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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 16 April 2018

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 639

FOURTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 16 April 2018

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police and Fire Service Collaboration

1. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between police and fire services. [904739]

16. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between police and fire services; and if she will make a statement. [904755]

18. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between police and fire services. [904757]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): This Government firmly support collaboration between emergency services and have invested more than £88 million in projects to support that since 2013. The Policing and Crime Act 2017 introduced a

host of measures to enable collaboration to go further and faster, which include a statutory duty to collaborate and allow elected police and crime commissioners to take on fire and rescue governance.

Mary Robinson: I welcome the recent Government investment of £24 million, following the Manchester bombing last May. The package includes almost £10 million to cover the cost of extra staffing and other pressures on Greater Manchester police. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is much we can learn from the response to the Manchester Arena terrorist atrocity and that we should continue to work to try to improve further how our excellent emergency services respond to such tragic events?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Of course, the important report highlights the acts of bravery and compassion that took place on the night of 22 May and in the following days. As Lord Kerslake noted, the response was “overwhelmingly positive”, but the report also shows a need for improvement in some areas. As she points out, it makes certain recommendations, which I know the local emergency services and the Home Office will follow up.

Michael Fabricant: Is my right hon. Friend as pleased as I am to hear that Staffordshire fire service is now not going to take to judicial review her decision to merge the governance of Staffordshire’s police and fire services? Does she agree with me—and, more importantly, with Matthew Ellis, our excellent PCC—that this merger will mean that an additional £10 million a year will be saved, which can go into frontline services?

Amber Rudd: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for his local leadership in achieving this. It was not uncontroversial for a while, so I am grateful that it has been able to go through, and that he accepts and the local authorities have accepted the independent advice we have received. I hope he and Matthew Ellis, and all the other organisations involved, will make a great success of it.

Luke Hall: Clearly, when we are looking at these reforms, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will suit every part of the UK. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the Government are going to be driven by a pragmatic approach, which will ensure that cross-service collaboration will be driven by what is best in terms of delivering results for communities up and down the UK?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is absolutely right to say that this is not a case where one size fits all, but it is the case that collaboration will lead to efficiencies, cost savings and a better service for all. I hope that the leadership we have seen across the country from some PCCs will be taken forward by others.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Collaboration between all the emergency services is vital, not least because these workers face some of the same threats, including a large and increasing number of assaults on them. Will the Home Secretary support my amendment to my own private Member's Bill, which we will be discussing next week, to make sure that sexual assault on emergency workers is also an aggravated offence? It is wrong that these emergency workers are facing these abuses.

Amber Rudd: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should do more to protect emergency service workers, which is why we are working closely with him on the Bill. I hope we will arrive at an accommodation in order to get it through.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): There is a lot to be gained from the police and fire services working closer together, but this cannot be used as an excuse for cuts. Efficiencies could come from it, but does the Home Secretary acknowledge that both the police and fire services are significantly underfunded at the moment and we cannot have more cuts coming in as a result of closer working?

Amber Rudd: One way of avoiding the impact of cuts that the hon. Lady highlights would be by having greater efficiencies, and having collaboration between the emergency services is an excellent way of doing that. That is what we have seen up and down the country, and I urge her to see more of it in her own area.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): The PCC takeover of fire services will change the perception of firefighters from "public safety" to "law enforcement". My question is: when are the Government going to provide adequate funding so that councils are not forced into hostile PCC and fire service mergers? I am looking for a meaningful response on central Government funding, not another brush-off about earmarked reserves.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady underestimates the high regard in which firefighters are held right across this country. The public know the difference, and are able to distinguish between firefighters and policemen and women, but they want to see better working of emergency services together.

Domestic Violence

2. **Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con):** What steps she is taking to tackle domestic violence.
[904740]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government have put tackling domestic abuse at the heart of their agenda. We have introduced a new offence of coercive and controlling behaviour; rolled out new tools, such as domestic violence protection orders; and committed £100 million to support victims of violence against women and girls. Furthermore, on 8 March, we launched a wide-ranging consultation, and we will introduce a groundbreaking domestic abuse Bill, which will offer further support.

Helen Whately: Domestic violence harms victims mentally as well as physically. Women who have experienced domestic abuse are far more likely to suffer from a mental health condition, as are children who have witnessed violence at home. I urge my hon. Friend to use the forthcoming domestic abuse Bill to make sure that victims of abuse and their families get the mental health support that they need.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; she is a long-standing campaigner on mental health. We recognise that mental health can be a theme in domestic abuse situations. We are already funding a number of projects through the VAWG transformation fund. For example, we have given £377,000 to the London Borough of Southwark for therapeutic support for victims and their children with complex needs. We want to use the consultation to get the best possible deal for victims of domestic abuse and to stop the cycle of violence.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): As well as putting the offences of psychological abuse and coercive control on the statute book, the Scottish Government have allocated funding to train 14,000 Police Scotland officers and staff to spot those offences in domestic abuse settings. Will the Minister commit to following that example in England and Wales?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to hear that Scotland is doing that. New police training has been developed by the voluntary sector in England and Wales. It is called Domestic Abuse Matters and focuses on the recognition of controlling and coercive behaviour, and it is being rolled out to forces throughout the country.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Government's domestic abuse consultation proposes the tagging of perpetrators. The Victims' Rights Campaign is calling for best use to be made of GPS tracking technology to warn police and victims when an offender enters a court-imposed exclusion zone. Does the Minister agree that such an alert system would provide vital security for victims and reduce reoffending?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that issue. She does a great deal of work in this area. It is an interesting idea, and I know that she and others will submit it to the consultation.

Modern Slavery

3. **Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to eliminate modern slavery.
[904741]

8. **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to eliminate modern slavery. [904746]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government remain committed to stamping out the abhorrent crime of modern slavery, both at home and overseas. We have strengthened the operational law enforcement response and introduced new requirements for victims to report on slavery in their supply chains, and we are now transforming the support that we provide to victims. Internationally, we continue to work with partners to build capacity and consensus to prevent modern slavery, wherever it occurs.

Alberto Costa: I welcome the Minister's answer and the extensive work that she and the Government are doing to tackle this horror in our society. Will she expand on what steps the Government are taking to provide ongoing support to victims of modern slavery?

Victoria Atkins: The Government's comprehensive reforms of the national referral mechanism will significantly improve support for victims of modern slavery. Move-on support for confirmed victims will be trebled to 45 days, giving a minimum of 90 days of support. During that period, victims can access accommodation, financial assistance, counselling, health services and signposting to legal support. In addition, confirmed victims will be entitled to a further six months of post-NRM support.

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend will know that section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 stipulates that companies and organisations with a turnover greater than £36 million must monitor their supply chains. What progress has been made in the implementation of section 54 across the public sector?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that interesting question. Section 54 of the Act does not cover the public sector, but the Government are committed to taking action against modern slavery in our supply chains. The Home Office and other Departments are piloting a new detailed questionnaire to get more information about modern slavery risks in our supply chains. In addition, we are learning from the leading large businesses that make up our Business Against Slavery forum, so that we can apply the best business practice to our own supply chains.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I talk to many people from the police who do not think they have sufficient resources to tackle the evil gangs in most of our towns and cities that exploit people—women, normally, although not just women—whether from this country or brought in, and force them into prostitution. This is happening in every one of our towns and cities. When are we going to get more action?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. Local police forces work with the National Crime Agency so that we have a nationwide response to modern slavery. Let us be clear that trafficking, particularly if it involves women and victims of sexual trafficking, is completely unacceptable. I encourage local police forces to work with the NCA to investigate and prosecute those offences when they can.

22. [904762] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): Last year, in a meeting of the all-party group on the hair industry, I praised the charity Unseen for its work on tackling modern slavery, particularly given the number of victims being exploited within the lifestyle, hair and beauty sectors. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State, or her Ministers, agree to meet me and the chief executive officer of the Hair Council to discuss what actions the hair and beauty industry can take to help end this exploitation?

Victoria Atkins: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. Nail bars can be a particular source of exploitation, which is why they are the focus of the anti-slavery commissioner and of the director of labour market exploitation. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter further.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): What steps has the Minister taken to report on slaves being retraded in the UK and recorded in the national referral mechanism more than once?

Victoria Atkins: One reason why we are improving the national referral mechanism is precisely to build resilience during that vital period. We are trebling the period once a person has been found to be a victim of modern slavery in order to build resilience in respect of those people, so that they are not prone to becoming victims of modern slavery or trafficking again.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The independent chief inspector of borders and immigration recently found no evidence that the Home Office is actively monitoring the link between the use of right to rent and victims of modern slavery, despite concerns that the scheme makes it difficult for victims of modern slavery to come forward. The inspector also found that the Home Office is failing to measure the scheme effectively, and yet it has refused to fully implement the inspector's recommendations for a proper evaluation. Will the Minister do so now?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. We have looked at the national referral mechanism because we are conscious that criminal gangs, as they find out what law enforcement and others are up to and as crime develops, change their modus operandi. If there are particular issues that he wishes to raise with me, I will be happy to meet him to discuss them further.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that modern slavery is not simply a national problem, but an international problem with international gangs? When we leave the European Union, will we continue to work very closely with our European colleagues and co-operate with them to deal with this evil trade?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. Public safety will always be part of the Government's priorities both in the EU negotiations and beyond. We already work very closely with our EU partners and with other partners because, sadly, victims are brought from all over the world. It is a programme that has the personal commitment of the Prime Minister and I know that that will continue to be the case.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): At the weekend, I attended an event in Edinburgh organised by the Faculty of Advocates' Tumbling Lassie Committee to commemorate the Scottish judiciary's rejection of slavery in the 17th century and, more importantly, to raise funds for charities working in Scotland at the moment, such as Community Safety Glasgow's TARA service—the trafficking awareness raising alliance—which provides a wonderful service for trafficked women who have been sexually exploited. Does the Minister agree that Governments should do everything they can to support the victims of modern slavery and human trafficking?

Victoria Atkins: I agree. Indeed, when the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, she undertook the massive piece of work that became the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which is universally recognised. When I have the opportunity to discuss this with our international partners, I find that the Act is universally recognised as being world-leading. The issue will very much continue to be a priority for the Government and we will continue to give victims the support they need.

Joanna Cherry: The problem with the Modern Slavery Act is that it does not actually place a duty on the UK Government—unlike the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, passed by the Scottish Parliament, which places a specific duty on Scottish Ministers to provide the sort of support and assistance that we are talking about. I am aware that there is a private Member's Bill going forward in the other place at the moment, but can the Minister tell us whether her Government have any plans to amend the Modern Slavery Act to bring it up to the standard of the Scottish Government's Act?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. and learned Lady is referring to section 50 of the Act, which provides for regulations. Those regulations are being reviewed at the moment—indeed, we have been in contact with the noble Lord who brought that private Member's Bill before the other place. The regulations are very much under review. We are conscious that, as crime and criminal gangs change, we must keep up to date with our response, too.

