

Jeremy Corbyn presses Prime Minister on UK aid allegedly being funneled to extremist armed groups in Syria

Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn has written to the Prime Minister demanding answers to serious questions arising out of evidence that UK aid money has been funneled to extremist sectarian armed groups in Syria.

The Government has suspended a foreign aid project after the BBC's Panorama programme reported allegations about the money paid to contractor Adam Smith International (ASI).

The letter raises six questions, including: why the Department for International Development awarded ASI this work after freezing other contracts earlier this year; when Foreign Office ministers became aware of problems with the programme and why no action was taken; whether funds were channelled to Egypt and the Myanmar military; and whether money was used to lobby UN representatives and others over human rights in Bahrain.

In the letter, Jeremy Corbyn says: "allegations of aid money ending up in the hands of an Al Qaeda affiliate and contributing to the Free Syrian Police's work with a judicial system accused of numerous human rights abuses is yet another blow to Britain's reputation on the world stage. It is the responsibility of your government to ensure robust scrutiny and transparency processes are in place to prevent such grotesque abuses of UK aid money."

Full text of the letter:

Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

5 December 2017

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing in light of the serious issues raised in the BBC Panorama programme yesterday evening concerning the Access to Justice and Community Security (AJACS) project, implemented in Syria by Adam Smith International (ASI) as part of a multi-million pound project, funded by the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and overseen by Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

The British public is extremely proud of our country's commitment to spend 0.7% of national income on aid to reduce global poverty. Under a Labour government, the UK was a world leader in aid effectiveness and global development. Therefore, allegations of aid money ending up in the hands of an

Al Qaeda affiliate and contributing to the Free Syrian Police's work with a judicial system accused of numerous human rights abuses is yet another blow to Britain's reputation on the world stage. It is the responsibility of your government to ensure robust scrutiny and transparency processes are in place to prevent such grotesque abuses of UK aid money.

Given the humanitarian crisis in Syria, with millions of Syrians internally displaced and millions of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, it is a real concern that your government has appeared to use aid funding to support sectarian division rather than humanitarian need. As a political solution is yet to be achieved in Syria, the role of UK government aid should be to support the international efforts to end violence and reach a political solution, not providing military or security assistance and resources.

These revelations raise wider questions about the FCO's capacity to manage aid programmes transparently and effectively, the overall operation of the CSSF, and the oversight of aid money through private contractors.

I would therefore request an urgent answer to the following questions:

1. Can you explain why the Department for International Development (DfID) froze contracts with ASI in March 2017, yet the FCO awarded £12m contract funding to ASI between April and September 2017?
2. Can you confirm exactly when FCO Ministers were aware of problems with the AJACS programme, why they took no action, and why the FCO's oversight mechanisms failed?
3. Can you confirm whether the CSSF was channelling money to juvenile detention centres in Egypt and until earlier this year was funding assistance to the Myanmar military?
4. Can you confirm whether CSSF funding in 2015 was used to lobby representatives from the UN and other countries, arguing that human rights in Bahrain were improving?
5. As the OBR revised growth figures down, the UK will now be spending £895 million less than expected on the intended objective of aid which is poverty reduction and tackling disease. Are you confident that DfID has the resources it needs to deliver global development?
6. Figures released recently show that 26.2% of funds are now spent through other departments, a considerable increase under your government. This is despite the widespread evidence of the lack of transparency and quality standards of DfID. Will you agree to urgently freeze and review all CSSF funding – with the aim of ensuring that British aid is used to alleviate poverty and disease?

I look forward to your urgent replies on these serious matters. Due to the public interest arising from the Panorama programme, I will be making this letter public.

Yours sincerely,

Jeremy Corbyn MP
Leader of the Opposition