have specific targets or milestones? What, for example, do you want to achieve by March 2015?

Baroness Warsi: First of all, we started off from a very low base. You may be aware that it has been a personal priority of mine, and that in many ways it straddles the two jobs that I do as Minister for Faith and Communities domestically and in my Foreign Office job. As part of the human rights brief, it is one of the six priorities, but it is my personal priority.

The reason why I say we started off from quite a low base is that I think the concept of faith in the public sphere—even talking about faith in the public sphere, or belief, or religion—was considered in itself to be politically either naive or stupid. When we first came into Government, it was important to me that the first speech I made was that this Government would do God. I wanted to signal a change. Since then, a whole series of measures have been taken, both domestically, in terms of how we do issues of faith communities, and internationally.

Internationally, there were a number of challenges to freedom of religion or belief. First of all, I don't think we were religiously literate enough. I certainly sensed that those of us working on this area—officials and Ministers—needed to be much more confident, and that we would be much more confident in dealing with some incredibly sensitive issues if we were more religiously literate. So I have initiated and championed a series of training programmes across the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—indeed, they are open to other Departments now as well—which include a hub of learning headed by our ambassador to the Holy See, training programmes and outside speakers coming in. We have had the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and the Archbishop Vincent Nichols come in. I think we are on to the 12th or 13th. It is open to officials. There are incredibly frank and open exchanges that give people the ability to have some of those tough conversations. I think religious literacy has been a big aspect of it.

The second was making sure that we got in the expertise to help and guide us through this process. You will be aware that we have set up a sub-group on freedom of religion and belief. We have people who specialise in it on the Foreign Secretary's main human rights advisory group. I set up the sub-group, and we had the first meeting earlier this year. It was important that we had a breadth of expertise on that sub-group—not a breadth of religious representatives, because that has happened in the past in Government. I didn't want a theological debating society; I wanted a series of people who could help us formulate campaigns and look at how we could formulate policy.

Thirdly, we have been much more outspoken in defining what freedom of religion and belief is. I think we were mealy-mouthed about what we meant by that, and we were quite cautious about being specific about specific problems. If I can explain that, whenever I talk about freedom of religion and belief, I always say that what I mean by that is freedom to have a religion or a belief, freedom to manifest that religion or belief, freedom to change that religion or belief, and freedom not to have a religion or belief.

It is really important that we outline all those different aspects of what we mean by freedom of religion and belief.

When we have seen specific problems, such as the exodus of Christian communities in certain places around the world, including Iraq and the Middle East, we have talked about the rights of all minority communities or the persecution of all faiths, as, of course, we must do. You invariably find that when a religious community is being persecuted, many other human rights are being abused at the same time, so it is a bit of a bellwether in terms of indicating where things stand in that country.

But we also have to be quite specific. I hope that speeches such as the one I gave in Georgetown about the persecution of Christians have indicated a much more confident and front-footed Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as a Government who are prepared to tackle these issues. Ministerial colleagues, including the Prime Minister, are now much more frank about discussing these issues. We are no longer seeing religion as—to quote the previous Archbishop of Canterbury—the preserve of “oddities, foreigners and minorities”. That was probably why politicians stayed away from it. I think we no longer see ourselves on that spectrum and are much more confident about it.

Q64 Sandra Osborne: Is that the same for staff both here and abroad? Is the difference that they are more confident? What are they doing that is different from the past?

Baroness Warsi: Part of a Minister’s role is to give their officials the confidence to be able to tackle difficult issues. I hope that I have given officials in the Foreign Office and DCLG the confidence to do that. We are in a much better place now than we were three or four years ago—certainly than when I first started at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. That is apparent from the response from parliamentarians and certain people in the media who write about these issues. My ministerial colleagues and officials are all part of that drive.

The training has helped. We have started to prepare these “how to do” factsheets that are given out as an internal training document—for example, how to do work on torture prevention. We are in the process of finalising the “how to do” work on freedom of religion and belief, which will be given to every one of our posts overseas. They give a starting point or a checklist from which people can begin.

The question that you asked me right at the beginning—sorry, you can tell that this is my big hobby-horse—was about the successes. I think that that is the next stage from where we have started. The work we are currently doing is about what outcomes look like in this area. One challenge we have on freedom of religion and belief is that it is sometimes interpreted very differently in the West as opposed to the East. We protect believers, whereas large parts of the East like to protect the religion. It has been really hard to reconcile that space politically and internationally.

We did get to an agreement through Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, but although people say that we have an agreement, every time that resolution comes before the Human Rights Council, we still argue about it, so I do not think that we have yet reached an agreement. More political will is required. I set up a political grouping to support the work of resolution 16/18, which includes people such as John Baird from Canada and Marty Natalegawa, the Indonesia Foreign Minister. Pakistan, OIC, the Italians and the Americans are all part of the group. It has been really interesting. It is about bringing together different parts of the world to create political will. We also have some exciting plans for before May

2015, which I hope will be well received at the next Committee hearing in about 12 months' time.

Q65 Sandra Osborne: Clearly we could have had a meeting on this subject alone. There are some very striking statistics in the human rights report: 75% of people live in countries where high levels of social hostility limit religious freedom; and 64% live in countries where Government restrictions are limiting factors. That is a huge number. I think that all our constituents are concerned about the whole issue and how it seems to their eyes. Is the Foreign Office selecting specific geographical areas as a focus for its initiative? What funding has been allocated and how do you plan to spend it?

Baroness Warsi: Again, if I can go back to the programme funding—I note the comments that the Chairman has already made about it—it is one aspect of the work that we do. The amount that was spent on project work on freedom of religion and belief in 2013-14 was £204,000 centrally. We are going to lay a written ministerial statement about this, but I suppose I am at liberty to say that it is going to be more than that in the next year, so I think that shows our commitment to this area.

There are certain countries where we have done specific work, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Sudan, Syria and Burma. We are hoping that we can bring some of that experience and expertise to what we hope will be a global gathering to take forward some of the practical outcomes I was talking about over the next 12 months. We have already started to use faith as a way of achieving outcomes.

The global summit to end sexual violence in conflict was a classic case. Some of the best sessions at that conference were about using faith as a lever for protecting survivors. The church or faith places are usually the first point of sanctuary and support for survivors, but they have, in the past, been part of the problem. We had an opportunity where we had a network of NGOs called “We Will Speak Out”, which did a session specifically around how much more work could be done around ending sexual violence in conflict. We had a higher level political meeting, which was attended by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Archbishop Vincent Nichols; we had Sheikh Bin Bayyah who came from Mauritania and is linked to Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi as well; and we had other religious leaders from regions where there is a real issue in relation to ending sexual violence, including Burma. It was an opportunity to turn the spotlight on faith leaders and say that we want faith to be part of the solution, but how do we get there? How do we empower these faith communities not to be part of the problem and not to allow a culture to exist that creates the climate that gives impunity for these crimes? If we are going to use religious terms, how do we make sure the sin—the crime—sits with the perpetrator, and that innocence and protection sits with the survivor?