Policing of Gangs

4. **Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police forces in policing gangs. [904742]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Last week, the Home Secretary launched the Government's serious violence strategy, which contains a commitment to ensure that independent police inspections have a focus on serious violence and include thematic inspection of police forces' response to county lines in 2018-19.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) is still celebrating the triumph of her beloved club, of which we will doubtless hear more anon, although not for too long.

Lucy Powell: I certainly am, Mr Speaker.

Does the Minister agree that prevention is an absolutely key aspect of policing youth violence, and that part of that prevention is a more sophisticated approach to how we police? Young people from certain neighbourhoods—especially if they are black or ethnic minority—are too often wrongly labelled as gang criminals when, in fact, they are groups of youths. Will he look at this issue?

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with the emphasis that the hon. Lady places on the balance needed between robust law enforcement and early intervention and prevention, to steer young people away from violent crime. That is exactly the balance that we are setting out in the serious violence strategy.

I also agree with the hon. Lady's second point. In fact, I heard it directly from youth workers in north Manchester, when I visited a factory there recently. They said, "Don't pin all this on gangs in large parts of Manchester." This is not about gangs; it is about very serious work to steer young people away from a path that can have devastating consequences for them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Does the Minister accept that changes to stop-and-search laws have led to an increase in the number of deaths through knife crime? Will he give a commitment that he will let our excellent police forces get on with doing their job, without having one or both hands tied behind their backs by politicians who are flexing their politically correct muscles and sticking their noses in where they are not needed?

Mr Hurd: With respect to my hon. Friend, with whom I go back a long way, there is absolutely no evidence to support his first assertion. In fact, the last big decline in knife attacks and violent crime coincided with a fall in stop and search. I will say, quite categorically, that we see stop and search emphatically as a vital tool in the police armoury as part of the robust law enforcement that we want. However, we have been clear that it needs to be used legally, targeted, intelligence-led and, ideally, increasingly supported by body-worn video.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I would call the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) to pose a supplementary question, given that her own question is not entirely dissimilar. She is not standing, so I will not call her; but if she does, I will.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Jo Swinson.

20. [904759] **Jo Swinson:** I had been thinking that Question 9 might have worked, but thank you very much for calling me now, Mr Speaker.

Organised crime groups south of the border are believed to be behind a recent spate of burglaries of gold from Asian families' houses, including 12 in East Dunbartonshire, leaving families terrified. A UK-wide response is clearly needed. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how policing efforts can be co-ordinated across the border to bring those responsible to justice?

Mr Hurd: I am happy to say that the Minister for Security has muttered his acceptance of that invitation to me. We are increasingly aware of the need to better align national, cross-national, regional and local capability to bear down on serious organised crime as it becomes more complex and affects more of our constituents.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): There is widespread support for what the Minister has said—that we need both a policing response and a response based on intervention to prevent young people from being involved in gang violence—but what is he doing to deliver on the crucial task of assessing which interventions are the most effective and deliver the best results?

Mr Hurd: As my right hon. Friend says, the serious violence strategy balances the need for robust law enforcement with really effective work to support prevention and early intervention. That needs to be evidence-led, otherwise we will waste money. Part of the Home Office's responsibility is to ensure that commissioners have the best evidence about what works.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The serious violence strategy made no reference at all to falling police numbers, but we have the document that was put together by Home Office officials, which clearly says that rises in serious violence are

“likely to be facilitated by...a shift in police resources meaning less proactive policing...and falls in arrests/charges relating to serious violence”.

So will the Minister explain on what evidential basis he or the Home Secretary removed that reference from the serious violence strategy? Was it a purely political decision to airbrush the strategy and risk our communities in the process?

Mr Hurd: I am disappointed that the hon. Lady should focus on that, not least because she was more sensible on the “Today” programme when she said, “We do not say that there is a direct causal factor between the number of officers on the ground and the number of crimes.” In saying that, she joined the Met Commissioner, who was also quite clear that causes of violent crime are complex and cannot simply be reduced down to resourcing. I give the hon. Lady credit for her interview on the “Today” programme because it was a lot more sensible than her question, which was partisan and party political at a time, frankly, when I think the public are sick and tired of politicians chipping away at each other on this issue and want to see us work together to put an end to this dreadful cycle of violence.

Human Trafficking: 45-Day Recovery and Reflection Period

5. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): If she will increase the minimum 45-day recovery and reflection period for potential victims of human trafficking. [904743]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government exceed their international obligations by providing a 45-day period of reflection and recovery for potential victims of modern slavery. That is not a maximum but a minimum period. The reforms of the national referral mechanism were focused on extending support at the point where stakeholders tell us victims need it most as

they move on from support and reintegrate into their longer-term communities. We are trebling that support to 45 days, giving people a minimum of 90 days' support plus up to six months of post-NRM support.

Alex Norris: What data is now being kept regarding outcomes for people who have been through the national referral mechanism, and what does this data tell us about levels of re-trafficking?

Victoria Atkins: If I may, I will write to the hon. Gentleman about that. We are very conscious, having listened to stakeholders, that the period in which they tell us victims most need support is after a decision has been made, and that is why we have trebled it.

EU Nationals: Citizenship Applications

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Lady, from whom we have already heard—we may have another dose of her later, but not in substantive questions, because that is in contravention of the procedures of the House.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Good try.

Mr Speaker: “Good try,” says the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), chuntering from a sedentary position to what he will regard as an obvious purpose.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Home Secretary may remember that in November last year I raised the case of a constituent she met at the TARA—trafficking awareness raising alliance—project in Glasgow. My constituent has been granted one year's discretionary leave to remain, not the asylum that she was seeking, and the Home Office continues to mishandle the case. Will the Home Secretary please look into this issue further? I am very concerned that this woman is not getting the support that she needs.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will appreciate that I cannot answer that question on the Floor of the House, but if she writes to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, we will look into it.

6. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What additional resources her Department is providing to ensure that all citizenship applications from EU nationals are processed before the UK leaves the EU. [904744]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Home Office continually reviews its capabilities to ensure effective delivery of the Government's agenda, which includes assessing how our priorities will impact on the workforce and capabilities required. We are on track to increase European casework staffing levels at UK Visas and Immigration to 1,500 ahead of the settlement scheme's launch later this year.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Home Secretary for her response. The already socially excluded are likely to have the most difficulty in completing settled status applications in time. According to the Migration Observatory, 64,000 non-Irish EU citizens said that they had never

used the internet. How will the Home Office ensure that those people can complete their online settled status applications in time?

Amber Rudd: I am glad to have the opportunity to answer the hon. Gentleman's question. The settled status application process will be very straightforward and very swift, with an assumption that people will get their status when they apply for it. We need to recruit many people and expend money to get this right, precisely because we need to make sure that we have the resources and facilities available for people who are not comfortable going online. We are aware of that and will be getting advice, and we will make sure that we have a system that works for everybody.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): EU citizens have a clear pathway to British citizenship, but British Indian Ocean Territory nationals, many of whom were exiled and denied citizenship, do not. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary could consider my private Member's Bill, to ensure that justice is restored to those British nationals, for whom we are responsible.

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend has taken a particular interest in that. We spoke about it when I saw him in his constituency, and of course I will engage with him carefully on his private Member's Bill.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Home Secretary will be aware of the Law Society's new evidence that the Government are losing 50% of immigration appeals. Given that the workload of this flawed immigration system is about to have the biggest increase in its history, with EU citizens applying for citizenship and then settled status after Brexit, what is she doing to sort out the complete mess of the immigration system?

Amber Rudd: I think that in the core of that question there was an inquiry about the settled status of EU citizens, which I know is the right hon. Gentleman's particular concern. As I said in response to a previous question, we are making sure that the new system will be completely online and straightforward to use, and the default position will be to accept.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am pleased to hear that the Home Secretary is confident about EU citizens, but there is widespread concern as to whether her Department has enough resources, and we now learn that the Windrush generation are going through what seems to be a nightmare system. What assurances can she give us, especially in relation to the Windrush generation, who, after all, are British citizens in the eyes of many of us?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend makes a fair point. I know that there will be an opportunity for me to answer questions on that later. I am very concerned about how the Windrush generation have been treated, and I will be making some further statements about what we are going to do about that. She is right to identify that they have the right to be here, and I will make sure that the Home Office delivers on that.

Cannabis Oil Prescription: Epilepsy

7. **Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** What progress has been made on bringing forward legislative proposals to license cannabis oil for prescription for epilepsy. [904745]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The World Health Organisation has committed to reviewing the scheduling of cannabis under the 1961 United Nations convention. It is due to consider the therapeutic use, dependence on and potential to abuse constituent parts of cannabis. The Government will await the outcome of that report before considering next steps.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. With special reference to Dravet syndrome, the seizures associated with which are aided incredibly by cannabis oil in a larger dose, can he confirm whether his Department will legislate for specific uses, to allow doctors to prescribe it to the likes of little Sophia Gibson in my constituency, whose parents Darren and Danielle are at this moment in Holland, where Sophia is receiving medical treatment?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman has raised his constituent's case with me in writing, and we have a huge amount of sympathy for Sophia Gibson and her family. He will know that we need to ensure that doctors and patients are assured of the quality, safety and efficacy of medicines before they come to market, but I have written to the hon. Gentleman to arrange a meeting to discuss his constituent's case.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister, who met Alfie Dingley and his family, will know the pain and anxiety caused by the cumbersome licensing process. Does he accept that a wider range of cases than this very rare form of epilepsy involve the use of cannabis oil in palliative care and pain relief, and that they also need to be investigated?

Mr Hurd: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman completely; it is hard not to feel a huge amount of sympathy for Hannah Deacon and Drew Dingley, not least having met them with Alfie. We have said that we want to explore every option within the existing law. The right hon. Gentleman talks about a cumbersome licensing process. In fact, we are waiting for someone to make an application. We cannot process a licence application until we receive one, and we are waiting for that.

National Crime Agency

9. **Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con):** What steps she is taking to tackle organised crime through the National Crime Agency. [904747]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): We have made significant progress in the fight against serious and organised crime since the National Crime Agency was established in 2013. Capabilities have improved, partnership working is better and we intervene earlier to prevent criminal activity. The agency has been instrumental to that progress and has gone from strength to strength, with an impressive and sustained track record of disruption across the full range of serious and organised crime threats.

Andrew Bridgen: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, contrary to recent media speculation, politicians from within the European Union can be subject to unexplained wealth orders, and that this will continue to be the case after we leave the European Union?

Mr Wallace: I am sure my hon. Friend will be delighted to learn that no one is above the law when it comes to unexplained wealth orders—whether a Member of the European Parliament, a European politician or even, indeed, a Member of this House.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Young people who have in effect been groomed into county lines are themselves victims of serious and organised crime, but so too are their families indirect victims. One thing that all the families affected by this issue in my constituency have in common is that they provide loving homes for their children, but they feel they have very little support from agencies in going through what must be a very traumatic process. What do Ministers plan to do not just to tackle the causes and symptoms of county lines and this kind of organised crime, but to provide adequate support to families who suffer enormous distress as a result?

