



Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

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Home Affairs

See also Senedd written answer WQ91649 “International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance” that is included in the Holocaust section below.

House of Commons Oral Answer

Topical Questions: Education

Michael Ellis (Conservative): At Cambridge University, a barbaric vandal wearing a £1,000 Mulberry backpack was so full of hate for Jews that she felt Lord Balfour’s letter of 1917 gave her the moral superiority to destroy a valuable and historic painting of him. This shines a light on the pernicious atmosphere faced by Jewish students at universities across the country, with calls for “Zionists off our campus” now shamefully normalised, and “Zionists” really meaning Jews. What steps does my right hon. Friend propose to take to convey to university heads that they have a legal and a moral obligation to stamp out antisemitism?

Robert Halfon: ... Arthur Balfour was a great man and identified the need for a homeland for British Jews. That is why antisemites do not like him and are slashing his picture. I and the Secretary of State are spending a lot of time with Jewish student groups. I have been to Leeds University to spend time with Jewish students, because the chaplain there was attacked, and we are working with Universities UK. We have announced a £7 million package to give to Jewish student groups,

including the University Jewish Chaplaincy, to try to stop antisemitism on campus. We are also developing a quality seal that we will ask universities to adopt, so that they deal properly with antisemitic incidents. Last week, I and the Secretary of State had a meeting with the Office for Students, to make clear to the regulator that antisemitism across our universities is not acceptable.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-03-11/debates/B81DFEF1-4951-4EE1-BDB8-F260A965246D/TopicalQuestions#contribution-7D229803-55A2-42E7-AA50-C45786F4DB58>

House of Commons Written Answers

Religion: Education

Rachael Maskell (Labour Co-op) [16687] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to increase consistency in the standards of teaching of religious education in schools.

Damian Hinds: Religious education (RE) is an important part of a school's curriculum and can contribute to a young person's personal, social, and academic development. When taught well, the subject develops children's knowledge of British values and traditions, helps them to better understand those of other countries, and refines pupils' ability to construct well-informed, balanced and structured arguments.

The department is offering a £10,000 bursary for RE trainee teachers that are starting initial teacher training courses in the 2024/25 academic year, with the aim to incentivise greater numbers of post-graduates to apply and increase the pipeline of RE specialists.

To support teachers when they are in post, and to ensure high standards and consistency of RE teaching, RE resources are currently being procured by Oak National Academy during the second tranche of its work. Oak will work closely with the sector and utilise sector experience when producing new materials for RE. This will ensure that high-quality lessons are available nationwide, benefitting both teachers and pupils, should schools opt to use them. Oak RE resources will be available for teaching from autumn 2024, with full packages expected to be available by autumn 2025.

The department also continues to offer eight week subject knowledge enhancement (SKE) courses in the 2022/23 academic year for candidates who have the potential to become outstanding teachers but need to increase their subject knowledge. The eight week SKE course, available in RE, can be undertaken on a full-time or part-time basis but must be completed before qualified teacher status can be recommended and awarded. Eligible candidates could be entitled to a SKE bursary of £175 per week to support them financially whilst completing their SKE course.

More information on these courses is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/subject-knowledge-enhancement-an-introduction>
<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-03-04/16687>

Religion: Education

Rachael Maskell (Labour Co-op) [16686] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has issued recent guidance to schools on the proportion of their funding that should be allocated to the teaching of (a) religious education and (b) other subjects.

Damian Hinds: This year, core school funding will total over £57.7 billion, which is an increase of £3.9 billion compared to the 2022/23 financial year. All schools have the freedom to choose how to spend their core funding according to their own

unique circumstances and priorities, providing that all expenditure ultimately benefits their students. The department does not provide specific funding for religious education; it is for schools to decide the allocation of resources across different subject areas.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-03-04/16686>

Attorney General: Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group

Anneliese Dodds (Labour) [16846] To ask the Attorney General, with reference to the document entitled Draft terms of reference for the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group, what updates her Department has provided on relevant developments in its area of work to that group since 2019.

Robert Courts: Ministers and officials have regular discussions with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities over a range of issues. More broadly, I refer the hon. Member to the answer of 1 March 2024, Official Report, PQ 16019 on tackling anti-Muslim hatred.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-03-04/16846>

The answer referred to above can be read at

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-27/16019>

House of Lords Written Answer

Religious Freedom: Demonstrations

Lord Pearson of Rannoch (Non-affiliated) [HL2752] To ask His Majesty's Government, following the recent conviction of Stephen Green, whether they intend to introduce legislation to amend the Public Order Act 2023 to ensure that it is not a criminal offence to display publicly Psalm 139 anywhere.