Q66 Sandra Osborne: You talked about different perspectives. Would it be right to assume that you have more chance encouraging change in states that fail to protect citizens from religious intolerances than in states that deny religious freedom or belief?

Baroness Warsi: I am not sure that you can always make that distinct divide. There are some countries that pride themselves on having religious freedom, but then have a list of religions that you can belong to. We try to have the discussion with them that that is not actually religious freedom, and that it is not your version of the faith that people have to

follow, but their version of the faith that people have to be allowed to follow. Some of those discussions have been about trying not to have that distinctive line between one type of country and another.

I also think that holding the domestic brief makes the arguments much more powerful. I have said for a long time that what we do domestically has an impact on our reputation internationally, and what we do internationally has blowback for us domestically. Being able to cite the kind of work that we do with our religious minorities—the way we protect communities from hate crimes, and all the work we have done on anti-Semitism, for example, using some of the projects we have done on inter-faith work—and citing the minority UK western experience when we talk about the minority eastern experience is so much more powerful than saying, “We, the West, predominantly Christian, are here to talk about the Christians in the East.” In doing that, we reinforce the view that somehow they are our people and they don’t belong there. Christianity wasn’t created in London or New York; it is a religion of those lands. We have to be really careful in how we make the argument in the sense that we don’t further stigmatise and isolate those communities. Using the minority experience to discuss a minority experience has been much more powerful.

Sandra Osborne: Thank you.

Q67 Ann Clwyd: Do you have any concerns that prioritising religious freedom might undermine lobbying on women’s rights and minority rights?

Baroness Warsi: I don’t. I feel that religion provides a solution to some of these challenges. If I can again give you a personal example, one of the first speeches that I made in Pakistan when I travelled there as a Foreign Office Minister was at the Fatima Jinnah university, which is a women’s university. The phrase that we built the speech around was, “Let not today’s men deny you the rights that your religion gave you 1,400 years ago.” So it was not about me, the western lady, coming to eradicate misogyny in Pakistan and liberate you all; it was actually, “Use the very tools and the very basis on which you are denied these rights,” because, if you go back, religion—in this example, Islam—provides a great basis on which the fundamental rights of women are protected.

For example, the case that is in the media a lot—that of Malala Yousafzai—and brought this to the fore was around the issue of education. One of the first tenets of the faith—we have used this quite a bit—has been about the duty of individuals to learn. The very clear teaching is about the duty to learn and educate yourselves, and it does not say in brackets, “If you’re a bloke.” It actually says, “Learn and educate yourselves,” and that is a fundamental right that was given to women. It is much more powerful. We have seen this happening now in south-east and south Asia, and we are seeing it across the Middle East. Women are starting to take forward these theological interpretations and are really fighting back on some of these incorrect and misogynistic interpretations that stop women from progressing.

Q68 Ann Clwyd: In that context, I was interested to read in the human rights report that in Afghanistan the FCO ran a successful English course for mullahs through the British Council to broaden their understanding of other religions and how they are compatible with Islam. Can you explain a bit more about that course and how its overall impact was measured? It seems a little curious.

Baroness Warsi: I am not familiar with that specific project, but I can certainly go away and look at it in detail and write to you.

Q69 Nadhim Zahawi: The Foreign Secretary and Angelina Jolie, the US special envoy, co-chaired the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict. It addressed the four key aims for change: first, to improve accountability at the national and international level; secondly, to provide greater support and protection to survivors of sexual violence; thirdly, to ensure that sexual and gender-based violence responses and the promotion of gender equality are fully integrated; and, fourthly, to improve international strategic co-operation. What mechanism do you have in place to monitor the progress of the commitments made at the global summit to ensure an end to sexual violence?

Baroness Warsi: It is an incredibly important question. If you will allow me, we need to go back and talk a little bit about the achievements of that sexual violence summit. If we had sat here two and a half to three years ago and said that the United Kingdom, the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office would be known for championing this issue and building international consensus, with 155 countries around the world—from across the globe—signing up to a declaration on ending sexual violence in conflict, we probably would have said, “Hardly. Can you see anybody championing that?” For me, it has been an incredible privilege to watch the Foreign Secretary take this forward. It is not being seen as a women’s issue that some woman will come along and deal with; this is an issue that goes to the core of what he believes. I will quote what he said: “The greatest strategic prize for our century is the full social, political and economic empowerment of women everywhere”. And sexually violated women are not going to achieve any of that; that is where we start to hinder their future opportunities and this is such a baseline of what we do.

The successes of the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict were first and foremost to end the culture of silence. In the late ‘90s, I dealt with some of the refugees coming out of the Balkan crisis, and I helped them with their applications for asylum. There was one thing that came out least, and this was subsequently in relation to what happened in Iraq. The one aspect of an asylum claim that either never came to light, or came to light so late in the day that it was seen as not being a credible claim, was sexual violence. Even when it did come to light, a number of women sat in my office at that time and said, “I’m telling you this, but I don’t want it to go before the judge because it will impact on my life with my husband and family.” The culture of silence that existed even within such a close relationship of husband and wife or partner was tremendous. A number of survivors at the conference said, “I’ve finally had the opportunity to have a voice.” The fact that we had started to talk about this and that 155 countries have signed up to it, and that dozens of Ministers and hundreds of NGOs there were talking about it, is in itself a success.

Secondly, on building an international protocol, we can talk about ending sexual violence, but it will really end when we get some prosecutions and people are held to account. It is the one aspect of international justice that is usually at the bottom of the pile, and it is the part of the trial that is either left behind or never convicted. Going back to my lawyer days, you will only get a conviction if we ensure that the evidence is properly preserved and properly collected, that a case is properly prepared, and that a prosecution is properly put. All those things build up to having a successful conviction. Agreeing an international protocol on how that is done and what is acceptable evidence, and having people on the ground—even as we do now in places such as Syria—collecting and preserving

that evidence so that at some point we will hold people to account, is an important aspect of that.

The third point: countries have been inspired by this and have been prepared to come forward with a country plan. Somalia came to the summit with a worked-out plan of what it wanted to do to end sexual violence in conflict. At the end of the summit, what was clear from the Foreign Secretary's marching orders to everyone was, "Right, now work out an implementation plan and make sure that this turns into deliverables."

I know the amount of work that has already been done. For example, the strand that I am taking forward is faith communities and ending sexual violence in conflict. I am confident that when we look at next year's report we can start pointing out some very clear deliverables. It will build on the idea, the political vision, the momentum building, the declaration and the summit, and that is going to be next stage.

Q70 Nadhim Zahawi: So the monitoring will come out of that—you will be monitoring how you document the evidence and the protocols in the different countries.

Baroness Warsi: It will be countries coming back and saying that they now have a process in place that allows evidence to be gathered in accordance with the international protocol. I don't think there will be a great body that will sit and monitor whether everybody has done what they are saying that they are going to do, because a lot of this has been driven by countries coming forward themselves.