Mr Wallace: I recommend that the hon. Gentleman looks at examples in other parts of the country of how county lines are dealt with using other agencies. I think his local authority is Ilford. Many local authorities and police forces work together on county lines in a pan-agency group, including social services and other local authorities. I saw one recently in Merseyside, which is doing exactly what he urges. If he thinks Ilford is not doing that, I would be very happy to meet him and the council to see what it can do to improve.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): A wave of organised crime burglaries is happening in the Wellingborough constituency. In one case, two 60-year-olds—a man and a woman—were taken into separate rooms and threatened with all sorts of things that would happen to their other half. This was in the early evening, and the burglars just smashed in the front door. Those people said to me, “What would happen if we’d defended ourselves? If we’d protected ourselves, would we have ended up in prison?” We need to look at that issue again.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point about self-defence and the rights of homeowners. He will obviously have seen the recent events—I cannot of course refer to that case because it is sub judice, or certainly an issue in hand—but there is clear guidance about this from the Ministry of Justice. It is important that people understand they have a right to self-defence, but they should sometimes be careful not to take the law into their own hands. If the organised criminals are well armed and dangerous, people should rely on the help of the blue light services.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for facilitating my further visit to the National Crime Agency this morning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) referred to the increasing threat posed by county lines. Will the £3.6 million allocated to the

new national co-ordinating centre come from elsewhere in the Home Office budget, and if the National Crime Agency needs additional resources, will they be provided?

Mr Wallace: In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s first question, that will be part of the overall funding package from the Home Office through either normal police transformation funding or existing National Crime Agency funding. However, county lines are developing more and more across the country, and that is why the Home Office—internally, with the National Crime Agency—has put together a strategy to look at what intelligence can be learned. If the lessons are that we require more resource or better inter-agency working, we will obviously reflect that in the serious and organised crime strategy that is due to come before the House soon.

Mr Speaker: We still have a lot to get through, and I am keen that we should do so.

Biometric Residence Permits

10. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What estimate she has made of the number of people born outside the EU who have leave to remain in the UK but do not have biometric residence permits. [904748]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Since August 2015, all non-EU nationals with a UK visa of more than six months have been issued with a UK biometric residence permit. We have no current estimate of the number of non-EU nationals born outside the UK who have leave to remain in the UK but have not obtained a biometric residence permit.

Jessica Morden: Constituents of mine from Commonwealth countries who have lived here on paper visas for many decades have now been refused universal credit because they do not have biometric residence permits, which they have never been told they need. This is causing real hardship—not least to those with no papers, with the immigration issues that that brings—and the BRP process is costly and lengthy. What are the Government going to do urgently to address this for those who have contributed so much to our country?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady’s view that they have contributed so much to this country. I am today announcing that I am setting up a new taskforce across the Department to ensure a swift response. I am also introducing a waiver for the fees involved and a number of other measures that I hope will go a long way to assisting the Commonwealth citizens who should have their rights confirmed without charge.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know there are people who came here 50 years ago who have now lost their jobs, lost their homes and lost their healthcare as a result of Home Office decisions. Now we discover that some of them have been locked up as a result of Home Office decisions and may even have been deported—wrongly—as a result of Home Office decisions. Can she tell us how many of the Windrush generation have wrongly been deported away from their family and friends, and what action is being taken now to urgently bring them back home?

Amber Rudd: I have agreed, and I have volunteered, to meet this week the high commissioners who would like to meet me, to find out whether there are any such people who have been removed. If they want to bring me situations such as that, I will certainly look at them.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware that one of her ministerial colleagues will apparently say tonight that some of these people were deported in error, so can she tell the House how many and how she plans to rectify the situation?

Amber Rudd: As I say, I will find out from the high commissioners whether there have been any situations where such people have been removed. I would respectfully remind the Labour party that the workplace checks were introduced by Labour in 2008. What is happening now is part of the pattern of making sure that people are here legally. I do not want any Commonwealth citizens who are here legally to be impacted in the way they have been. Frankly, some of how they have been treated has been wrong—has been appalling—and I am sorry. That is why I am setting up a new area in my Department to ensure that we have a completely new approach to how their situation is regularised.

Online Radicalisation

11. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps she is taking to safeguard vulnerable people from online radicalisation. [904749]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): This Government have been clear there should be no safe space online for terrorists and their supporters to radicalise or inspire people. We are working closely with industry, including through the Global Internet Forum, to counter terrorism and to encourage industry to develop innovative solutions to tackle online radicalisation.

Alex Burghart: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the world's leading internet companies need to do much more to take down violent and terrorist material online, and that if they do not, we should make them?

Mr Wallace: I do agree with my hon. Friend. It was the Home Office that took the initiative to set up the counter-terrorism internet referral unit, which has seen 300,000 pieces of terrorist propaganda taken down—voluntarily, but taken down none the less. It was the Home Office that worked with ASI Data Science to develop an automatic model, which has a 99.9% accuracy rate. If we can do it, why can those companies not?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I recently held a community meeting to contribute to Mayor Andy Burnham's consultation on community integration and preventing radical hate speech. One issue that came up was the extent of online hate speech against Islam coming from around the world, and particularly from the United States. Will the Minister say what discussions he is having internationally to ensure that this kind of derogatory and offensive material is taken down as quickly as possible?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady makes a really valid point. One of the challenges is that, while broadcast is obviously covered by Ofcom and so on, some individuals move online and broadcast speeches that would be illegal if they were broadcast under Ofcom's responsibility. I am due to visit the United States this week, and that is exactly one of the points that I shall be raising, so her question was very timely.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If a relative suspects that a vulnerable family member is being radicalised online, what advice would the Minister give that relative about what would happen to that vulnerable person if they were reported?

Mr Wallace: First of all, the relative could make a report to the police, the local authority, local safeguarding officers or safeguarding officers at school. That report would then be looked at in conjunction with a Prevent panel. People's names would not be logged; they would not be part of a deep surveillance operation. They would simply be looked at, and the case would be discussed at a multi-agency level. Over 30% of cases are referred to other safeguarding—it might be domestic abuse or sexual abuse—and about half see no further action taken. So it is all done delicately, with respect for the individual and respect for the community. At the end, we get a good outcome, whereby a significant number of people are given assistance and are no longer radicalised or a threat.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that, with the invention of the internet, radicalisation is now global and crosses international boundaries, so how is he working with our international partners? He will be aware that last week a Labour delegation visited Etidal in Riyadh, which has extraordinary technology to counteract online radicalisation.

Mr Wallace: In answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, and the question from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), there is no doubt that the only way to curtail such radicalisation is by working with all our international partners, whether in the middle east, Europe or the United States. We have to act together, which is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary sits on the Global Internet Forum to ensure that we push those countries together. The United Kingdom's lead has raised awareness and proved that solid solutions can be delivered.

Vulnerable Syrian Families

12. **Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What progress the Government have made in placing vulnerable Syrian families in the UK. [904750]

14. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What progress the Government have made in placing vulnerable Syrian families in the UK. [904753]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is important that we focus our support on the most vulnerable refugees in the region who are fleeing the atrocities in Syria, whatever their nationality. We are more than halfway towards reaching our commitment to resettle

20,000 refugees. As of December, 10,538 refugees had been welcomed in the UK under the scheme. We will continue to work closely with local authorities and devolved Administrations to ensure that we meet our commitments.

Mrs Trevelyan: Northumberland County Council is providing homes and resettlement family support for 28 Syrian adults and their 41 children, but we currently have no Syrian refugee children as we are short of foster carers to provide the necessary support. Does the Minister agree that we must encourage people who want to support those Syrian children to apply to be foster carers?

Caroline Nokes: I am very grateful to all the local authorities, including Northumberland County Council, that have participated in both the resettlement scheme and the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Northumberland County Council recently received funding through the controlling migration fund to boost its capacity to look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The Government are reviewing funding arrangements for local authorities that look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In last year's safeguarding strategy, the Government committed to further boosting fostering capacity, including by commissioning 1,000 training places for foster carers and support workers who are caring for unaccompanied children.

John Howell: Is my right hon. Friend continuing to work closely with local authorities? She mentioned a figure of 10,500, but how is she doing at meeting the 20,000 target within a couple of years?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of working collaboratively with local authorities. We also work hard with charities, housing associations and civic society to help refugees on the road to integration. During the recess, I was fortunate to visit World Jewish Relief, Coventry City Council and Horton Housing, among others, which are working with resettled families who are being helped into work as part of their integration. He is right to mention the 20,000 target and I am absolutely confident that we will reach it by 2020.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Families belong together, and vulnerable refugee families from Syria in particular belong together. Will the Minister use the opportunity of the current attention on Syria to commit the Government to standing by Members on both sides of the House who support the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)?

Mr Speaker: What wonderful pronunciation, upon which the House will want to congratulate the hon. Lady.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for that question; I am conscious of her keen interest in this subject. She will of course know that, since 2010, 24,000 family reunion visas have been issued, but I will look very carefully at the Bill from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), which

has received cross-party support. We will continue to look at what we can do to help the most vulnerable families from the region. They should, quite rightly, be our priority.

Police and Law Enforcement: Recruitment

13. James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What steps she is taking to recruit a broad range of people to the police and law enforcement agencies with the skills required to tackle modern crime. [904751]

17. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps she is taking to recruit a broad range of people to the police and law enforcement agencies with the skills required to tackle modern crime. [904756]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): As crime and society change, so must the police. That was why we established the College of Policing to raise standards and the quality of training, and why we funded innovative schemes such as Direct Entry and Police Now, which are bringing in fresh skills and talent.

James Cleverly: Will my right hon. Friend outline the specific measures that are being taken to recruit cyber and technical experts to crack down on the vile crimes taking place on the dark web?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that fundamental point, because more and more of our constituents are vulnerable to crime online—crime enabled by the internet—and it is absolutely vital that our police forces have the right skills to tackle crime. That is why, as part of our £1.9 billion cyber programme, we are investing in awareness programmes such as CyberFirst and creating the cyber digital career pathways project to ensure that officers have the skills that they need to face modern crime.

Alan Mak: Following the publication of the Government's race disparity audit, what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to build on the work that has already been done to make sure that our police reflect the society that we all live in?

Mr Hurd: The Home Secretary and I attach great importance to this because we have policing by consent, and it is incredibly important that our police forces represent better the communities that they serve. They are more representative than ever, but are nowhere near where they need to be, and that is why the college, the police chiefs and the superintendents are working together to develop a national diversity strategy, which is being presented to chiefs this week. We attach huge importance to the strategy's implementation so that our police forces can become increasingly representative of the communities they serve.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will we be members of Europol next April, or will we have to recruit to fill the skills that will be lost without our membership?