Lord Sharpe of Epsom: The Government respects people's rights provided under Article 9 (freedom of thought, religion and belief), Article 10 (freedom of expression) and Article 11 (freedom of association and assembly) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The Government has recently consulted publicly on non-statutory guidance for section 9. We are currently analysing all responses to the consultation, which closed on 22 January, and we will publish the final guidance in due course.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-26/hl2752>

Psalm 139, referred to above, can be read at

<https://www.sefaria.org.il/Psalms.139.1?lang=en>

Section 9 of the Public Order Act 2023 can be read at

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/15/section/9>

The European Convention on Human Rights, referred to above, can be read at

https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

House of Lords Library Briefing

Regulation of news broadcasting companies

<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/regulation-of-news-broadcasting-companies/>

Downing Street

Prime Minister's Ramadan Message [video]

<https://twitter.com/RishiSunak/status/1767172496623640724>

Home Office

Government commits more funding to protect UK Muslims

The funding ... will be used to protect mosques, Muslim faith schools and other community centres. This year the government has made up to £29.4 million available, including an uplift of £4.9 million following the events in Israel on 7 October.

This follows the Prime Minister's pledge to provide more than £70 million over the next 4 years to the Community Security Trust to protect Jewish community sites, as part of the Jewish Community Protective Security Grant. The funding will increase security at a range of locations across the country, including schools, synagogues and other facilities used by the Jewish community.

Funding was allocated to reflect the number of community sites used by each faith, with British Muslims making up 14 times more of England and Wales' population than British Jews.

Concerningly, recent events in the Middle East since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas conflict have been used by some as an excuse to stir up indefensible hatred against both faith groups.

Today's announcement marks a package of longer-term support to provide reassurance that anti-Muslim abuse, threats or harassment or any form of hate crime will not be tolerated.

The funding will provide protective security measures to ensure the UK's Muslim community can be, and just as importantly, can feel safe. Measures include technology such as CCTV, alarm systems and secure perimeter fencing at mosques, Muslim faith community centres, and Muslim faith schools.

This comes alongside the extension of the deadline for the Protective Security for Mosques Scheme, and the government continues to invite mosques and Muslim faith community centres to register for protective security measures.

The government will continue to work closely with policing and community partners to ensure the safety and security of Muslims.

Home Secretary James Cleverly said: Anti-Muslim hatred has absolutely no place in our society. We will not let events in the Middle East be used as an excuse to justify abuse against British Muslims.

The Prime Minister has made clear that we stand with Muslims in the UK. That is exactly why we have committed to this funding, giving reassurance and confidence to UK Muslims at a time when it is crucially needed.

Security Minister Tom Tugendhat said: This funding demonstrates that this government stands firmly against hate crimes, abuse, threats or harassment against British Muslims.

We continue to work closely with policing and community partners to ensure the safety and security of British Muslims.

Some £31 million will also be made available to protect democratic processes and institutions in response to growing extremist threats.

The government condemns the recent rise in reported anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish hatred. Ministers have made it clear they expect the police to fully investigate all hate crimes and work with the CPS to make sure the cowards who commit these appalling offences feel the full force of the law.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-commits-more-funding-to-protect-uk-muslims>

UK Mission to the WTO, UN and Other International Organisations

UN Human Rights Council 55: UK Statement on Countering Religious Hatred

In recent months, we have seen a shocking increase in hatred and intolerance. Jewish children are scared to go to school. Muslim women have been abused in the street. Let me be clear - we unequivocally condemn incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, wherever this occurs.

The United Kingdom is a proud multi-ethnic, multi-faith democracy. However, we are cognisant of the challenges we face. So we are seeking to address the underlying causes of religious hatred while supporting all victims, including through:

- funding Tell MAMA, the leading national organisation to monitor and support victims of anti-Muslim hatred.
- our Protective Security for Mosques Scheme.
- funding the Jewish Community Protective Security Grant.

We agree with the Special Rapporteur that we must strike a balance - combatting religious hatred whilst upholding all human rights including freedom of religion, belief, speech and expression.

These issues are complex. But we must be prepared to stand up for our shared values. And to draw a line, as international human rights law does. There is no space for religious intolerance and hatred in pluralistic, modern societies.

The time has now come for us to stand together to combat and overcome the poisonous forces of division we face.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/un-human-rights-council-55-uk-statement-on-countering-religious-hatred>

Department of Health and Social Care

New action to tackle ethnic and other biases in medical devices

The government has today announced action to tackle potential bias in the design and use of medical devices, as it accepts recommendations from a UK-first independent review into equity in medical devices. ...

Ministers agree that unless appropriate action is taken, ethnic and other unfair biases can occur throughout the medical device life cycle, from research, development and testing, to approval, deployment and post-market monitoring, as well as in the use of devices once deployed. ...

The government will ...