It has been fascinating for me politically. When we were lobbying countries at the beginning—when there were 20, 30 or 40 countries—it was much harder to explain. We then got to a point where countries did not want to be part of the group that had not signed, so the momentum started to build, and I think that the same will happen with implementation. We will have those initial countries that will start to have plans in place, and then we will have countries that do not want to be left behind because they do not have a set of procedures in place to document this. Let's not forget that the ending of sexual violence in conflict sits as part of an overarching plan regarding violence against women, and women, peace and security. We have an action plan; I do not know if the Committee has seen it.

Q71 Nadhim Zahawi: That is my next question; you have come to it very nicely. Why is the implementation plan not developed and published at the same time as the national action plan? Is it not reasonable that one goes hand in hand with the other?

Baroness Warsi: It does. I can assure you that an implementation plan will be published before the end of the year. We felt that it was important to get this plan out.

Q72 Nadhim Zahawi: So we can hold you to that.

Baroness Warsi: You can hold me to that.

Q73 Nadhim Zahawi: Very good; excellent.

Finally, in the national action plan, the Government stated that they will not allocate specific resources to women, peace and security, so how will they monitor the amount of funding spent on women, peace and security, given that there is no specific allocation of funding?

Baroness Warsi: First, women's rights are a priority anyway, in terms of our six priorities, so there is already funding allocated to the issue of women's rights. I don't think there is a pot of money that does women, peace and security because we do that in so many different ways. Much of the work that DFID does is focused around women, peace and security, as I know from my own experience in Afghanistan. Indeed, regarding education in Pakistan, providing educational opportunity for women is about women, peace and security.

I am a firm believer in the idea that you mainstream rather than silo important human rights work. When you create a silo of a programme or a pot of money, you kind of say, "We've done women." I do not think that we should do that. I think that we should make sure it runs through everything that we do: the Arab partnership work that we do and the empowerment of Arab women through economic opportunities; the educational work that we do; the development work that we do; and the peace and security work that we do. For example, in Syria, when we were preparing for Geneva II, one of the things that I was involved in was making sure that we had women around the table who were part of the Syrian delegation and indeed part of the national coalition. We should be doing that in everything that we do.

Going back to a previous question on religious freedom, I think that in the past sometimes we felt—and certain countries have taken this approach—that if we had an ambassador for women or an ambassador for religious freedom, it was their job and they could get on with it. My view is that we are all ambassadors for religious freedom and we are all ambassadors for dealing with issues around women, peace and security. It is going to be an all-Government approach, and the girl summit that we have later on this month is another indication of how this is coming right from the top, from the Prime Minister, and being mainstreamed across everything that we do.

Q74 Mike Gapes: The United Kingdom was elected to the UN Human Rights Council and took its seat in January for a three-year term. What would constitute a successful outcome of that three-year term?

Baroness Warsi: First of all, getting elected to the Human Rights Council is a successful outcome. I made it one of my priorities last year to say that this was a big election that we needed to win, and I am delighted that we are back on the Human Rights Council, playing a role at the heart of this important issue.

We have already had success at the Human Rights Council. I would say that if you look at the last two meetings of the Human Rights Council, the resolution in relation to Sri Lanka and the subsequent appointment of a high-level panel on the independent inquiry, which includes some phenomenal names, are important aspects of that. The much improved language around the referral of Syria and the DPRK to the ICC—via the UN Security Council, of course—has been a success of that. The universal periodic reviews make sure that we are there, playing our part in getting the countries together in terms of holding countries to account.

I do not think you can say, "Success at the Human Rights Council has to look like this, this and this," because we are dealing with a changing world. If you had asked me four years ago what would be the big priority for us, would I have been saying Syria? Would I

have been saying Sri Lanka? I think that things change and we have to be prepared to respond to those changes.

Q75 Mike Gapes: There are a lot of people in NGOs such as the United Nations Association and other bodies who are very critical of how the Human Rights Council has behaved. They feel that in many respects, because of some of the countries that are on it, it is not much better than the old Human Rights Commission. What is your view on that?

Baroness Warsi: The fundamental difference is the universal periodic review, where every country has to come and present itself to its peers. It does not matter who you are or where you are. We have done it, and in fact we have won plaudits for how we have presented ourselves, predominantly led by the Ministry of Justice. We come back every four years to be reviewed again, like every other country. In fact, we are just about to submit a mid-term review or report to show how much progress has been made. So I think it is different.

The second thing is that the Human Rights Council allows council members to hold countries to account, because there is this mechanism within which we are working. At a time, as I said, of changing circumstances, it allows us to respond. Sri Lanka is a classic case. If we go back to 12 months ago, when we were having political debates about whether the Prime Minister should attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Sri Lanka because of Sri Lanka's human rights record, it was the Human Rights Council, ultimately, that allowed us to deliver the political will and momentum that the Prime Minister created as a result of that visit.

Q76 Mike Gapes: We will question you on Sri Lanka a bit later on, but may I focus on the Human Rights Council? One of the key thematic areas that you wished it to focus on was business and human rights, but you were not able to secure a united resolution. There was the position that we were supporting with some other countries and, as I understand it, Ecuador had a different position. Why were you unable to get an agreed position?

Baroness Warsi: We are not always able to achieve an agreed position and, just as I talked about the high points, I have to be quite frank about some of the low points. That, along with Egypt's family resolution, was a moment when the Human Rights Council was not united. The two resolutions were probably going to achieve two different things. Although the intention may have been the same—to ensure that business was running its affairs in accordance with human rights standards—I am not sure that the resolution put forward by Ecuador was going to achieve that.

Our national action plan on business and human rights, of which I am incredibly proud—we are the first country that has published an action plan—is based on guiding principles but, fundamentally, focuses on the voluntary aspect. The reason we have been able to have the action plan is that business and Government have worked together to achieve it. Having spent a large part of my life in the private sector, I know that if business does not want to do something, it will find all the documentation to show that it will, and then it will not do it. Big business certainly will not do it.

That is why it is important, on the issue of business and human rights, that we get businesses working with us, and that they buy into the fact that it is in their interest to have a good human rights record and good human rights policy. That was our resolution. We were

saying that the guiding principles, through a voluntary mechanism and national action plans in the countries, is where the resolution should be. We were in great company in that. Ecuador was furthering a resolution that says there should be an international treaty. I think it was trying to do human rights to business, rather than with business, and that is why there was a split decision. I still fundamentally believe that our approach was the right one.

Mike Gapes: Thank you.

Q77 Ann Clwyd: Can I ask you about the reason why the Government denied a UN special rapporteur on violence against women access to the Yarl's Wood immigration centre? Do you think this undermines us as a strong champion of human rights? We have been criticised for the decision. Why did people make it?

Baroness Warsi: You make an important point, and it is one that I make regularly in Government. It goes back to what I said earlier: what we do domestically has an impact on our international reputation, and what we do internationally has blowback for us domestically. We must not say, "Do as we say and not as we do." It is important that we have a good human rights record, and that we believe and do what we talk about—that we walk the walk.