Mr Hurd: We have said clearly that we want to preserve the capabilities that we have worked hard over many years to develop with our European partners.

That is why we have proposed a comprehensive new security treaty, in the mutual interests of our European partners, who recognise—this relates to the right hon. Gentleman's point about Europol, and I think we are its second biggest contributor—that our continued active presence in that agency, along with the other tools that we have developed over many years, are absolutely critical to our security going forward.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, recently said that the police need to be better trained to tackle and prosecute upskirting, but police and crime commissioners have argued that a change in the law is needed. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the Justice Minister or with police and crime commissioners?

Mr Hurd: I think that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) colleague, who is responsible for crime and safeguarding, has agreed to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this important point further.

Prostitution

15. **Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Whether she is taking steps to reduce the demand for prostitution in the UK. [904754]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government's focus remains on protecting those selling sex from harm and enabling the police to target those who exploit vulnerable people involved in prostitution. We recognise the need for research on the nature and prevalence of prostitution before we consider any changes to legislation and policy. We have commissioned research by the University of Bristol to achieve this aim.

Laura Smith: Article 6 of the 1979 United Nations convention on gender equality and the empowerment of women positions prostitution as symbolic of women's continued discrimination and inequality. What is being done to address that and to prevent inequality and discrimination happening to women who find themselves in that vulnerable position?

Victoria Atkins: We are very clear that we want to tackle the harm and exploitation that may result from prostitution. We want a strong evidence base to inform any changes that may or may not be made in future, and that is why we have commissioned this research. However, we are clear about the harm from prostitution and that enabling people who want to leave it must be accommodated.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Many young girls are forced into selling their body as a result of being in coercive and controlling relationships. Prostitution is a form of violence against women and girls. What more can the Government do to protect victims from the harsh reality of this form of abuse?

Victoria Atkins: We are very clear that any such abuse is against the law. Indeed—this follows on from the previous question—we have awarded £650,000 to Merseyside police from the VAWG service transformation fund to provide services for sex workers who are the victims of, or at risk of, sexual and domestic violence and abuse,

exploitation or human trafficking. We have provided £389,000 to organisations that help those who want to leave prostitution and sex work.

Mr Speaker: We now come to topical questions, and it is a top of the league day for Lucy Powell.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Still champions, Mr Speaker.

Topical Questions

T1. [904764] **Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am deeply concerned about the recent experiences of people from the Windrush generation in terms of the appeal for their documentation and any confusion that has caused. This is a unique cohort of people who have automatic leave under our legislation and therefore are entitled to reside here lawfully. The vast majority will already have documentation that proves their right to be here. For those who do not, I am today announcing a new dedicated team to help them evidence their right to be in this country and access services.

The team will be tasked with helping applicants to demonstrate that they are entitled to live in the UK, and with resolving cases within two weeks of the evidence being provided. The team will work across Government to help applicants to prove they have been living or working in the UK. Of course, no one should be left out of pocket as they go through this process. Given the uniqueness of the situation in which the group find themselves, I therefore intend to ensure that they will not pay for this documentation.

We have already set up a webpage and dedicated contact point for people with concerns, and I have been engaging with charities, community groups and high commissioners to reassure people. The Prime Minister will meet Heads of Government tomorrow, and I will be meeting high commissioners later this week.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Home Secretary for that response and put on record my gratitude for the fantastic leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). However, is this not a case of too little, too late for many? Is not what has happened to the Windrush generation a broader reflection of the over-pernicious nature of the Home Office, which is going after the soft targets instead of those who are much more difficult to identify—those who are here illegally and should be deported?

Amber Rudd: There is no question of going after any soft targets or of our trying to single out a particular cohort—and, yes, we do go after the illegal cohort. It is because we do that that some of these people have been caught up in the process. As I referenced earlier, it was the Labour party that put in place the labour market tests in 2008, meaning that people had to evidence their right to work here, but because the Windrush cohort has been caught up in this, I am making that sure we put in place particular arrangements to support them.

T3. [904766] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I commend the Government for their work on—*[Interruption.]* It says here, “law enforcement with regard to the dark web”. What steps are the Government taking to best protect families and businesses from those who use the anonymity of online platforms for illegal activities?

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I think that my hon. Friend might have got lost in the dark web just then.

Our dark web programme is investing in specialist capability to disrupt and bring to justice those who use online anonymity to trade in illegal goods and services, including personal data. Much of the risk to families and businesses can be defeated by simple best practice. The Cyber Aware campaign encourages small businesses and individuals to adopt simple, secure online behaviours to protect themselves and their data from cyber-criminals.

T2. [904765] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know that hundreds of thousands of people have already signed petitions opposing giving the passport printing contract to a foreign company. Like me, they are concerned—indeed astonished—that while France, Germany Italy and Spain all back their own industry, she seems unwilling to back Britain. They also question whether British firms are actually competing on a level playing field. Even at this late stage, will she call in the decision and engage with De La Rue to preserve British jobs for British workers in the north? Will she also publish the data on which she made her decision?

Amber Rudd: This was a fair and open competitive process. It is right to have a tendering process that looks after taxpayers’ money and of course ensures that British companies can compete. I wish that a British company had won the contract, but the process has to be carried out fairly, on the basis of quality and cost, and on that basis we saved the country £120 million. I wonder how the right hon. Gentleman would choose to spend that; I know that we can put it to good use.

T4. [904767] **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Essex police, fire and crime commissioner, Roger Hirst, who has used precept powers to increase the number of frontline police officers in Essex by 150?

Amber Rudd: I welcome the action of my hon. Friend’s police and crime commissioner. PCCs have been given powers to raise additional funds, if they want to do so, to provide extra policemen and women on the frontline, and most are choosing to do that.

T5. [904768] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): More money is being raised by tax for more police, but every single police officer and constituent I speak to says it will not be enough, and that we will not have, and do not have, enough police on the streets of Bassetlaw. What does it say about Government priorities that nobody accepts what the Home Secretary is saying—that we have enough police?

Amber Rudd: I note that someone on the left-hand side of the Opposition Benches wants me to spend another £120 million while a Member on the right-hand side has asked me where more money is to come from.

We have made it very clear that we will run an efficient Government, particularly in respect of public procurement, to ensure that we have the funds to support our public services. As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is not just about police numbers. Last year I commissioned a new serious violence strategy, which has come up with new information and a new approach to stopping the sort of crime to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I hope that our new serious violence taskforce will be able to do that.

T6. [904769] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): For a number of years, businesses, shopkeepers and residents in The Stow, in Harlow, have been blighted by antisocial behaviour. We saw the tragic murder of a Polish man in 2016, and only last Saturday youths were spraying CS gas, forcing shops to shut. I welcome the extra police in Essex, but will my right hon. Friend have urgent talks with the police and crime commissioner in Harlow and do what she can to help us to deal with this antisocial behaviour?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): May I answer the question on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary?

I read about the incident in The Stow, which must have been extremely unsettling for my right hon. Friend’s constituents. He is tireless in acting on behalf of Harlow, and he was one of a number of Essex Members who lobbied me asking that the police and crime commissioner be allowed to increase the precept. That increase is enabling the commissioner to invest in providing 150 additional police officers across the county. I will of course join my right hon. Friend in speaking to the police and crime commissioner to reassure his constituents that the area is being policed.

T8. [904771] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Policing and uniformed police training are not devolved in Wales, so will the Minister ensure that Welsh police forces receive their full share of the apprenticeship levy for training? It is just not good enough to pass responsibility to the Welsh Government when the money involved does not even cover their Treasury spending cuts.

Mr Hurd: I share the hon. Lady’s concern about the training available to Welsh police officers. I have been very clear about the importance of ensuring that our police officers have the right skills, but there is currently an impasse, as Welsh police forces are paying tax to the Welsh Government and getting nothing in return. There is a difference of view on the issue, but we are trying to resolve it. A meeting is imminent, and I hope that we shall be able to make some progress then.

T7. [904770] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): We have all been shocked by the incidents of knife and gun crime in London, Manchester and other locations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that stop-and-search still has a role to play, especially when it is intelligence-led?

Mr Hurd: Yes, I strongly believe that the approach has a very important role to play. As I have said before, it is a vital tool, and we expect it to be used vigorously as part of a robust law enforcement approach to the terrible cycle of violence that we are seeing. We welcome the news that the Metropolitan police, for example,

has increased its use significantly in the most affected areas. However, as we have made clear for some time, it must be used legally, and be proportionately targeted and intelligence-led, and the use of body-worn video must increase. We must not go back to the old days when more than a million people a year were stopped and only 9% were arrested.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Two and a half weeks ago, I telephoned 999 after witnessing a prolonged and serious fight in a petrol station in Chesterfield. I have not been contacted by the police since then. Although I have been unable to establish this for certain, I believe that the incident was not recorded as a crime because none of the protagonists considered themselves to be victims of crime, although it was also reported by the people who run the petrol station. Is this part of a wider policy? Are the Government encouraging police forces not to record as crimes incidents that would clearly be seen as crimes? What guidance do the Government give police forces in such circumstances?

Mr Hurd: I understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration about that particular incident, and one hears similar anecdotes, but the Government's policy is, in fact, completely the reverse. We have pressed the police, with the help of the independent inspectorate, to get better at recording crime. Back in 2014, an independent inspection showed that only about 81% of reported crime was recorded. That has improved, and the improvement is feeding into increased pleaded recorded crime. The truth is therefore completely the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman has asserted.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Time is very much against us, but we must hear the voice of Shipley. Mr Philip Davies.

T9. [904772] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Can the Home Secretary tell us what has happened to the long-awaited and much-needed immigration Bill and when it might appear before the House?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We will, of course, be bringing forward a White Paper later this year and an immigration Bill as soon as possible after that.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): When will the Home Office fix the disastrous mess that is being caused by the tier 2 work visa cap being exceeded for four months on the trot? Is it not time to scrap the cap?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will know that we keep the tier 2 visa route constantly under review. We are looking very carefully at the issue that he raises.

T10. [904773] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): Can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents in Willenhall and Bloxwich that post Brexit we will continue to work closely with our friends in Europe on matters of security and counter-terrorism?

Amber Rudd: Yes, I can certainly give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We know the importance of working closely with our European Union friends on matters of

security. In conversations with my opposite numbers, I have received much reassurance from them that that is what they want as well.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you will remember that on 29 March, the Leader of the House said that we would have a debate in Parliament on the Government's serious violence strategy when it was published. It was published on 9 April, so my question is simple: when will we have that debate?