- work with MHRA to ensure regulations for medical devices are safe for patients, regardless of their background, while allowing more innovative products to be placed on the UK market. ...
- drive forward work to remove racial bias in datasets, including ensuring diverse skin tones are included in data used by researchers for clinical studies
- support ongoing work with NHS England to upskill clinical professionals on issues including health equity
- work with partners to improve transparency of data used in the development of medical devices using artificial intelligence (AI), as well as AI products which influence clinical decisions ...

The medical devices review focused on 3 areas - optical devices such as pulse oximeters, AI-enabled devices and polygenic risk scores (PRS) in genomics. ...

To read the full press release see

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-action-to-tackle-ethnic-and-other-biases-in-medical-devices>

Equity in Medical Devices: Independent Review

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65e89e9e62ff48001a87b2d8/equity-in-medical-devices-independent-review-report-web-accessible.pdf>

Government response to the report of the equity in medical devices: independent review

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-report-of-the-equity-in-medical-devices-independent-review/government-response-to-the-report-of-the-equity-in-medical-devices-independent-review>

Scottish Parliament Motion

Pam Gosal (Conservative) [S6M-12448] Ramadan Mubarak 2024 – That the Parliament notes the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which will begin on 11 March 2024 and will last for 30 days; understands that the ninth month of the Islamic calendar is a month of fasting from sunrise until sunset, spent in prayer and good deeds; appreciates the charitable giving during this month to those who are less fortunate and in need, and wishes all those celebrating in Scotland, the rest of the UK and around the world a Ramadan Mubarak. <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/votes-and-motions/S6M-12448>

Scottish Government

Tackling hate crime

New laws to tackle the harm caused by hatred and prejudice come into force next month. The Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act will provide greater protection for victims and communities from 1 April.

It creates new stirring up of hatred offences for protected characteristics including age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and transgender identity. These extra provisions will add to the long-standing stirring up racial hatred offences, which have been in place since 1986.

Recent statistics show that 5,738 charges of hate crime were reported in Scotland in 2022-23. However, we know not all crimes will be reported.

A new Scottish Government public awareness raising campaign supported by Police Scotland has been launched today. The Hate Hurts campaign shows the impact of hate crime and encourages those who have witnessed or experienced a hate crime to come forward.

Minister for Victims & Community Safety Siobhian Brown said: “For those impacted by hatred and prejudice, the results can be traumatic and life changing. While we respect everyone’s right to freedom of expression, nobody in our society should live in fear or be made to feel like they don’t belong, and the Scottish Government is committed to building safer communities that live free from hatred and prejudice.

“Hate crime is behaviour that is both criminal and rooted in prejudice. It can be verbal, physical, online or face-to-face. The new law will give greater protections to those who need it and helps to form the basis of understanding about the type of behaviour that is not acceptable in our society.

“We must do all we can to give victims and witnesses the confidence to report instances of hate crime, which is why we have launched a new campaign, ‘Hate Hurts’. The campaign is informed by lived experience, and explains what a hate crime is, the impact it has on victims and how to report it.” ...

Chief Superintendent Farouque Hussain, hate crime prevention lead, Police Scotland, said: “Hate crime is vile and wrong. To target a person, a group or a community because of who they are, how they look, or how they choose to live their lives, undermines freedoms and

rights we are entitled to enjoy as human beings.

"We know it can be hard for people to report a hate crime, and in some cases to even recognise or acknowledge that they have been a victim.

"We want everyone targeted by hate crime, or those who witness it, to have confidence to come forward. They can be assured they will be treated with dignity and respect and that the circumstances they report will be fully investigated."

To read the full press release see

<https://www.gov.scot/news/tackling-hate-crime-1/>

TOP

Holocaust

Welsh Senedd Written Answer

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

Sam Rowlands (Conservative) [WQ91649] What engagement is Welsh Government having with the UK Government's presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance?

Minister for Social Justice and Chief Whip: The UK Government has not yet engaged Welsh Government in relation to its presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

In 2017, Welsh Government adopted the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism in full and without qualification, and we continue to fund the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust to deliver its important engagement work in Wales.

<https://record.senedd.wales/WrittenQuestion/91649>

TOP

Israel

See also Commons oral question "Topical Questions: Education", and Home Office press release "Government commits more funding to protect UK Muslims" that are included in the Home Affairs section above.

House of Commons Ministerial Statement

UK-Israel Free Trade Agreement: Fourth Round Negotiations

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): [HCWS325] The fourth round of United Kingdom-Israel Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations took place virtually between 19 and 29 February 2024.

During this round, officials held technical text-based discussions across 12 policy areas in 26 sessions. The negotiations focused particularly on services, which are not covered by our existing agreement, and important given the UK is the world's second largest exporter of services.