There are two fundamental issues that we need to address. One is in relation to how we view human rights. Sometimes people will say, "How can you talk about human rights when you don't give prisoners the right to vote?" My argument is that you can talk about that in a human rights context, but when I go overseas and talk about human rights, I talk about the death penalty, the torture of people when they are taken into custody, and the camps in the DPRK. That is one aspect of it—what we are talking about when we talk about human rights.

Q78 Ann Clwyd: Let's just talk about the rapporteur. I personally have criticised other countries for not allowing a UN rapporteur to visit somebody. I find it ironic that the UN rapporteur on violence against women is denied access to that immigration centre, where there were criticisms of the treatment of women.

Baroness Warsi: My understanding on that particular case—I may have to refer back to my notes—was that there was a concern about when the request was made and how quickly it could be facilitated. That is what I think it came down to in the end. However, I will look at that again, and if I feel that there is anything more than that, or I need to correct that response, I will certainly write to you.

Q79 Ann Clwyd: The special rapporteur said: "despite my repeated requests, a visit to Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre was not facilitated by the Government, and...my access to the centre was denied when I tried to visit it independently." She obviously made more than one request. I would have thought that within that period she should have been allowed to visit.

Baroness Warsi: I can confirm what I have just said, which is that the visit to Yarl's Wood was requested at short notice and was not part of the originally agreed programme. As

Yarl's Wood is an operational centre, unscheduled or short-notice visits are unlikely to be possible. This was apparently explained to the special rapporteur in advance.

Q80 Ann Clwyd: Thank you, but will you look into that further, in case it occurs again?

Baroness Warsi: If there is anything to add to those lines, I certainly will.

Q81 Ann Clwyd: Thank you. Can I take you on to the resolution on drones? The Government chose not to support what was described as a modest resolution on drones at the UN Human Rights Council in March. Was the UN special rapporteur wrong in his assessment of the need for greater legal clarity on the use of drones?

Baroness Warsi: Two things. First, we have been a strong supporter of saying, and have said consistently, that any use of these weapon systems should be in accordance with international law, and that states should be clear about their obligations in their use of them. We expect all states to act in accordance with international law. Of course, we also support the role of the special rapporteur, Ben Emmerson, and we have co-operated with the inquiry that he will be conducting.

Again, you will be aware that at the Human Rights Council there were two separate resolutions on the issue of drones. One that did not succeed, which I think was put forward by Mexico, was in relation to looking at the human rights aspect and fallout from the use of these weapon systems. We were happy to support that, but it did not go ahead. The other resolution, which was put forward by Pakistan, we felt was trying to deal with issues that were outside the remit of the Human Rights Council. That is why we felt we could not support it.

Q82 Ann Clwyd: The UN special rapporteur reported that the use of remotely piloted aircraft left “dangerous latitude for differences of practice by States”. Is the UK comfortable about how many states may use drones in the future?

Baroness Warsi: I think there is a real need for a debate about this weapons system. As weapons technology develops, it is important that there is international protocol and understanding about how those weapons systems are used. We just did not feel that the Human Rights Council was the right forum for it. We felt that it should be at the United Nations General Assembly or the Security Council.

Ann Clwyd: Thank you.

Q83 Chair: Minister, could I just press you on this point about the use of drones and international and humanitarian law? If information is supplied to the operator of a drone that results in an attack on, say, militia personnel, is that within your understanding of international and humanitarian law, or is it outside it?

Baroness Warsi: Interestingly, Chairman, that was exactly the question that I asked my officials. We are—

Chair: What was the answer?

Baroness Warsi: “We are seeking further advice on it”, was the answer that I got. I think it would be wrong for me to comment on anything that would have a legal consequence, so I am choosing my—

Q84 Chair: It is perhaps slightly unfair to catch you with that one. Again, in this growing letter, could you respond to that point?

Baroness Warsi: I certainly will.

Chair: With the advice that is ultimately forthcoming? I should be quite interested in a fairly clear answer.

Baroness Warsi: I will certainly make sure that, if it is advice that I can disclose, I will do so.

Q85 Chair: Why would you not be able to disclose it?

Baroness Warsi: I think I would like to see what the—

Chair: I mean, it would not be classified; it is an interpretation of the law. You know, surely, that although the Law Officers do not publish their legal advice, there are established precedents for them to paraphrase. A yes or no would help.

Baroness Warsi: I will certainly look at that advice, and I will look at what the process is in relation to the publication of either the advice or a paraphrasing of it.

Q86 Mark Hendrick: In September last year, the Government published their action plan on business and human rights. You, and indeed the Foreign Secretary, stated in this Committee that the UK was the first country to have such a plan for the implementation of the UN’s guiding principles.

The Companies Act requires listed companies to report on their human rights impact. Indeed, the Modern Slavery Bill, which is being debated now, will strengthen law enforcement to combat human trafficking and labour exploitation. What indicators are you planning to use to monitor the implementation of the action plan? What makes the action plan more than just a set of aspirations? Earlier, you said that it is in businesses’ interests to have a good human rights policy, and for human rights to be done with, rather than to, business. What do you mean by that? What sort of examples can you prefer that show progress in this area and deliverables?

Baroness Warsi: There are a number of ways in which we are implementing the action plan, trying to ensure buy-in on this, and using our networks to get companies to buy into this. For example, it forms the backbone of much of the work we do around trade missions. Our embassies and high commissions overseas use it as a basis, and of course, it links back to the UN guiding principles. It is also a document that we use with Governments locally, trying to get them to buy into it. We use it as a way of lobbying other countries to have an action plan as well. The Netherlands and Denmark are examples of that. We also have quite specific sector work done around it. Some work has been done around the private security industry, and the certification scheme has been an example of how it has been

incorporated. Some work has also been done specifically in relation to the extractive industries; that is another area where there has been real progress.

Other Departments have used the action plan. You will be aware that BIS and FCO jointly launched the business and human rights action plan. BIS has used it in relation to its supply chain reports and the work that is being done on, for example, the follow-up to the issues around Thailand and prawns, which have been in the media. There is also the work that we did through DFID on the Rana Plaza tragedy; it has been used to underpin some of that work.

You referred to the Companies House element; it is for companies to show how they do their human rights work. For some people, it is not going to be an issue. You could be a little company that runs a corner shop and have a company registered at Companies House. I am not convinced that any of us would expect them to have a full, briefed-out human rights plan and to give an indication that they abide by it. This predominantly relates to companies that are working with other countries and multinational companies, but I think it is important that all companies are brought into that.

I talked about the voluntary aspect of it—this is not a point of policy, being quite frank about it. You are not going to force businesses to do human rights work until you get them to buy into—

Q87 Mark Hendrick: The point you made earlier, and I am sure the point you are trying to make now, is that it is in the interests of business to do it.

Baroness Warsi: Yes.

Mark Hendrick: What makes it in the interests of business? Why should they, as you put it, buy into it? What are the consequences of not buying into it?