Amber Rudd: I will take that very good question to the Leader of the House. I would relish such a debate. I thank the hon. Lady for the leadership she has given in this area, and I hope to have more progress to report regarding the taskforce in due course.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The drug commonly known as Spice has as strong an impact on its users as any class A drug, yet its categorisation as class B means that its dealers receive much lesser sentences than others. Will the Minister commit to looking again at this drug's classification so that that reflects its impact more accurately?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend has long expressed concern about the impact of Spice, not least on Torquay town centre, and I have seen at first hand the terrible effect it has. I hope he welcomes the progress that we have made in relation to the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, and the fact that over 300 retailers across the UK have either been closed down or are no longer selling these substances. We are making arrests and a great deal of progress, and usage is falling. On changing the classification, I am sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that any decision has to be led and guided by advice from the advisory council, and its position at the moment is not to reclassify.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Charles Mukerjee has special educational needs. He and his family were recently detained in Yarl's Wood. In detention, his medication was taken away, and he had a number of seizures and stopped eating. A doctor who saw him there said that he was traumatised. Will the Home Secretary urgently look at this family's experience and see what changes need to be made to ensure that we treat all people who are detained humanely and in a dignified way, especially those with learning disabilities and mental ill health?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. The answer to her question is yes, I will, and I ask her to send me the information, which I will take a look at personally.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Home Secretary welcome the additional 200 police officers who are being recruited and deployed by Sussex police in her Hastings and Rye constituency and mine of Bexhill and Battle?

Amber Rudd: Yes, this is good news. The police and crime commissioner for Sussex, the excellent Katy Bourne, has told us that she will be recruiting 200 officers this year and 200 the following year. Kent has said the same, and I understand there will be another 1,000 officers in London.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Online radicalisation and cyber-crime are no respecters of boundaries, yet policing in Scotland is devolved. Will the Minister assure me that there will be maximum co-operation and co-ordination between Police Scotland and the UK police forces to stamp out these terrible and terrifying crimes?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and that is why at Gartcosh, just outside Glasgow, we have put together the National Crime Agency and Police Scotland to tackle, through cyber-crime units, that very problem. It is absolutely true that the best thing to do is to make sure we work in solid partnership, whether that involves the agency, local police or regional organised crime units.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of the ease with which users can remove unacceptable online content and how quickly that content is then taken down?

Mr Wallace: The biggest challenge in that space is often that when we make a referral to internet companies, the speed at which they take content down is not as rapid as it should be. We often identify it quickly. By working with a technology company, we have managed to produce a system that is 99.95% accurate. Let us see what the internet companies can do, but there is still more to be done.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Fear stalks many streets in Erdington with gang crime, gun crime, knife crime and attacks with machetes on the rise. The police are doing a magnificent job in very difficult circumstances, but does not the Policing Minister accept that cutting 2,000 police officers from West Midlands police, the hollowing out of neighbourhood policing and huge cuts to youth services are making it so much more difficult for them to keep the public safe?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have always recognised that our police system is stretched. That was why I personally led the demand review and why we took through the House a funding settlement that will see another £460 million going into our police system this year. That will mean that we are investing £1 billion more this year than we were two years ago. That is additional money for the west midlands that I would have hoped that he would support, but he voted against it.

Mr Speaker: Mr Clarke—get in there, man!

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Last week, there were some serious incidents of antisocial behaviour in Saltburn in my constituency. Will Ministers assure the public in Saltburn that they will work with me and the PCC to give the best advice on how to deal with youth gang violence, and will they commend the officers of Cleveland police for their response?

Amber Rudd: First, I am of course pleased to commend the officers for their response. I am sorry to hear about the example that my hon. Friend has given. I urge him to work with us in terms of looking at the serious violence strategy, because there is a lot of new work on, and new approaches to, how we handle gang violence, which is often the driver not just of serious violence but of antisocial behaviour.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Listening to colleagues is endlessly inspiring, and my appetite for doing so is usually insatiable, but we must now move on because we have other important business to address.

Windrush Children (Immigration Status)

3.41 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make an urgent statement on the status of Windrush children in this country.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I should like to thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for raising this question and for giving me the chance to build on what I have already told the House this afternoon. I recognise the concerns of some people in the Windrush generation, and I would not want anyone who has made their life in the UK to feel unwelcome or to be in any doubt of their right to remain here. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already made clear, there is absolutely no question about their right to remain, and I am very sorry for any confusion or anxiety felt.

While the vast majority of people who came here before 1973 will already have documentation that proves their right to be in the UK, I know that some do not. I know that there are those who have never applied for a passport in their own name or had their immigration status formalised. That is why today I am announcing that a new dedicated team will be set up to help those people to evidence their right to be here and to access the necessary services. The team will help the applicants to demonstrate that they are entitled to live in the UK, and it will be tasked with resolving cases within two weeks when the evidence has been provided.

Of course no one should be left out of pocket as they go through this process, so, given the uniqueness of the situation this group finds itself in, I intend to ensure that the group will not pay for this documentation. We have set up a webpage and we have been speaking to charities, community groups and high commissioners about providing advice and reassurance to those affected, and we will set up a dedicated contact point as well. Tomorrow, the Prime Minister will meet the Heads of Government, and I will be meeting high commissioners this week to discuss this issue as a matter of urgency. I hope that this will provide people with the reassurance that they need.

Mr Lammy: The relationship between this country and the West Indies and the Caribbean is inextricable. The first British ships arrived in the Caribbean in 1623, and despite slavery and colonisation, 25,000 Caribbeans served in the first and second world wars alongside British troops. When my parents and others of their generation arrived in this country under the British Nationality Act 1948, they arrived here as British citizens. It is inhumane and cruel for so many of that Windrush generation to have suffered for so long in this condition and for the Secretary of State to be making a statement on the issue only today.

Can the Secretary of State tell us how many people have been deported? She suggested earlier that she would ask the high commissioners, but it is her Department that has deported those people. She should know the number. Can she tell the House how many have been detained as prisoners in their own country? Can she tell us how many have been denied healthcare under the national health service, how many have been denied pensions and how many have lost their jobs? This is a

day of national shame, and it has come about because of a “hostile environment” and a policy that was begun under her Prime Minister. Let us call it as it is: if you lay down with dogs, you get fleas, and that is what has happened with the far right rhetoric in this country. Will the Secretary of State apologise properly? Will she explain how quickly the team will act to ensure that the thousands of British men and women who have been denied their rights in this country on her watch in the Home Office are satisfied?

Amber Rudd: I share the right hon. Gentleman’s admiration for the people who came here from the Caribbean and contributed so much to our society in many different ways, and that admiration remains in place. I am concerned that the Home Office has become too concerned with policy and strategy and sometimes loses sight of the individual. This is about individuals, and we have heard the individual stories, some of which have been terrible to hear. That is why I have acted. That is why I have put a clear limit on the amount of time it will take to correct the situation. That is why I am so committed to ensuring that there is no cost involved. That is why I am so committed to making sure that we can work across Departments. We hope to be able to get the necessary information ourselves in the same way that we are looking ahead to the EU settled status, when we will be able to engage with other Departments to look at national insurance numbers. We will share things and will take the responsibility for finding the evidence, so that we can get the documents for those who need them.

Finally, on one other point that the right hon. Gentleman raised, I am not aware of any specific cases of a person being removed in these circumstances. That is why I have asked the high commissioners if they know of any cases, and they should bring them to me. If anyone here knows of any such circumstances, they should bring them to the Home Office.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Home Secretary is right to have set up a special unit so that the necessary reassurance can be provided as soon as possible. With that in mind, will she tell the House what the minimum level of evidence that the new Home Office unit will accept is, so that people will be able to demonstrate quickly and easily that they are genuine Windrush-generation citizens of this country?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend, who has some experience in this area, will be aware that we cannot have a situation in which anybody can perhaps falsely declare anything—that would not assist the Windrush generation, whom we are trying to help. We are going to work with them in a cross-Government way, so if they come to us with their address and date of birth, we will start from that point and try to build a picture to evidence the circumstances and, within two weeks, get them the permits that they need to be able to access services.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): In the week of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, is the Home Secretary aware of how shameful it appears that we are treating the Windrush generation of Commonwealth citizens in this way? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said, they came here after the second world war to help rebuild this country, and they worked hard and paid

their taxes. There are few more patriotic groups of British citizens than the generation from the West Indies that we are talking about.

The Home Secretary mentioned her special team. Is she aware that hundreds of these people have been trying to get their situations sorted out with their lawyers, presenting what information they have? Months later, however, things have not been resolved. How much confidence can people have in the special team when people with lawyers have been unable to resolve their situations? Why does she not simply issue an instruction to her officials today that no one in such a position can be deported until the case is clarified? There must also be an apology to any who were wrongfully deported, and the Government must consider compensation.

Is the Home Secretary aware that in 2014 the Government removed the immigration protection that existed for the Commonwealth citizens who had come here previously? Theresa May was the then Home Secretary, and there was no parliamentary debate or scrutiny at the time. Theresa May could simply—

Mr Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* I do not need any advice from people chuntering from a sedentary position for their own satisfaction but to no wider benefit at all. The position is that Members should not refer to other Members by name—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Members who are wittering away from a sedentary position probably feel better for doing so, but it does not advance the interests of the House.

Ms Abbott: I apologise for naming the former Home Secretary in that way, but we are talking about a very serious matter. I believe the Home Secretary could now simply table a statutory instrument restoring the protections, which were removed without debate in 2014; there would be no objection from this side of the House.

Finally, this policy and this scandal did not fall from the sky. It is a product of the bent of Government policy: the “hostile environment” for migrants generally. We now hear warm words about the contribution of Commonwealth migrants who have given their lives to this country, but warm words are not enough. We have to establish the facts on the deportations; we have to make apologies where necessary; and as the Commonwealth Heads of Government are gathered in London, we have to acknowledge what a disgrace it is that this Government have treated Commonwealth migrants in this way.

Amber Rudd: Nobody disputes that the people who came here as part of the Windrush cohort are highly valued here and have the legal right to stay. In this week in which we celebrate the Commonwealth, I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to acknowledge the changes that we as a Government are making today to ensure that this cannot happen again and that the new processes in place will indeed reach out and protect all Commonwealth citizens who need additional help to get their documentation in place.

The right hon. Lady asks particularly about removals and detention, and I reassure her and the House that I have given an explicit instruction. In accordance with my wishes today, there will be no removals or detention as part of any assistance to help former Commonwealth citizens get their proper documentation in place.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome what the Home Secretary has set out today—I also welcome the detail given by the Minister for Immigration in her media interviews today—and the calm and measured tone in which she set it out.

Given that many people will not be aware that they are in this position until they run into difficulties, can the Home Secretary say any more about what steps the Government could take proactively to communicate what they are doing to some of those who might be affected, so that they are never actually put in this position in the first place and can have their status regularised?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is right. I really do want people who are in this position to realise that we have made the changes and have set up a system that will be easy to use and accommodating to them. There will be no charge for it, and I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to pass that on to their constituents, so that people have the confidence to approach us so the situation can be addressed. Of course, the Home Office will be doing its own media work to ensure that is the case.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this urgent question. The Scottish National party shares his outrage, on behalf of the Windrush generation, at how some of these now quite elderly people have been treated by the Home Office.