These negotiations reflect our shared commitment to working towards a comprehensive deal and strengthen our existing trade relationship, worth £6.4 billion in Q3 of 2023. A cutting-edge agreement with provisions covering services, innovation and digital trade would complement both our economies.

A fifth round of negotiations will take place in due course.

The UK will maintain its long-standing foreign policy positions in this FTA, including with

respect to the internationally recognised borders of Israel; and will continue to exclude illegal settlements to ensure nothing in this FTA undermines the viability of a two-state solution.

The Government remain clear that any deal we sign, including with Israel, will be in the best interests of the British people and the United Kingdom economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental and labour protections, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations, the NHS, and the services it provides, is not on the table.

The Government will continue to work closely with Israel and will keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-03-11/debates/24031148000011/UK-IsraelFreeTradeAgreementFourthRoundNegotiations>

House of Commons Written Answers

Diplomatic Immunity

Andy McDonald (Independent) [17391] To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, whether his Department granted a Special Mission Immunity certificate to a (a) visitor and (b) prospective visitor since 1 January 2024; and what the nationality was of each person.

David Rutley: The FCDO has granted one Special Mission Status certificate since 1 January 2024. This certificate was for the visit of Israeli Minister Benny Gantz on Wednesday 6 March.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-03-06/17391>

Visas: Gaza

Stephen Farry (Alliance) [16537] To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, how many people in Gaza have arrived in the UK following a successful application for a visa as a dependant of someone in the UK on a (a) work and (b) student visa since 7 October 2023.

Tom Pursglove: Border Force does not hold the information in an easily accessible format, therefore the information requested cannot be obtained without disproportionate cost.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-03-01/16537>

The following two questions both received the same answer

Overseas Students: Palestinians

Rachael Maskell (Labour Co-op) [16394] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has had discussions with the British Council on the families of students invited to study at universities from the state of Palestine via scholarship programmes.

Rachael Maskell (Labour Co-op) [16396] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department is taking steps to help provide support to Palestinian university students with (a) injured and (b) deceased family in Gaza.

Robert Halfon: The best way to provide protection for vulnerable people in Gaza is an end to the fighting as soon as possible and the return of the hostages held by Hamas. That is why the government is calling for an immediate pause to get aid in and the hostages out, then progress towards a sustainable, permanent ceasefire, without a return to destruction, fighting and loss of life.

The UK is currently supporting non-governmental organisation and UN partners to deliver medical aid and care in the Gaza Strip. This includes support for primary healthcare, trauma and emergency care services, disease surveillance and

outbreak response, and deployment of Emergency Medical Teams. The government is also exploring further options to help meet the medical needs of Palestinians.

Universities offer a range of dedicated support to their international students before they arrive in the UK, on arrival, and during their studies. This includes both pastoral care and financial support. If a student is experiencing difficulties, they should contact the university to discuss their circumstances. Universities have their own hardship funds to support students who are going through financial difficulties, and like domestic students, international students can apply to their provider to access these funds.

The department is also an active funder of the Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL) programme. This programme, facilitated by the British Council, provides young academic staff with potential in universities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the opportunity to complete a Masters or PhD programme in the UK. There are currently fifteen HESPAL scholars in the UK, five of which are from Gaza. The British Council has met with UK university partners to discuss the best means of support for these scholars. These conversations have covered safeguarding issues, one-to-one support to scholars and both virtual and physical platforms to enable scholars to come together and support one another. Departmental officials continue to engage with the British Council to identify further support for current and former HESPAL students.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-29/16394>

and

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-29/16396>

Israeli Settlements

Tommy Sheppard (SNP) [17209] To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of placing sanctions on (a) Itamar Ben Gvir, (b) Bezalel Smotrich and (c) other Israeli officials that support the expansion of settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Andrew Mitchell: We urge Israel to halt settlement expansion immediately. We continue to take a strong stance against settler violence and urge Israel to take stronger action to stop settler violence and hold the perpetrators accountable.

We do not speculate on future designations.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-03-05/17209>

Palestinians: Humanitarian Aid

Rachael Maskell (Labour Co-op) [16259] To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, whether he is taking steps to deliver aid to Palestine by sea.

Andrew Mitchell: We are increasingly concerned about the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and recognise the urgent need to significantly scale up the flow of aid getting in. All parties must take immediate steps to ensure unhindered humanitarian access, ease restrictions on humanitarian supplies and ensure the UN and aid agencies can reach civilians in need throughout Gaza. We continue to explore all routes for aid deliveries, including the Cypriot initiative for a maritime corridor between Cyprus and Israel/OPTs and have called on Israel to open further aid routes into Gaza, such as Ashdod Port and the Erez crossing.