Baroness Warsi: Ultimately, if you operate in a country where the human rights record is pretty appalling, you can bet your bottom dollar or pound that that is an unstable environment to be working in, which ultimately will have an impact on your business. It is in your interests, as a business, to work in a stable environment with a state that protects the human rights of its citizens—to work in an environment where you will, fundamentally, protect the human rights of the communities that you are working with.

Q88 Mark Hendrick: That sort of goes without saying. What I am trying to get at is this: a company that chooses to work in such an environment has got more chance of success if it moves elsewhere, where there is a better environment, than it has of changing the undesirable ways in which a regime operates.

Baroness Warsi: I do not agree with that, and the reason why is that I have a number of discussions with multinationals operating in the countries I have responsibility for as a Minister. Those companies spend years and years investing in a country before they start to reap any rewards. These companies make long-term investments. They do not go in and say, “We can’t change these people, so let’s just go off somewhere else.”

Q89 Mark Hendrick: Maybe, but that is why I asked you for examples. You have given me three: the private securities industry, which we are aware of; the extractive industries; and prawn fishers around Thailand. That is not exactly wide-ranging stuff.

Baroness Warsi: The extractive industries are huge. The companies now investing in Afghanistan will be interested in having a stable future in Afghanistan. If you look at some of the companies that have invested in central Asia—another area I have been working in—and are looking to invest in places like Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan, they have been there for many years and are fighting difficult business challenges. Those companies go into these countries with a long-term plan, which includes working with their Governments to make sure that better environments are created. The Rana Plaza tragedy and the phenomenally positive response we had from Primark taught us all that it does huge reputational damage if companies are seen to be abusing the human rights of the people in the communities they are working in. There is so much more awareness around those issues. I go back to what I said: this is a voluntary principle that will be best applied when businesses themselves buy into the fact that this is in their interest.

Q90 Mark Hendrick: I accept your point about Primark. What happened there was an absolute disgrace; there is no doubt about that. Moving on, the UK-China human rights dialogue is a series of bilateral meetings held between the UK and China. The last meeting was on 19 and 20 May, and China unilaterally cancelled the April 2014 meeting. One of your Ministers—the Minister for Business and Enterprise, Mr Fallon—said that human rights should not “get in the way” of expanding trade ties with China. How do you feel about that?

Baroness Warsi: I am not going to comment on what another Minister said, but I can say what we do in relation to human rights work in China. Right from the top—the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and Ministers responsible for China—human rights forms an integral part of our discussions. We have just moved on from a discussion on business and human rights; if we want more business between our two countries, one aspect of that has to be the human rights dialogue. The Prime Minister raised the issue of human rights with Premier Li Keqiang at the UK-China summit on 17 June, which gives you an indication of how the Government view it. That is the kind of view you should be taking. The Foreign Secretary also raised it in the strategic dialogue in February with the Vice-Minister at the time.

Q91 Mark Hendrick: I know that it has been raised. It is for me to decide what view I should take; I am asking you what view you take of what your Minister, who is working with you on the human rights and business agenda, has said. Surely you have an opinion on that.

Baroness Warsi: My view is that of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, which is that human rights are an integral part of our relationship with China. It was right that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary raised it. I have not visited China as a Minister—I am not the Minister with responsibility for China—but I know that those Ministers who hold the brief for it, along with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, take the view that human rights are an essential element of that relationship.

Q92 Mark Hendrick: In that case, what would you say the human rights dialogue with China has achieved to date? While it is a good idea and I support it, would it make any difference if it was discontinued?

Baroness Warsi: The 21st round of dialogues took place in May this year, so it has been a long process. Some years it happens, and other years it doesn't. I probably do not know enough about those 21 rounds of discussions to say what has been achieved during that time, but I can say that it is firmly on the agenda and will stay there.

Q93 Mike Gapes: May I take you back to your remarks about the UN Human Rights Council and Sri Lanka? The Sri Lankan Government has robustly rejected the UN Human Rights Council motion. It has shown contempt for the UN, and it has even got its Parliament to pass a resolution to not allow Human Rights Council officers into the country to investigate the alleged human rights abuses. What steps will our Government take to support the UN human rights commissioner and to ensure that the investigation is carried out properly, given that the Prime Minister assured the House last year that he would attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, to which we have referred, as a kind of quid pro quo: we would work hard—I welcome that fact—to get a resolution through the UN? Now the Sri Lankan Government is showing total contempt for the UN resolution.

Baroness Warsi: First of all, I am pleased that there is now much more political consensus on the fact that the Prime Minister was right to go to Sri Lanka for that Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. I think it clearly showed that he made the right call, and his judgment was right, as was the judgment of the Foreign Secretary. They went there, had discussions, and said to the Sri Lankans, "This has been going on since 2009, and this is when you subsequently said there would be an inquiry." The report has been on the books since—I am working from memory—2011. There has been some progress, but the recommendations of that report have not been implemented in any substantive way. The Prime Minister had the opportunity to get beyond the capital. I make this point because decisions that were taken at that time have resulted in where we are now. I do not think we would have built the political will to get a resolution had we not done that, and given the Sri Lankans the opportunity to put their house in order before there was an independent inquiry.

Now that we have an independent inquiry, if I may move on to that, we are of course encouraging Sri Lanka to co-operate. It is in their interest to co-operate, if they are genuinely committed to a process where there is reconciliation, and a moment of reconciliation for all communities. With Martti Ahtisaari, for example, and Asma Jahangir, the human rights campaigner, we have got a great line-up of experts on the independent panel.¹ We feel that even without the Sri Lankans co-operating, an independent inquiry can take place, and something material can come out of that.

Q94 Mike Gapes: The Sri Lankan Minister with responsibility for mass-media said that the Sri Lankan Government would take legal action against anyone who testifies before the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Clearly, the situation is one where the Sri Lankan Government and their Parliament have said no, they are not going to co-operate; so what are we going to do about that?

Baroness Warsi: What I would say is that we continue with our international partners to persuade and convince the Sri Lankans that it is in their interest to co-operate with this report, but if they do not co-operate, this report and this inquiry will still go ahead; and if they

¹ See clarification from witness:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-fcos-human-rights-work-in-2013/written/12234.html>

want this report to be truly reflective, and us to acknowledge the progress that has been made, it is in their interest to be part of that. I am not going to speculate on what may happen if they do something and we do not get access.

Q95 Mike Gapes: You have said “progress that has been made”. There are ongoing abuses against the Tamil population in Sri Lanka. There are now Buddhist extremists violently attacking Muslims in Sri Lanka. There are reports of sexual violence against women, and the Sri Lankan Government has not signed up to the declaration of a commitment to end sexual violence. You are talking about raising the issue with the Sri Lankan Government, but in reality, aren’t we dealing here with a regime and, sadly, a Parliament that has rejected the norms and values of the international community? We are giving a certain amount of financial assistance to Sri Lanka. I know it is not a large amount.