The Home Secretary is wrong. This is not just about individuals; it is about a systemic policy put out by her Department. It is symptomatic of the politically driven “hostile environment” policy, and it is a sign that that has to stop. I hope that, in what she has said this afternoon, there is a big chink of optimism that she will review this “hostile environment” policy.

On the Mall this morning, I saw all the flags out for the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference, but all the Government’s warm words about the Commonwealth will be seen as weasel words unless they take proper steps to address what is happening to these people, who are as much part of our country as the Home Secretary and myself.

I have heard what the Home Secretary has to say about the procedures she is putting in place, but the Migration Observatory at Oxford University says there are up to 50,000 Commonwealth-born people in this situation. What will she do to recognise the almost impossible nature of the task those people face in evidencing their right to be here, and will she give them access to legal advice to help them combat the Home Office’s often unfair procedures?

Amber Rudd: The hon. and learned Lady has raised a number of important points. I would just say that it is right we have a policy that distinguishes between legal and illegal migrants, and the Commonwealth group—the so-called Windrush cohort—are legal. That is why I have put in place these measures to protect them. That is a clear difference between them and other groups, where we have a compliant environment, to ensure that people who are here legally are looked after but people

[Amber Rudd]

who are here illegally should not be here and we have the information that we can collect to remove them lawfully and correctly.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend's assurance that the costs will be borne by the state will be most welcome; it is clear that this may have acted as a deterrent to some in the past when seeking to regularise their position. Will she make certain that it is made very clear, very publicly, that there is no need to hire an expensive lawyer to put this right—we can do it?

Amber Rudd: The important point for my hon. Friend is that the system I will now put in place will not require people to go to their lawyers. I hope that it will be sufficiently constructive, sympathetic and helpful that it will not require people who are seeking to regularise their position to have lawyers.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Office has been warned repeatedly about failings in its decision-making processes and weaknesses in the “hostile environment” operation. The Home Secretary's response to this problem now is far too passive: just a taskforce that relies on the Windrush generation raising their problems with her. That is not good enough. She should now be instituting a huge review, right across the Home Office, of all Windrush-generation cases, and not just suspending deportations and detention, but working urgently with the Department for Work and Pensions and the NHS to make sure that nobody from that generation loses their benefits, their homes or their healthcare, while this is being sorted out.

Amber Rudd: I respectfully say to the right hon. Lady, who usually has such careful knowledge in this area, that of course we do not have individual numbers for the Windrush generation, because they were not identified as such when they came here. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) referred to the assessment of 50,000, but we do not know whether that is the case, because, obviously, we do not have identification cards in this country; we do not know until people approach us. The point I am trying to convey here, which I hope will go out from this House, is that we will help anybody who would like to have their position regularised and there will be no cost to it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is intense interest in this matter, and that is to be expected. I am keen to accommodate it, as far as is possible, but I remind the House that there are important businesses to which we must proceed and therefore there is a premium on brevity from Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike. Put bluntly, if people ask long questions, they will do so knowing that they are preventing other colleagues from contributing, and that is not something they would want to do, I feel sure.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was sickened to read these stories and I am reassured by what my right hon. Friend has had to say today. However, will she ask her officials to review all cases where there is a possibility that people from the Windrush generation have been deported?

Amber Rudd: As I have said, I do not have any evidence to suggest that anybody has been removed in that way. Some people are talking as though this has taken place and it has been suggested in some media companies that it has, so I invite people who have any such evidence to bring it to the Home Office so that we can take a look.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): May I say to the Home Secretary that the way this trailblazing generation and their families have been treated in this year, the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush on our shores, is a complete and utter disgrace? So many are my constituents. She has talked about individual cases. A well-publicised one involves someone who has not been able to get access to cancer treatment that he needs from the NHS because of his immigration status. She has said that these cases will be processed quickly. Okay, that is welcome. She says her Department will help individuals in this situation to identify the evidence, but what happens if the evidence does not exist? On healthcare, will she commit to ensuring that indefinite leave to remain is granted—

Mr Speaker: We are immensely grateful. We have a lot to get through and it is very self-indulgent if people spend ages. I understand the importance, but colleagues have to do this pithily—it is as simple as that.

Amber Rudd: I completely understand the urgent need to get this issue addressed so that people can access the NHS when they need it. I am going to make sure that we do it in such a speedy manner that we will address people's particular needs. It should not interfere with their treatment. The fact is that hospitals are increasingly asking for evidence of residence; we will help people to get the evidence. The hon. Gentleman asked what will happen if there is none; there is always going to be evidence of people living in a country. My taskforce will make sure that we find that evidence so that we can get it to people.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We owe a debt of gratitude to the Windrush generation for coming to this country's aid. Will my right hon. Friend enable all MPs to access an appropriate means of communicating to the Home Office the cases that come to us, so that they are dealt with speedily and in a way that ensures that people are thanked for their service?

Amber Rudd: Yes; my hon. Friend makes a good point. I will ensure that everybody in the House has the details of the taskforce contact point and that we are able to communicate to everybody who has assisted this country—the people from the Windrush generation—our thanks and support.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assurances will the Home Secretary give to people who settled here from parts of the Commonwealth other than the West Indies, including the many in my constituency who came from Bangladesh and Pakistan? Will she commit to the suggestion made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) about a statutory instrument to restore the protections for people from Commonwealth countries?

Amber Rudd: Respectfully, I will have to come back to the hon. Lady on that point about a statutory instrument. My purpose today is to reassure this particular cohort and to make sure that we have in place the right systems so that we can act swiftly and efficiently, as they would expect.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's absolute clarity that the Windrush generation's right to remain here is unchallenged. As constituency MPs, we want to do all that we can to help them, so will she confirm that there will be an MPs' hotline, through which we can help our constituents who are most unable to help themselves?

Amber Rudd: Yes. I am of course aware that as leaders in their own areas, Members of Parliament will need to be able to access that hotline and to access all the information so that we can act fairly, efficiently and effectively for the Windrush generation, which is so valued in this country.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): A number of my constituents have been caught up in the Government's hostile environment policy, including Paul, who has been here for four decades. He was removed from his home and detained at one of the Croydon detention centres. Will the Home Secretary commit to introducing a statutory instrument that will reverse and restore the rights that the Windrush generation had secured?

Amber Rudd: Unfortunately, I cannot comment on individual cases in the Chamber, but if the hon. Lady would like to write to the Home Office or bring to me that particular case, I will make sure that it is looked at.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said, but urge her to consider whether, if applicants who ultimately prove successful have already incurred legal fees in trying to make their case, those fees could be compensated.

Amber Rudd: I am happy to take that away and come back to my hon. Friend on it. Going forward, it is my strong commitment to ensure that the system that we put in place will not require legal advice. It will be straightforward and effective to use. My team in the taskforce will work with individuals to deliver that.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I have previously written to the Home Secretary about my constituent, Bill Samuel, who as a six-year-old came to the UK with his grandmother from St Vincent back in the '60s. He has worked and paid taxes since 1973. He was told by the Home Office that he would have to pay £273 to apply for no-time-limit status; will the Home Secretary confirm that he will not have to pay that amount of money or to apply for no-time-limit status in order to apply for a British passport?

Amber Rudd: I can confirm that we are not going to charge for the no-time-limit status to which the hon. Gentleman refers. In respect of the individual journey to a passport, I am afraid that we will have to take that away and look at the individual case.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I commend the Home Secretary for her statement, but say to her that this is not only about the Windrush generation but about all those for whom, certainly in my experience as a Member of Parliament, her officials unfortunately have a default position of no. Does she agree that it is at moments such as this that Government and Opposition Members need to accept the need for a proper, open and honest debate about immigration? If we did that, we might come to the proper conclusion that not just the Windrush generation but generations of immigrants over centuries have contributed in a positive way to all aspects of life in our country.

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the value of immigration in this country. I share her views on our approach. I need to ensure that the Home Office is more focused on individuals than on policy, so that individuals do not receive the type of treatment that we have seen over the past few weeks, but instead have a Home Office that leans in and tries to assist them.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Home Secretary clarify definitively whether this new dedicated team helping the Windrush generation will be accessible to all Commonwealth citizens facing similar problems?

Amber Rudd: Yes, we will make sure that the team can assist others as well.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): On that note, I very much welcome the Government's assurances today that they will help these Commonwealth citizens. I particularly wish to cite the case of a constituent of mine from Uganda who came here after he was thrown out by Idi Amin. Will the new systems help him? He has lived in my constituency for 40 years and has had a heartrending experience with people wanting to throw him out.

Amber Rudd: I am sorry that my hon. Friend's constituent is having such a challenging time. I urge her to ask the Immigration Minister to take a look at his particular case.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Following her statement, could the Home Secretary clarify whether her Department is still expecting people to prove their rights while they have no recourse to public funds and no right to work? What is her message to those who may need legal advice, but cannot afford it?

Amber Rudd: It is my firm belief that the individuals who will be able to access this group in the Home Office will not need legal advice, because the process will be simple and one in which my team will try to assist. We will be able to use information across Government, so that we can help prove their national insurance number or their school records without calling on them to send in so much detail. It will be a shared responsibility, which I think will make a big difference.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her clear message today that the Windrush generation not only have the legal

[*Steve Double*]

right to stay, but are welcome here and we want them to stay, if that is their desire. Will she reassure us that her Department will provide every sensitive assistance possible to help the affected people produce the documentation that is required?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to reinforce that point. We value immigrants in this country, and we value the contribution that the Windrush community has made. I will ensure, going forward, that that value is conveyed to them.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Is the Home Secretary aware that there is real fear spreading through some of our diverse communities? One impact of that is that people who are entirely legitimately entitled to make use of public services are being deterred from doing so. Will she be speaking to other departmental heads in order to ensure that the message goes out, particularly in respect of the health service, that nobody should avoid accessing services because they are frightened of what the “hostile environment” will do?

Amber Rudd: Of course I do not want people who have health issues not to be able to contact the national health service. One of the saddest things in some of these stories is hearing about people not being able to do that. That is one reason why I feel so much urgency in addressing this matter, so that such a thing happens to fewer people.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement of a special taskforce. Will she confirm precisely how quickly cases will be processed and, crucially, when she envisages the backlog of cases will ultimately be dealt with, as people need this shadow removed from their lives?

Amber Rudd: The most important thing that we can convey from today’s statement is that the Home Office is going out of its way to ensure that we can reassure people that they will be able to get that information. I do not expect there to be a great rush of people who will want to apply, but whenever people need to do so, I will ensure that the process is done quickly, effectively and efficiently.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the sense of anticipation in the Chamber about subsequent business, but I gently point out that we are discussing the rights and the futures of residents of this country. This is an extremely serious matter and the issue, and the people speaking about it, should be treated with respect. It really should not be necessary for me to say that again.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Is not the key point in all this that the pernicious and “hostile environment” has an impact on everybody, whether they are here legally or otherwise? People can hardly get out of bed these days without somebody asking to see their passport. Is it not time to scrap the “hostile environment”?