The Foreign Secretary has appointed his Representative for Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Mark Bryson-Richardson. He is based in the region and is working intensively to address the blockages preventing more aid reaching Gaza.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-28/16259>

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK is deeply concerned by Special Representative Patten's findings of sexual violence on 7 October: UK statement at the UN Security Council by Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon

... As we have seen in conflicts around the world, it's a tragic fact, sexual violence is used to terrorise civilians. ...

We are collectively and rightly appalled by reports of sexual violence committed by Hamas on 7 October and against hostages.

I refer to the report and note with deep concern the findings of SRSG [Special Representative of the Secretary-General] Patten, including "reasonable grounds" to believe that sexual violence occurred in Israel on 7 October and the existence of, and I quote, "clear and convincing" information that sexual violence has been committed against hostages.

Mr President, it is deeply disturbing to know that "such violence may be ongoing against those still in captivity" a direct quote from the report. We continue to call an immediate, safe and unconditional release of all hostages.

And to work through every channel to secure an immediate stop in the fighting, then progress towards a sustainable ceasefire – because, for us, that is the best route to achieve this.

I am also deeply shocked by the very concerning reports, referenced in the SRSG report and also by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, of sexual violence perpetrated by Israeli forces against Palestinian detainees of which we've just heard, who have been arrested and held by Israel.

These reports, as we've heard, are being investigated. I therefore call on Israel to take immediate measures to prevent conflict-related sexual violence, to abide by international humanitarian law, and to ensure thorough investigations into these reports, and ultimately for perpetrators to be held to account. ...

Put it simply, it must stop. Perpetrators must be held accountable. Survivors must receive holistic support and I call on all members of this Security Council to be unequivocal on these points.

And may I say to both Israelis and Palestinians, and their representatives here today that the United Kingdom, as a friend to both, is ready to support.

As The PM's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, here is my offer on behalf of the United Kingdom. We have our PSVI Team of Experts, who have already deployed over 90 times.

We have The Murad Code, launched last April in this very Council, which sets out minimum standards to ensure survivors are not retraumatised when they are interviewed.

We have our Stigma Toolkit which provides practical measures to address the stigma faced by survivors in criminal justice systems. ...

Mr President, justice delayed is justice denied. And for the United Kingdom it remains that a two-state solution is the only way to achieve justice and security for both Israelis and Palestinians.

The first step must be an immediate stop to the fighting leading to a permanent, sustainable ceasefire. The release of all hostages, and vital humanitarian, life-saving aid to be delivered to Gaza. It is this solution that we seek.

We owe it to the legacy of every innocent civilian killed in Israel and across the Occupied Palestinian Territories to utilise every lever we have and every channel we have in pursuit of this noble objective. ...

To read the full transcript see

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-is-deeply-concerned-by-special-representative-pattens-findings-of-sexual-violence-on-7-october-uk-statement-at-the-un-security-council>

The report referred to above can be read at

<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/report/mission-report-official-visit-of-the-office-of-the-srsq-svc-to-israel-and-the-occupied-west-bank-29-january-14-february-2024/20240304-Israel-oWB-CRSV-report.pdf>

Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon During the holy month of Ramadan, we urge Israel to take all efforts to protect the status quo and allow unhindered access for worshippers to the Jerusalem holy sites. Restricting access to Al-Aqsa during Ramadan risks inflaming tensions and undermines Muslim rights to worship.

<https://twitter.com/tariqahmadbt/status/1767324308332859620>

Scottish Government

UK Government must reverse decision to suspend aid

The UK Government must now reverse its decision to suspend aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), given the continuing deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Gaza, External Affairs Secretary Angus Robertson has said. ...

The letter [to the Minister for Development and Africa, Andrew Mitchell] reads: ...

I am writing to express my heightened concern for the continuing deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and in particular regarding the suspension of aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) by the UK Government. Given the dependence on UNRWA of 2.2 million people in Gaza, including children who are now dying of starvation, dehydration and infectious disease, I implore you to reverse this decision.

I share the concerns about the serious allegations that a number of UNRWA staff were involved in the abhorrent attacks of 7 October on Israel. However, I have been reassured that UNRWA is taking the necessary action to investigate these allegations and to mitigate against such risks in the future.

I note that the European Commission announced on 1 March that it will proceed to paying €50 million to UNRWA and increase its emergency support for Palestine by €68 million in 2024. The Commission stated that it took this decision based on the swift action taken by UNRWA to immediately dismiss the implicated staff members and to launch an independent investigation. UNRWA has provided additional assurances that it will facilitate a further review and audit of the Agency by EU appointed external experts and that it will strengthen its department of internal investigations and the governance surrounding it. ...

I also ask you to use your influence to ensure that the barriers to aid getting into and distributed throughout Gaza, which are being imposed in contravention of international law, are removed. I note that the UK and international partners are exploring the activation of a maritime corridor for aid delivery. When increased levels of aid finally start to enter the Gaza strip, UNRWA remains the only organisation with the capacity to distribute it at the scale required throughout the territory. They must be able to fulfil this critical function.