We spent £5 million in 2012 on a number of issues. Is it not time for us to reassess our relations with Sri Lanka and also to exert even greater pressure, not just through the UN, but through the Commonwealth?

Baroness Warsi: On your last point, the Commonwealth—we saw this in the Heads of Government meeting—is divided on this issue. I do not think there is a unified approach within the Commonwealth, and I am not entirely convinced that it covered itself in glory on Sri Lanka.

Q96 Mike Gapes: No, because India is not prepared to move on the issue.

Baroness Warsi: In terms of progress, there has been some progress on land and restitution and on the election of a chief minister in the predominantly Tamil area. We are urging the Sri Lankan Government to give full authority and powers to the chief minister. There has been some progress, and it is right for us to acknowledge that, but I completely take on board the view that it is disappointing that the Sri Lankan Government did not sign up to the declaration. Their high commissioner attended the summit and will hopefully be persuaded in due course to convince Sri Lanka to sign the declaration.²

On extremism and extremism among some of the Buddhist groups, I know that one of the groups, Bodu Bala Sena, has been part of some of the more recent attacks. You mentioned specifically the attacks on the Muslim community. Last year, the high commissioner engaged with them and spoke directly with the group.³ They talked about some of the concerns we had at the time on what was rhetoric, rather than the actions we have subsequently seen. It is important that we continue to talk to them on these issues of extremism. You say we need to rethink this relationship, but I still feel that we need to remain engaged and ensure that we keep trying to encourage them to head in the right direction.

Q97 Andrew Rosindell: Minister, what is your assessment of the situation with Burma? Promises have been made by the President of Burma to make changes to the country, to make

² See clarification from witness:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-fcos-human-rights-work-in-2013/written/12234.html>

³ See clarification from witness:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-fcos-human-rights-work-in-2013/written/12234.html>

reforms and to improve human rights. What is your assessment of how we are progressing on that?

Baroness Warsi: Again, I think it is a bit of a mixed bag. It is important that Burma feels—it has, over the past few years—that it wants to come in from the cold and be part of an international community, and it is important that we engage with it. It has made some progress in the release of some political prisoners and some constitutional reform, but the low point, which is probably a terribly low point, is the census, specifically in terms of the Rohingya community and Rakhine province. They have been described by so many independent organisations and human rights organisations as one of the most persecuted groups in the world, and we felt that the census provided an opportunity for the Rohingya community finally to be recognised. We were given a number of reassurances by the Burmese that they would be allowed to self-identify, as is the international norm with censuses, and we felt right until the last minute that that would happen, but it did not. That was a regressive step and it was right that Hugo Swire summoned the Burmese ambassador off the back of that.

We continue to stress to the Burmese how it is important not to exclude certain groups. I had a meeting with the Burmese Economic Minister and the head of the Burmese chambers of commerce when they were visiting earlier this year. The term might not be entirely politically correct—I have used it before—but I said to them, “Persecution is bad for business. If you guys are Economic Ministers and you want a trading relationship and to be part of the international community, you need to wake up to the fact that you cannot have a persecuted community while you are making these cases.” They acknowledged that and the conversations were robust and frank.

The situation is not good, but our record is good. We can stand on that. Our high commissioner was one of the first into Rakhine province once the relationship started to thaw and Hugo Swire was one of the first Ministers into Rakhine province. There is specific work that we are doing through DFID, and DFID is working through other agencies to deliver support in Rakhine province.

For us, this is not just a Foreign and Commonwealth issue. Interestingly, this has quite an important blowback for us domestically. If you look at some of the reporting on CT concerns on what is happening in Burma, Burma is seen to have a radicalising effect on young people in the United Kingdom, in the same way that some people were looking at issues around Srebrenica and how that formed part of a narrative of a group being persecuted while the world looked on. So there is a lot of interest in the Foreign Office to make sure we get this right and I think we stand on firm territory on that, but we also have a domestic interest in making sure that we get the issue around the Rohingya community—

Q98 Andrew Rosindell: Are you still confident about the British Government’s position that Burma is in transition to democracy? Are you confident that we are still in that position, and if so how long do you think it might be before we could support the possibility of Burma joining, or rejoining, the Commonwealth?

Baroness Warsi: I don’t think I could predict on the second bit, or even the third bit, of the question. I still think Burma is on the right journey. I think the Rohingya community is quite uniquely persecuted in Burma, and again it has overlaps with Sri Lanka, which we were

just discussing. There is evidence now to show that there is an overlap between some of the extremist Buddhist ideology in Sri Lanka and the impact that that is having in terms of the ideology in Burma, which is kind of overlapping that ideology.

I still feel that Burma is on the path to democracy and therefore we have to keep supporting them, but we have also got to hold their feet to the fire on this particular community. I had the opportunity to visit the Rohingya community in Bangladesh, because some of the camps there are where they have fled to. As I said, tragically, they really are one of the most persecuted communities in the world at the moment.

Q99 Mark Hendrick: That was an unfortunate phrase—“hold their feet to the fire.” I know that you didn’t mean it in any context other than getting them to improve. However, the situation is far worse than you painted it. The Rohingya are obviously being persecuted terribly and the way that Buddhist nationalists are operating is absolutely disgraceful; it is beyond any acceptable norms. Even in Aung San Suu Kyi’s party, there is this feeling towards Burmanisation that not only excludes, to some extent, the recognition and the acceptance of Rohingya but many of the other ethnic minorities that exist throughout Burma.

My colleague mentioned Burmese democracy and asked whether Burma would be accepted at some stage in the future into the Commonwealth. You say there is a “journey” but it is a very long path, if you can describe it as a journey, because there are so many minorities and so many atrocities being committed against the ethnic minority tribes within Burma, as well as against the Rohingya themselves. I hope that Aung San Suu Kyi becomes President at some point in the future, but that issue has to be addressed as well, because in the quest to get more democracy and eventually to get her as a President, part of the price of that has to be to keep some of this stuff on the back burner and not be quite open about it. And I think we make the mistake—in Britain and the west—of thinking that she is the end of the problem. She is actually the beginning of dealing with the problem that is Burma.

So, when we say our record is good, well our record is only as good as the outcomes that we see in Burma, and while there has been some movement, there has been very little in terms of what needs to be done in the future to make that a democratic state and a state that recognises human rights as we would begin to understand them in this country. That is less of a question, Chairman, and more of a comment, but I would still appreciate a response.

Baroness Warsi: I agree with you, which is why I didn’t give a prediction in terms of timings, and I said this is a journey and I don’t think we can predict the timing of that journey. I am not always convinced that on that journey they will keep heading in the right direction. I am sure we will have many lapses.

The point that you raise in relation to Aung San Suu Kyi is really well made, and it is a point I have made in the past, which is: you cannot say, “I fight for the rights of individuals, except for that lot over there.” She has to be much braver. I think we were all disappointed by her interview when she was last here when she chose to avoid to support the Rohingya community. We need to be much more robust in our engagement. A lot of people in Parliament had spent many years supporting her through some very difficult times, and it is absolutely right to say that to her. Politics and leadership is never easy, but leadership is about being prepared to lead and that is an issue on which she has to show leadership.