Amber Rudd: I simply do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s interpretation. He is not correct to say that people have to show their passport at every step. It is important to make a clear distinction between people who are here legally and people who are here illegally. The point of today’s statement is that the people who came with the Windrush group are here legally, and we will look after them.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his work and leadership on this issue. Today’s decision will cost all people from the Windrush generation, including those who are my constituents, huge amounts of money in legal fees. Will the Home Secretary set up a unit within the Home Office to deal with the cases, and refer them back to Members of Parliament to deal with?

Amber Rudd: We are setting up a team of about 20 people who will be able to engage with the generation, who need to have their situation regularised. I hope that people will not need legal advice. Of course, if that is the case—the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point—I will take a look at whether we need to assist.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline what engagements she will have with charities and community groups to ensure that people do not need to go to expensive lawyers to find out about the procedures that she has outlined today?

Amber Rudd: I share my hon. Friend’s view about expensive lawyers. We have begun engagement with charities, non-governmental organisations and the high commissioners who have been in touch with us. I will ensure that we have thorough public engagement to ensure that people are aware of the process that we have set up, and that it will not cost them money.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I emphasise to the Home Secretary that some of the problems faced by the Windrush generation go well beyond people who came here from the Caribbean? For example, a constituent of mine was born in a Commonwealth country to Polish refugees from Nazism, has lived in this country since 1951 and has served in the Grenadier Guards, but he was turned down for a UK passport. Will people in his situation be subject to the fast-track procedure that the Home Secretary outlined today?

Amber Rudd: I would fully expect them to be subject to it. I find the hon. Gentleman’s statement very surprising and ask him to write to me about it. The default position of the team that I am setting up will be to get the information and to accept people. The only situation where people would not be accepted is on grounds of serious criminality.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I very much welcome the sentiment expressed by my right hon. Friend. Those affected may well approach local advice services, such as the citizens advice bureaux in our constituencies, seeking support. Will she undertake to disseminate comprehensive guidance to them as soon as possible?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful suggestion. Of course, I will engage with Citizens Advice to ensure that it has the information. I also urge Members of Parliament to tell their constituents about the positive arrangements that this Government have now put in place so that the people from that cohort can be looked after and can stop fearing for their situation.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I would be grateful if the Home Secretary would tell me how I should explain to the elders of the Afro-Caribbean community in my constituency why they are being expected to prove that they have a right to be in the country to which they have paid taxes and national insurance, and contributed so much—rather than the other way around, with the onus being on the Home Office to prove that they do not have such a right.

Amber Rudd: The dedicated team that I am setting up will work with individuals from the hon. Lady's community to ensure that we look for the information and that they engage with us in that. We cannot look in isolation, if people do not engage with us and do not give us the information that we need. We are going to work across Government to ensure that we try to get information such as national insurance numbers or schools. Will the hon. Lady please tell her community that the Home Office is here to help it?

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary tell me whether there was previously an exemption for leave to remain for Commonwealth citizens who arrived in the UK before 1973? Will she also confirm if and when this was removed from the legislation and, if so, when that was debated by Parliament?

Amber Rudd: I think that what the hon. Lady's constituents really want to know is whether they have a legal right to be here. The purpose of my standing here today is to confirm to them and to all Members here that they do have the legal right. We want them to take it up, if that is what they want. My unit in the Home Office will be leaning in to ensure that we make the process as simple and effective as possible.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): As the proud Member of Parliament for Coldharbour Lane in Brixton, where many Windrush passengers came to look for work and make their homes, I can tell the Home Secretary that it is entirely wrong for her to present this as a new problem that has suddenly arisen. It has been going on for years, and it is a consequence of Government policy which lacks any grace or compassion and which, in its intolerance, looks for any possible reason why people who have come here from overseas should not be allowed to stay. Will she now commit to looking at the systemic problems with UKVI and reform the immigration system so that people who have made their lives in this country and contributed so much can live with security and dignity in their old age?

Amber Rudd: That is exactly what I want this country to look like—the sort of country where the hon. Lady's constituents can have confidence here. I point out to her that it was of course Labour who, in 2008, introduced the labour market test so that people had to evidence their status, so this has not started entirely with us. But

if we want to live in a country where there is a difference between legal and illegal residence, then it is absolutely right to have a system that addresses that.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If the Secretary of State is saying that there is no way of checking whether someone has been wrongly deported, does that mean that it is the same for asylum seekers as well?

Amber Rudd: I only heard part of the hon. Gentleman's question, but I can tell him that I do not know of any cases where people have been removed. However, I have said to Members here, as I have said to the high commissioners, that if they know of any cases, they should bring them to us.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): My constituent Paulette Wilson came here from Jamaica in 1968 aged 10. She worked in the UK all her life, including here in Parliament. Last October, she was detained at Yarl's Wood and threatened with being deported. The Home Secretary says that she does not know the extent of this problem or the numbers, but surely a simple search by date of birth and origin would give her that data. Will she go away and have a look at that?

Amber Rudd: If the hon. Lady wants to write to me about a particular case, I will certainly look at it. I have put out an instruction today that there will be no detention or removals of anybody in this cohort who raises any questions, so I have removed that fear. But I am much more ambitious than that. I want to make sure that our new dedicated unit really addresses this and sorts out, to the satisfaction of everybody involved, the individual status of the people who have come here and contributed so much.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Home Secretary instruct the Home Office to be supportive to individuals who apply under this scheme rather than leaving already traumatised individuals having to meet very, very difficult requirements when they are already in such distress?

Amber Rudd: Yes. The default position will be to accept. The only real change to that will be if there is serious criminality. We will need to work with the individuals to ensure that the information is collected. I want to make sure that this works for the individuals. As I said earlier, this is about individuals whose lives have been upset and who need reassurance, and I want to make sure that they get it.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I offer Conservative Members who may not understand what it is like to work with the Home Office every single day the chance, if they would like, to come and work in my constituency office. As somebody who works with the Home Office every single day, can I ask how many people will be in this team and how long it will last for, because this is not a problem that is going to go away overnight?

Amber Rudd: I work with the Home Office every day, and I am aware of some of the challenges. The team will have 20 people in it, it will deliver what I have set out today, and we will see how long it is needed for. What I am interested in is outcomes—effective, sympathetic outcomes for the people who need it and who are so valued by this country.

Syria

4.19 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I come to the substance of my statement, I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in offering our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Sergeant Matt Tonroe from the 3rd Battalion the Parachute Regiment, who was killed by an improvised explosive device on 29 March. Sergeant Tonroe was embedded with US forces on a counter-Daesh operation. He served his country with great distinction, and it is clear he was a gifted and intelligent instructor who was respected by everyone he served with. Sergeant Tonroe fought to protect British values, our freedoms and to keep this country safe.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the actions that we have taken, together with our American and French allies, to degrade the Syrian regime's chemical weapons capabilities and to deter their future use.

On Saturday 7 April, up to 75 people, including young children, were killed in a horrific attack in Douma, with as many as 500 further casualties. All indications are that this was a chemical weapons attack. UK medical and scientific experts have analysed open-source reports, images and video footage from the incident and concluded that the victims were exposed to a toxic chemical. That is corroborated by first-hand accounts from NGOs and aid workers, while the World Health Organisation received reports that hundreds of patients arrived at Syrian health facilities on Saturday night with

"signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals".

Based on our assessment, we do not think that those reports could be falsified on that scale. Furthermore, the Syrian regime has reportedly been attempting to conceal the evidence by searching evacuees from Douma to ensure samples are not being smuggled from the area, and a wider operation to conceal the facts of the attack is under way, supported by the Russians.

The images of this suffering are utterly haunting: innocent families seeking shelter in underground bunkers found dead with foam in their mouths, burns to their eyes and their bodies surrounded by a chlorine-like odour, and children gasping for life as chemicals choked their lungs. The fact that such an atrocity can take place in our world today is a stain on our humanity, and we are clear about who is responsible.

A significant body of information, including intelligence, indicates that the Syrian regime is responsible for this latest attack. Open-source accounts state that barrel bombs were used to deliver the chemicals. Barrel bombs are usually delivered by helicopters. Multiple open-source reports and intelligence indicate that regime helicopters operated over Douma on the evening of 7 April, shortly before reports emerged in social media of a chemical attack, and that Syrian military officials co-ordinated what appears to be the use of chlorine weapons. No other group could have carried out this attack. The opposition do not operate helicopters or use barrel bombs. Daesh does not even have a presence in Douma.

The reports of this attack are consistent with previous regime attacks. Those include the attack on 21 August 2013, where over 800 people were killed and thousands more injured in a chemical attack also in Ghouta; 14 further smaller-scale chemical attacks reported prior

to that summer; three further chlorine attacks in 2014 and 2015, which the independent UN Security Council-mandated investigation attributed to the regime; and the attack at Khan Shaykhun on 4 April last year, where the Syrian regime used sarin against its people, killing around 100, with a further 500 casualties.

Based on the regime's persistent pattern of behaviour and the cumulative analysis of specific incidents, we judged it highly likely that the Syrian regime had continued to use chemical weapons on at least four occasions since the attack in Khan Shaykhun and we judged that it would have continued to do so, so we needed to intervene rapidly to alleviate further indiscriminate humanitarian suffering. We have explored every possible diplomatic channel to do so, but our efforts have been repeatedly thwarted.

Following the sarin attack in eastern Damascus back in August 2013, the Syrian regime committed to dismantle its chemical weapons programme, and Russia promised to ensure that Syria did that, overseen by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. At the weekend, the Leader of the Opposition cited that diplomatic agreement as a

"precedent that this process can work",

but this process did not work. It did not eradicate the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime, with the OPCW finding only last month that Syria's declaration of its former chemical weapons programme is incomplete. And, as I have already set out, it did not stop the Syrian regime carrying out the most abhorrent atrocities using these weapons.

Furthermore, on each occasion when we have seen every sign of chemical weapons being used, Russia has blocked any attempt to hold the perpetrators to account at the UN Security Council, with six such vetoes since the start of 2017. Just last week, Russia blocked a UN resolution that would have established an independent investigation able to determine responsibility for this latest attack. Regrettably, we had no choice but to conclude that diplomatic action on its own is not going to work. The Leader of the Opposition has said that he can

"only countenance involvement in Syria if there is UN authority behind it".

The House should be clear that that would mean a Russian veto on our foreign policy.

When the Cabinet met on Thursday, we considered the advice of the Attorney General. Based on this advice, we agreed that it was not just morally right but legally right to take military action, together with our closest allies, to alleviate further humanitarian suffering. This was not about intervening in a civil war and it was not about regime change: it was about a limited, targeted and effective strike that sought to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people by degrading the Syrian regime's chemical weapons capability and deterring their use.