I cannot overstate how crucial this decision is, for the very survival of starving children, women and men in Gaza. ...

To read the full press release see

<https://www.gov.scot/news/uk-government-must-reverse-decision-to-suspend-aid/>

FoI Release: Correspondence regarding United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202400398300/>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/5n8vaj75>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/bpbdfyht>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/mtz9dkw9>

Northern Ireland Assembly Debate

International Women's Day 2024

4.55pm Declan Kearney (Sinn Féin): ... In today's world, women continue to be denied economic, social and national freedoms. Nowhere is that more starkly apparent than in Palestine, particularly in Gaza. This year, there will have been no celebration of International Women's Day or of Mother's Day, particularly in the Gaza Strip. By 8 March — last Friday — Israel's war had killed 9,000 Palestinian women, with over 54,000 injured; 5,200 Palestinian women have lost their babies; 50,000 Palestinian women who are pregnant cannot give birth in a safe place because there are no hospitals, medical centres or safe places in which to give birth; 65,000 breastfeeding Palestinian mothers cannot feed their children properly or look after them safely; and, in the north of Gaza, 350,000 women and girls are starving. Half a million Palestinian women are homeless. The women of Palestine need to hear, see and feel our solidarity.

Chun críochnú, déanfaidh mé aithris anois ar an rann seo atá tiomnaithe do mhíneach mhná na Palaistíne. Cuisle na mban; aoibhneas na mban; cineáltas, cruthaitheacht agus samhlaíocht na mban; daoirse, streachailt agus fulaingt na mban; diongbháilteacht agus tiomantas do chearta na mban; macalla na mban; ré úr do mhná gan leatrom ná cos ar bolg; dóchas agus fíis na mban lenár linn; Ní saoirse mhná na cruinne go saoirse mhná na Palaistíne.

Translation: To finish, I will now recite this reflection dedicated to the courage of the women of Palestine. The heartbeat of women; the happiness of women; the kindness, creativity and imagination of women; the slavery, suffering and struggle of women; dedication and determination for the rights of women; the echo of women; a new era for women without discrimination or oppression; the hope and vision of women in our time; the women of the world will not be free until the women of Palestine are free. ...

5.00pm Linda Dillon (Sinn Féin): ... I take the opportunity to acknowledge the women across the world who are suffering as the result of conflict, particularly ... the women in Palestine. Today, we think of all the children who, yesterday, did not have their mummies to wish a happy Mother's Day and all the mothers who were not able to hug their children and enjoy being a mother. We think of them today. ...

Deborah Erskine (DUP): ... Declan Kearney referred to the situation in Gaza and Israel. I hope that he will join me in condemning Hamas and the torture and rape of women that it carried out. ...

To read the full transcript see

<https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2024/03/11&docID=392360#4263365>

Northern Ireland Members Statement

St Patrick's Day: Washington DC

Gerry Carroll (People Against Profits Alliance): In a few days' time, people will celebrate St Paddy's day with craic and ceol, but, this year, there is a really sinister edge that needs to be challenged and called out. The man with the biggest arsenal of weapons in human

history behind him is trying to use his lineage and family history to give himself a by-ball for the carnage and slaughter that he has supported for the last six months. That man's name is Joe Biden. It is crystal clear that, without the cheques, the tanks and the fighter jets sent by the US, 30,000 Palestinians would still be alive today. I make a final call to all party leaders here but especially to Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill: do not help to facilitate and rehabilitate "Genocide Joe". Give him the cold shoulder that he deserves this Paddy's day. That man does not deserve a bowl of shamrock; he deserves to be in The Hague and on trial for his support for war crimes and genocide on the Palestinian people.

Across the island, people have spoken against Joe Biden and his actions. At least 20,000 people have signed a petition demanding that parties refuse to go to Washington to shake his hand and get a selfie, and I repeat that call today. Tens of thousands have marched across the island to call out "Genocide Joe" and the States' actions. Thousands are likely to be out in Belfast again this weekend.

It is worth repeating that the violence did not start on 7 October 2023. Violence has been ongoing since 1948 and even the 1920s under the British mandate. There has been theft of land, ethnic cleansing and daily slaughter. There have been many 7 Octobers every year for the Palestinian people. This Paddy's day, people should refuse to go to the White House and should refuse to shake the hand of Joe Biden; instead, they should say, "Free Palestine" this Paddy's day.

<https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2024/03/11&docID=392360#4262792>

United Nations

Reasonable Grounds to Believe Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Occurred in Israel During 7 October Attacks, Senior UN Official Tells Security Council

There are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence — including rape and gang-rape — occurred across multiple locations of Israel and the Gaza periphery during the attacks on 7 October 2023, a senior United Nations official reported to the Security Council ...