Q100 Andrew Rosindell: Minister, would you tell us what we are doing about North Korea, which has probably one of the worst human rights records?

Baroness Warsi: Where do I start? I regularly answer questions on the DPRK in the House of Lords and almost any aspect of human rights concerns that anyone can be concerned about are found in the DPRK, whether that is the way in which the prisons are run, the lack of space for freedom of expression, the media—every aspect of it. It is such a closed society on so many different levels.

As an assessment, it is almost impossible to say that there is any progress. The phrase that I regularly use is that we are “appalled” by their human rights violations, as documented by the UN Commission inquiry. We keep asking for critical engagement on these issues, but we are also quite realistic.

We have an amazing amount of expertise in the House of Lords on this. Both Lord Alton and Baroness Cox do a huge amount of work in this area, and I regularly answer debates. It is quite disheartening because during the past two years I have come to the Dispatch Box and said the same thing, because there is very little progress, if any.

Q101 Andrew Rosindell: So is the British Government attempting to take this matter to the UN Security Council and table a resolution on human rights violations?

Baroness Warsi: We got stronger language at the Human Rights Council on the resolution in relation to an ICC referral, which now has to go back to the UN Security Council. But you will be aware of how the UN Security Council operates and some of our challenges with the P5 and the impact that that could have.

Q102 Andrew Rosindell: Finally, Minister, what is the British Government’s policy on Bedouin rights to ownership of land in the Negev desert in Israel?

Baroness Warsi: That is very specific. I can honestly say that I do not know the answer to that. I will see if it is part of my brief.

Chair: It is coming up, Minister.

Baroness Warsi: I can tell you that we continue to follow the debate around the issue of unresolved Bedouin land claims and unrecognised Bedouin villages in the Negev. We urge the Israeli authorities and the Bedouin communities to engage in dialogue to agree a satisfactory solution, which respects the equality of all of Israel’s citizens in a way which avoids forced relocations and which is consistent with Israel’s commitments under international law.

I am not sure whether that takes it any further, so I will go away and see if we have much more than that and possibly some specific examples of where we have engaged—whether we are running any projects there and when our ambassador there was last engaged on this issue—and I will write to you on that.

Q103 Andrew Rosindell: As we give a lot of support to Israel in general terms, if they are breaching the human rights of traditional peoples such as the Bedouins, surely the British

Government should be taking a more active role in reminding the Israelis of their obligations to human rights, as those citizens who live in the desert have their rights as well.

Baroness Warsi: I completely agree. You will know that it is a country of concern, and we have talked about some of the real concerns we have about human rights abuses within Israel and the occupied territories. One bit of good news is that Israel has finally come back to the UPR. You will be aware that for a number of years they disengaged, and we were quite worried, because it was the only country to have disengaged from the universal periodic review. Therefore, we made that point. I don't think the point was lost when countries such as Iran and the DPRK were engaging with the universal periodic review, but Israel was not. We have the opportunity to raise some of these issues through that review.

Q104 Mike Gapes: Unfortunately, I don't have time to get into all the aspects of this issue, but I want to talk specifically about the Palestinians in the west bank and Gaza. I am struck by the massive number of e-mails I get from constituents on that issue. However, there are Palestinians today in refugee camps in Syria who are being bombed by Assad's air force—barrel bombs were used at the Handarat camp, near Aleppo. There are other Palestinians in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria who are being shot at by the al-Nusra Front—the Islamist, al-Qaeda-linked group. Why is it that those issues are not on the international agenda in the same way as issues that arise with regard to Israel and the Palestinians in the occupied territories?

Baroness Warsi: First, I don't think there is a hierarchy of victims. One set of victims is not more or less important than another set of victims. Our approach to human rights should be that anybody who is persecuted anywhere is of concern to us, and we should be prepared to raise those issues.

That issue has been discussed in the past at the Human Rights Council, and indeed within the UN family. Israel feels that it is sometimes singled out for criticism in a way that other countries are not. It feels that countries sometimes use processes such as debates in the Human Rights Council to treat it in a specific, different way, and we have to be prepared to understand that argument. The alternative argument, which is probably put by the kind of people who write to you about these issues, is that Israel is uniquely treated much more favourably than if those human rights abuses were committed somewhere else. You will always find both sides of the argument—people in Israel who will say, "We are being treated exceptionally, and people are being too tough on us," and others who will say, "We are being too lenient on Israel, and we tolerate stuff that we wouldn't tolerate in other places."

Q105 Mike Gapes: My point is that there are terrible things happening in Syria today—not only to many Syrians, but to many people who fled to Syria as refugees and are in refugee camps—but there is little publicity about it.

Baroness Warsi: I think the human rights situation in Syria is truly appalling. It is not just about the refugees; the violence against women and girls, and the appalling way in which some of the minorities have been treated during the conflict are other aspects of it. More than 6 million people have been displaced internally, more than 2.5 million people have been displaced externally as refugees and the country has been in turmoil for the past three years. We are dealing with such a huge number of issues on Syria—people are not getting food,

people are besieged in places and are not allowed out, the most appalling torture is taking place and chemical weapons are being used on innocent civilians. There is such a huge number of issues in relation to human rights abuses that it may be that in the wider picture those specific circumstances are not being brought to the fore. The picture is so appalling that we cannot see individual incidents in the same way.

Q106 Mike Gapes: May I ask you about Egypt? As I understand it, Egypt is coming before the universal periodic review in October. I was in Egypt three weeks ago, and I had discussions and met President Sisi. As I understand it, unlike the previous President, Morsi, the current President has taken the position that he will not interfere with the judiciary. However, on the BBC website this week he is quoted as saying that he very much regrets the trial of the al-Jazeera journalists and that it has done damage to the reputation of his country. Do you think that means that there is more likelihood now of attempts to change and reform the judiciary in Egypt? If so, is it a good opportunity for us to use the universal periodic review to raise the issues about judicial reform in Egypt, even though there seems to be a decision that we are not going to interfere and that the judiciary is independent? Recognising that in Egypt—where hundreds of people can be given the death sentence, pending several appeals that could go to the Grand Mufti, who then writes it off and then it starts again—there are real problems with the judicial process, can we try to assist that process of reform?

Baroness Warsi: Egypt is going through a huge moment of transition. We have been really concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation there. The judiciary, the death sentences, the way in which journalists have been imprisoned and sentenced, the clampdown on freedom of expression and the clampdown on political parties are just a selection of the concerns that we have in relation to Egypt. That is why it is a country of concern, and certainly those issues will be raised as part of the periodic—*[Interruption.]* It's why it's a case study.

Mike Gapes: It's not a country of concern.

Baroness Warsi: It's not a country of concern; it's a case study, and that is why we will be raising those issues at the universal periodic review. We need to find a way with Egypt where we help it through what is a very difficult time, but we do so in a way where we are true to our values and our commitment to human rights.

