

Statement to Parliament: Minister Field statement on visas to Burma for the International Development Committee (IDC)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Like him, I am deeply disappointed that the Government of Burma have not granted visas for members of the International Development Committee. That displeasure has been communicated to the Burmese authorities. The Committee does vital work, providing oversight of UK aid programming in Burma and beyond.

The hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the International Development Committee, was due to travel on 27 February, with the rest of the Committee due to travel on 28 February. When no decision on visas was received by early yesterday morning, the Committee understandably cancelled the Burma leg of its visit. I understand that the Committee will continue with the second element of its trip, namely to travel to Bangladesh to review the Department for International Development's work there, including support for the Rohingya refugees displaced to Cox's Bazar and the vicinity.

My officials were informed this morning that the IDC's visa applications had been formally denied. Burmese officials have indicated three reasons for the refusal: first, that there is an extended public holiday in Burma; secondly, that access to Rakhine state remains restricted for security reasons; and finally—I think the Chair of the IDC mentioned this in a press release yesterday evening—that they were unhappy that individual members of the IDC had signed a letter calling for the senior general of the Burmese army to be held to account for Burmese military behaviour in Rakhine.

It is right that the House takes a close interest in this sort of crisis, and I know that all Members present will continue to do so. The Government fully support the work of the International Development Committee and have been active in supporting this visit. DFID Burma worked closely with the IDC to develop a comprehensive itinerary covering a range of projects in-country. The British ambassador to Burma, Andrew Patrick, and other FCO officials pressed repeatedly for visas to be approved, both in Burma and through the Burmese embassy in London. I myself spoke over the telephone to the Burmese ambassador yesterday morning to raise the status of the visas. That demonstrates just how seriously the FCO takes this matter, not least as a courtesy to the House. I understand that you, Mr Speaker, wrote to the Burmese ambassador, and that he intends to reply formally to set out the reasons for the refusal.

Through DFID, the UK is one of the largest single donors to the refugee crisis in both Bangladesh and Burma. Our aid is making a big difference. The first tranche of UK funding is providing emergency food to some 174,000 people and safe water and hygiene to more than 138,000. Following a

diphtheria outbreak in the refugee camps, we deployed the UK's emergency medical team of more than 40 specialists to save lives.

This decision to deny visas is highly regrettable and will prevent the Committee from seeing some of DFID's work at first hand. However, this Government must and will remain committed to supporting Burma's poorest and most vulnerable people. Working with DFID, we will ensure that the Committee has access to all the information it needs to scrutinise the programme in Burma effectively.