Following allegations of brutal sexual violence committed during and in the aftermath of the Hamas-led terror attacks, Pramila Patten, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, led an official visit to Israel ... to gather, analyse and verify reports of sexual violence related to the 7 October attack. Due to ongoing hostilities, the Special Representative did not request to visit Gaza, where other UN entities that monitor sexual violence are operational.

"What I witnessed in Israel were scenes of unspeakable violence perpetrated with shocking brutality," Ms. Patten recalled. Detailing her methodology, she said that her team met with families of hostages and members of communities displaced from several kibbutzim. It conducted confidential interviews with 34 individuals, including survivors and witnesses of the 7 October attacks, released hostages, first responders and health and service providers. It visited four attack sites — as well as the morgue to which the bodies of victims were transferred — and reviewed over 5,000 photographic images and some 50 hours of footage of the attacks.

"It was a catalogue of the most extreme and inhumane forms of killing, torture and other horrors," including sexual violence, she stated. The team also found convincing information that sexual violence was committed against hostages, and has reasonable grounds to believe that such violence may still be ongoing against those in captivity. While there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred in the Nova music festival site, Route 232, and kibbutz Re'im, reported incidents of rape could not be verified in other locations. Concurrently, the team determined that at least two

allegations of sexual violence in kibbutz Be’eri — widely reported in the media — were unfounded.

Turning to the West Bank, she painted a grim picture of “intense fear and insecurity, with women and men terrified and deeply disturbed over the ongoing tragedy in Gaza”. On her visit to Ramallah, she spotlighted instances of sexual violence in the context of detention, such as invasive body searches; beatings, including in the genital areas; and threats of rape against women and female family members. Sexual harassment and threats of rape during house raids and at checkpoints were also reported. She expressed disappointment that the immediate reaction to her report by some Israeli political actors was not to open inquiries into those alleged incidents but, rather, to reject them outright via social media. However, she underscored that her findings do not legitimize further hostilities. Instead, they create a moral imperative for a humanitarian ceasefire to end the unspeakable suffering imposed on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and bring about the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. ...

In the following discussion, numerous Council Members ... expressed shock over the incidents of sexual violence related to the 7 October attacks detailed in the Special Representative’s report. Many urged Hamas to immediately release all hostages, who — according to the report — can still be subjected to such acts. Some, including the representatives of the United States and France, criticized the Council’s failure to condemn Hamas.

There can be no doubt about what happened on 7 October, said **the representative of the United States**, pointing to the report’s findings that several bodies, naked from the waist down, were recovered — mostly “women with hands tied and shot multiple times, often in the head”. The report also indicated that the detention of Palestinians has been compounded by sexual violence. Nevertheless, she rejected “the false equivalency between these actions and hostage-taking by a foreign terrorist organization”.

Incidents of sexual violence in Israel and the West Bank contained in the report “add another horrific dimension to the tragedy unfolding in the Middle East”, observed **Guyana’s delegate**. Noting that at least two widely reported allegations of sexual violence were unfounded, she urged all parties “to act responsibly and avoid sensationalizing headlines”.

Tariq Ahmad, Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom, said that London is ready to provide support, including its team of experts on preventing sexual violence in conflict and its toolkit that provides practical measures to address the stigma faced by survivors. “All reports of sexual violence must be fully investigated to ensure justice for survivors and victims,” he said, adding that “justice delayed is justice denied”. [[click here to read this speech in greater detail](#)] ...

The Russian Federation’s delegate, meanwhile, questioned the UN’s selective approach to visits in the region — including the Special Representative’s recent trip, which did not cover the Gaza Strip. “We are dealing with some sort of half-truth that in no way gives a full picture,” she stressed. Noting that the Special Representative’s report was based on data received from the Israeli Government rather than accounts of the 7 October victims, she underscored that “putting an end to violence, including sexual violence, will only be possible when we have objective and verified information”. ...

The plight of Palestinians is not a recent phenomenon, [**Algeria’s delegate**] continued, noting that only three criminal investigations have been initiated in response to 1,400 complaints about acts of torture since 2001. None have led to indictments. ...

For his part, **the Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine** said that the Council has shown “unprecedented reactivity” by convening a briefing on a report just released. For decades, similar reports regarding sexual assault against Palestinians have not led to the convening of a single Council meeting. He then recalled that the Special Representative’s mission did not seek to gather information or verify allegations in the Occupied Palestinian

Territory, so as not to duplicate the ongoing work of other UN entities there. Yet, none of these entities were invited today to present their findings ...