The response that we gave to the sentencing of the journalists, including BBC journalists, was a really strongly worded statement from the Foreign Secretary and the Minister, and we summoned in the ambassador and made it clear what we thought of the recent developments.⁴ There is some specific work that we are doing as part of our overseas security and justice agreement with Egypt, and part of that work will be about support for the judicial process and the rule of law. A lot is changing at the moment in Egypt. The case study process will allow us to review it after six months, and the UPR process will allow us to hold Egypt to account as well.

Q107 Ann Clwyd: Apart from the Foreign Secretary saying that he is deeply concerned about the Muslim Brotherhood and about the al-Jazeera journalists, what more do

⁴ See clarification from the witness:

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/the-fcos-human-rights-work-in-2013/written/12234.html>

you think we should be doing? You mentioned the periodic review, but surely that will not be sufficient?

Baroness Warsi: There are a number of ways in which we are working with Egypt, including, as I said, the security and justice agreement that we have. Egypt is changing so rapidly. Not so long ago, we were in the throes of working with the Morsi Government, trying to help and support them in establishing a new democracy in a pretty volatile region. So much has happened since then, and it is important that we remain engaged and we continue to work alongside them. Our new ambassador there is looking at ways, including on judicial reform, in which we can help and remain engaged with them. I do not think that there is a single answer or a single silver bullet, about which we can say, “That will fix Egypt,” because we do not know what Egypt will look like in six months’ time. I think it is a country that we all agree we have to remain alongside and continue to help.

Q108 Ann Clwyd: We were there on a visit when Mr Morsi was just about coming in, and the American NGOs at that time and some other NGOs were imprisoned. The way the Americans did it was to say that they were withdrawing aid to Egypt, and suddenly all the NGOs in jail were released. It seems to me that they have got a lot more clout than we have. That is why I was suggesting that you might examine other ways of showing our muscle in Egypt, particularly when the judiciary is obviously biased.

Baroness Warsi: We are also aware that when the US withdrew some of its funding, other countries came and almost doubled it. We need to be really careful when we think we can use these levers. They are not always levers that can have an immediate impact.

Q109 Ann Clwyd: Well, it did work in this case; we saw it.

Baroness Warsi: The amount of money that can flow and has flowed into Egypt from other sources means that sometimes the contributions or investments that we are making there seem less significant.

I am a firm believer, however, that—this argument is used about a country with which I am much more familiar: Pakistan. Arguments are constantly made about whether we should be withdrawing our aid to them, or whether we can use aid as a lever to get things done. I am not always convinced that what we use as a lever impacts the people we are trying to impact. What we invariably end up doing is impacting people whose lives are pretty wretched anyway. I do not know what specific programmes we are running at the moment in Egypt, but my view would be that that is money probably being spent on the poorest in society, in some of the most challenging circumstances. I am not sure that the impact of pulling such a lever would be on the Government.

Q110 Ann Clwyd: Can I take you to the last question? A Foreign Office Minister was talking about investment in Uganda at an event with President Museveni on the same day that the first prosecutions came to court under a draconian law criminalising same-sex relations. Are you comfortable with that kind of approach?

Baroness Warsi: The issue of LGBT rights, not just in relation to Uganda but much more broadly, is an area in which, if we are incredibly frank either as individuals or as countries, everybody has been on a journey. I think we need to be careful when we campaign on the issue of LGBT rights that we do not say, “We’re here right now, and that’s the right

place to be, and we want you to be here right now.” We need to make sure that we work with countries to make sure they keep heading in the right direction. Every country will come to that moment at a different time, and we have to be realistic and accepting of that.

The worry I have is that there are many countries, including Uganda, which are going in the wrong direction. It is not even that they are not where we want them to be; they are actually heading in the wrong direction. I had the opportunity to talk to an incredibly inspirational LGBT from Uganda, Frank Mugisha, who talked me through some of the challenges that the new legislation presents for them. He did feel, however, that the engagement we had with the Government was important and that we needed to continue engaging with them.

We do the issue of LGBT rights in a number of ways in Uganda and other countries. Some of it is working with centres and in health care areas, where we can give access to services to members of the LGBT community. Some of it is about supporting NGOs and grassroots campaigners. Some of it is about lobbying at a much higher level and supporting the legal challenges relating to legislation. We had quite a lengthy discussion. I think sometimes NGOs are quite good at dealing with grassroots work, but not as good in terms of standing back and looking strategically at the bigger picture of how they can move countries. I think they rely on us to be part of that strategic engagement and challenge Presidents and Prime Ministers. Therefore, I think they would—

Q111 Ann Clwyd: Can I just put it to you that this is another example of the difficulty of reconciling commercial interests with human rights?

Baroness Warsi: No, I think the two go hand in hand. If, for example—I use this completely hypothetically—we decided that in a country we were going to have no commercial relationship whatever and that all we were going to do with them was human rights work or raising issues such as LGBT ones, I am not entirely convinced that we would always get face time with the President. It is because we actually have lots of things that we talk about.

A phrase that I use in the Foreign Office regularly is: “If we’re going to do human rights, let’s do it properly; if we’re not going to do it properly, let’s not do it at all.” That might seem like a harsh statement, but it is because I am not in the job of being able to stand at the Dispatch Box to say, “We raised the issue of human rights with person X in country A”, if what we did was raise it for about 30 seconds in the margins of a meeting that was an hour long and in which we talked for 59 minutes about something else. That is not doing the issue of human rights, because we are actually doing that to cover our backs, and I am interested not in covering our backs, but in doing the job.

Certainly for me, when we go in and have those discussions, they give us the opportunity to have serious discussions about human rights issues and to make the case that if you value these bits of our relationship, you have to value these bits of what we think you need to change.

Q112 Ann Clwyd: I will just press you again on that. Is it not then unfortunate that this kind of talk was going on at exactly the same time as they were cracking down in a particularly nasty way on human rights in Uganda?

Baroness Warsi: I don't know about the specific moment or the specific timings of why that happened at that time. I am completely convinced—I cannot imagine that either side planned for that to happen at the same time. It may just have been that this was something that was planned and the Minister was there, or that this was when this piece of legislation came in. I recently went to a country where I had a whole series of meetings and, when the wheels were up, they actually implemented the death penalty. I can remember arriving in Dubai on transit on the way back, getting the news and thinking, “Well, that was a useful moment to be there, wasn't it?” Sometimes these things happen and you just have to be prepared to accept that these things happen at the same time and that timings work in that way.

But to go back to the substantive issue, do we feel that we should have trade relationships with countries that are introducing this legislation that is punitive? I think we need to have a broad range of issues in a relationship. Having that broad range of issues in the relationship allows us to have these conversations.

Chair: That completes our questions, Minister. Do you have anything to say in conclusion?

Baroness Warsi: No. Thank you very much. It has been a wide-ranging Committee experience.

Chair: It has. It has been particularly interesting for us and very helpful, so I thank you very much indeed, and your colleague, Mr Fenn. Thank you.