Israel Katz, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Israel, criticized the United Nations for remaining silent about Hamas' horrible acts for too long. According to the Special Representative's report, the killings of innocent young men and women on 7 October were crimes against humanity. Against this backdrop, he called on the United Nations to declare Hamas a terrorist organization, citing the recognition of this status by numerous countries. Emphasizing that "Hamas does not speak on behalf of the Muslim world," he urged Muslim leaders to denounce the crimes committed by Hamas, particularly those involving sexual violence.

Turning to the situation of hostages, he urged the Council to take urgent action to ensure the release of 134 kidnapped individuals and "stop this living hell". "By doing so, you will show the world that the Security Council can be a shining light of justice for all," he added.

To read the full press release see

<https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15621.doc.htm>

The report referred to above can be read at

<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/report/mission-report-official-visit-of-the-office-of-the-srsg-svc-to-israel-and-the-occupied-west-bank-29-january-14-february-2024/20240304-Israel-oWB-CRSV-report.pdf>

Secretary-General's remarks at press stakeout - on the beginning of Ramadan

Today marks the start of the holy month of Ramadan – a period when Muslims around the world celebrate and spread the values of peace, reconciliation and solidarity.

Yet even though Ramadan has begun – the killing, bombing and bloodshed continue in Gaza.

We recently entered the sixth month since the Hamas terror attacks in Israel and the catastrophic Israeli onslaught on Gaza began.

My strongest appeal today is to honour the spirit of Ramadan by silencing the guns – and removing all obstacles to ensure the delivery of lifesaving aid at the speed and massive scale required.

At the same time – and in the Ramadan spirit of compassion -- I call for the immediate release of all hostages.

The eyes of the world are watching. The eyes of history are watching. We cannot look away.

We must act to avoid more preventable deaths.

We have witnessed month after month of civilian killing and destruction at a level that is unprecedented in all my years as Secretary-General.

Meanwhile, life-saving relief for Palestinians in Gaza is coming in trickles – if it comes at all.

International humanitarian law lies in tatters.

And a threatened Israeli assault on Rafah could plummet the people of Gaza into an even deeper circle of hell.

For months, leaders have appealed for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the immediate release of all hostages.

But the most compelling calls have come from the families of the victims of this war.

I will never forget my meetings with them -- and they have stood at this very podium and addressed you -- united in remarkable courage and unfathomable pain.

Israeli hostage families who shared their torment and anguish – and pleaded for the immediate release of their loved ones.

And Palestinian families who shared heart-wrenching testimonies of family members killed in Israeli bombardments – and pleaded for an immediate ceasefire.

As one of those family members said, "We are not here for condolences. We are not here for apologies. We are here for immediate action."

Is that too much to ask?

We must hear and heed those voices.

Desperate civilians need action – immediate action. ...

Let's not forget that beyond Ramadan, Christians will soon celebrate Easter and Jews will celebrate Passover in April.

It is time to end the terrible suffering. Now is the time to do it. ...z

To read the full statement see

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2024-03-11/secretary-generals-remarks-press-stakeout-the-beginning-of-ramadan>

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Foreign Affairs

House of Lords Written Answers

The following two questions both received the same answer

Iraq: Development Aid

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning (Conservative) [HL2740] To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon on 20 February (HL2204), what processes and safeguards are in place to ensure that UK funding to the government of Iraq is not channelled to the Popular Mobilisation Forces and affiliated organisations such as Kata'ib Hezbollah.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning (Conservative) [HL2741] To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon on 20 February (HL2204), whether they intend to apply further conditions to funding provided to the government of Iraq to prevent this funding being funnelled to other groups, including Kata'ib Hezbollah.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Thorough due diligence assessment of all funding is carried out and the FCDO ensures partners have procedures in place to manage the main risks of aid diversion from activities it funds, including specific controls to ensure that assistance goes direct to the intended beneficiaries.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-26/hl2740>

and

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-26/hl2741>

The answer referred to above can be read at

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-02-05/hl2204>

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Relevant Legislation ** new or updated today

UK Parliament

Arms Trade (Inquiry and Suspension) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3567>

**** Criminal Justice Bill**

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3511>

Amendment Paper

https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-04/0155/amend/criminal_rm_rep_0312.pdf

Disestablishment of the Church of England Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3539>

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3475>

The Equality Act 2010 (Amendment) Regulations 2023 [Draft]

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2023/9780348253191/contents>

Genocide Determination Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3535>

Genocide (Prevention and Response) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3521>

Holocaust Memorial Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3421>

International Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3564>

Palestine Statehood (Recognition) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3596>

Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Draft Bill

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/terrorism-protection-of-premises-draft-bill-overarching-documents>

Scottish Parliament

Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill

<https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/gender-recognition-reform-scotland-bill>

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Consultations

** new or updated today

**** closes in 6 days**

Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill - Standard Tier (closing date 18 March 2024)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/martyns-law-standard-tier-consultation>

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