We have published the legal basis for this action. It required three conditions to be met. First, there must be convincing evidence, generally accepted by the international community as a whole, of extreme humanitarian distress on a large scale, requiring immediate and urgent relief. Secondly, it must be objectively clear that there is no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved. Thirdly, the proposed use of force must be

necessary and proportionate to the aim of relief of humanitarian suffering, and must be strictly limited in time and in scope to this aim.

These are the same three criteria used as the legal justification for the UK's role in the NATO intervention in Kosovo. Our intervention in 1991 with the US and France, and in 1992 with the US, to create safe havens and enforce the no-fly zones in Iraq following the Gulf war were also justified on the basis of humanitarian intervention. So Governments of all colours have long considered that military action on an exceptional basis—where necessary and proportionate, and as a last resort to avert an overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe—is permissible under international law.

I have set out why we are convinced by the evidence and why there was no practicable alternative. Let me set out how this military response was also proportionate. This was a limited, targeted and effective strike that would significantly degrade Syrian chemical weapons capabilities and deter their future use, and with clear boundaries that expressly sought to avoid escalation and did everything possible to prevent civilian casualties.

As a result, the co-ordinated actions of the US, UK and France were successfully and specifically targeted at three sites. Contrary to what the Leader of the Opposition said at the weekend, these were not “empty buildings”. The first was the Barzeh branch of the Scientific Studies and Research Centre in northern Damascus. This was a centre for the research and development of Syria's chemical and biological programme. It was hit by 57 American TLAMs and 19 American JASSMs. The second site was the Him Shinsar chemical weapons bunkers, 15 miles west of the city of Homs, which contained both a chemical weapons equipment and storage facility and an important command post. These were successfully hit by seven French SCALP cruise missiles.

The third site was the Him Shinsar chemical weapons storage site and former missile base, which is now a military facility. This was assessed to be a location of Syrian sarin and precursor production equipment, whose destruction would degrade Syria's ability to deliver sarin in the future. This was hit by nine US TLAMs, five naval and two SCALP cruise missiles from France and eight Storm Shadow missiles launched by our four RAF Tornado GR4s. Very careful scientific analysis was used to determine where best to target these missiles to maximise the destruction of stockpiled chemicals and to minimise any risks to the surrounding area. The facility that we targeted is located some distance from any known population centres, reducing yet further any such risk of civilian casualties.

While targeted and limited, these strikes by the US, UK and France were significantly larger than the US action a year ago after the attack at Khan Shaykhun, and specifically designed to have a greater impact on the regime's capability and willingness to use chemical weapons. We also minimised the chances of wider escalation through our carefully targeted approach, and the House will note that Russia has not reported any losses of personnel or equipment as a result of the strikes. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to all the British servicemen and women, and their American and French allies, who successfully carried out this mission with such courage and professionalism.

Let me deal specifically with three important questions. First, why did we not wait for the investigation from the OPCW? UNSC-mandated inspectors have investigated previous attacks and, on four occasions, decided that the regime was indeed responsible. We are confident in our own assessment that the Syrian regime was highly likely responsible for this attack and that its persistent pattern of behaviour meant that it was highly likely to continue using chemical weapons. Furthermore, there were clearly attempts to block any proper investigation, as we saw with the Russian veto at the UN earlier in the week.

And let me set this out in detail: we support strongly the work of the OPCW fact-finding mission that is currently in Damascus, but that mission is only able to make an assessment of whether chemical weapons were used. Even if the OPCW team is able to visit Douma to gather information to make that assessment—and it is currently being prevented from doing so by the regime and the Russians—it cannot attribute responsibility. This is because Russia vetoed, in November 2017, an extension of the joint investigatory mechanism set up to do this, and last week, in the wake of the Douma attack, it again vetoed a new UNSC resolution to re-establish such a mechanism. Even if we had the OPCW's findings and a mechanism to attribute, for as long as Russia continued to veto the UN Security Council would still not be able to act. So we cannot wait to alleviate further humanitarian suffering caused by chemical weapons attacks.

Secondly, were we not just following orders from America? Let me be absolutely clear: we have acted because it is in our national interest to do so. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] It is in our national interest to prevent the further use of chemical weapons in Syria and to uphold and defend the global consensus that these weapons should not be used, for we cannot allow the use of chemical weapons to become normalised—within Syria, on the streets of the UK or elsewhere.

So we have not done this because President Trump asked us to; we have done it because we believed it was the right thing to do. And we are not alone. There is broad-based international support for the action we have taken. NATO has issued a statement setting out its support, as have the Gulf Co-operation Council and a number of countries in the region. Over the weekend I have spoken to a range of world leaders, including Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Gentiloni, Prime Minister Trudeau, Prime Minister Turnbull and European Union Council President Donald Tusk. All have expressed their support for the actions that Britain, France and America have taken.

Thirdly, why did we not recall Parliament? The speed with which we acted was essential in co-operating with our partners to alleviate further humanitarian suffering and to maintain the vital security of our operations. This was a limited, targeted strike on a legal basis that has been used before. And it was a decision that required the evaluation of intelligence and information, much of which was of a nature that could not be shared with Parliament. We have always been clear that the Government have the right to act quickly in the national interest. I am absolutely clear, Mr Speaker, that it is Parliament's responsibility to hold me to account for such decisions, and Parliament will do so. But it is my responsibility as Prime Minister to make these decisions—and I will make them. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

[*The Prime Minister*]

As I have been clear, this military action was not about intervening in the civil war in Syria or about regime change, but we are determined to do our utmost to help resolve the conflict in Syria. That means concluding the fight against Daesh, which still holds pockets of territory in Syria. It means working to enable humanitarian access and continuing our efforts at the forefront of global response, where the UK has already committed almost £2.5 billion—our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

Next week, we will attend the second Brussels conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region, which will focus on humanitarian support, bolstering the UN-led political process in Geneva and ensuring continued international support to refugees and host countries, driving forward the legacy of our own London conference held in 2016. And it means supporting international efforts to reinvigorate the process to deliver a political solution, for this is the best long-term hope for the Syrian people. The UK will do all of these things. But as I have also been clear, that is not what these military strikes were about.

As I have set out, the military action we have taken this weekend was specifically focused on degrading the Syrian regime's chemical weapons capability and deterring their future use. In order to achieve this, there must also be a wider diplomatic effort, including the full range of political and economic levers, to strengthen the global norms prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, which have stood for nearly a century. So we will continue to work with our international partners on tough economic action against those involved with the production or dissemination of chemical weapons.

I welcome the conclusions of today's European Foreign Affairs Council, attended by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, which confirmed that the Council is willing to consider further restrictive measures on those involved in the development and use of chemical weapons in Syria. We will continue to push for the re-establishment of an international investigative mechanism that can attribute responsibility for chemical weapons use in Syria. We will advance with our French allies the new International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, which will meet in the coming weeks. We will continue to strengthen the international coalition we have built since the attack on Salisbury.

Last Thursday's report from the OPCW has confirmed our findings that it was indeed a Novichok in Salisbury. I have placed a copy of that report's executive summary in the House of Commons Library. While of a much lower order of magnitude, the use of a nerve agent on the streets of Salisbury is part of a pattern of disregard for the global norms that prohibit the use of chemical weapons. So while the action was taken to alleviate humanitarian suffering in Syria by degrading the regime's chemical weapons capability and deterring its use of these weapons, it will also send a clear message to anyone who believes they can use chemical weapons with impunity. We cannot go back to a world where the use of chemical weapons becomes normalised.

I am deeply conscious of the gravity of these decisions. They affect all Members of this House and me personally. I understand the questions that, rightly, will be asked about British military action, particularly in such a complex region,

but I am clear that the way we protect our national interest is to stand up for the global rules and standards that keep us safe. That is what we have done and what we will continue to do. I commend this statement to the House.

4.36 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I want to start by thanking the Prime Minister for our phone conversation in advance of the bombing raids on Friday night and for the advance copy of her statement today. I also join her in paying tribute to Sergeant Matt Tonroe, the SAS sniper from Manchester who was killed on 28 March with US forces in northern Syria, and Master Sergeant Jonathan Dunbar from Texas, who was killed in the same attack.

I welcome the fact that all British military personnel involved have returned home safely from this mission. The attack in Douma was an horrific attack on civilians using chemical weapons—part of a civil war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people.

This statement serves as a reminder that the Prime Minister is accountable to this Parliament, not to the whims of the US President. We clearly need a war powers Act in this country to transform a now broken convention into a legal obligation. Her predecessor came to this House to seek authority for military action in Libya, and in Syria in 2015, and the House had a vote on Iraq in 2003. There is no more serious issue than the life-and-death matters of military action. It is right that Parliament has the power to support or stop the Government taking planned military action. The BBC reports that the Prime Minister argued for the bombing to be brought forward to avoid parliamentary scrutiny. Will she today confirm or deny those reports?

I believe the action was legally questionable. On Saturday—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I urge Members to calm down. In my experience, some Members who shout from a sedentary position also entertain the fanciful idea that they might be called to ask a question. I wish to disabuse them of that idea. The Prime Minister was heard in an atmosphere of respectful quiet. That will happen for the Leader of the Opposition as well: no ifs, no buts, no sneers, no exceptions. That is the position.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I believe that the action was legally questionable, and on Saturday, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, said as much, reiterating that all countries must act in line with the United Nations charter, which states that action must be in self-defence or be authorised by the United Nations Security Council. The Prime Minister has assured us that the Attorney General had given clear legal advice approving the action. I hope the Prime Minister will now publish this advice in full today.

The summary note references the disputed humanitarian intervention doctrine, but even against this, the Government fail their own tests. The overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe due to the civil war in Syria is absolutely indisputable, but the Foreign Secretary said yesterday that these strikes would have no bearing on the civil war. The Prime Minister has reiterated that today by saying that this is not what these military strikes were about.

Does, for example, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen entitle other countries to arrogate to themselves the right to bomb Saudi airfields or its positions in Yemen, especially given its use of banned cluster bombs and white phosphorus? Three United Nations agencies said in January that Yemen was the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, so will the Prime Minister today commit to ending support to the Saudi bombing campaign and arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

On the mission itself, what assessment have the Government made of the impact of bombing related military facilities, where the regime is assessed as storing chemical weapons? What about the impact on local people of chemicals being released into the local environment? News footage shows both journalists and local people in the rubble without any protective clothing. Why does the Prime Minister believe that these missile strikes will deter future chemical attacks?

As the Prime Minister will be aware, there were US strikes in 2017 in the wake of the use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun, for which the UN OPCW team held the Assad regime to be responsible. In relation to the air strikes against the Barzeh and Him Shinsar facilities, the Prime Minister will be aware that the OPCW carried out inspections on both those facilities in 2017 and concluded that

“the inspection team did not observe any activities inconsistent with obligations”

under the chemical weapons convention. Can the Prime Minister advise the House whether she believes that the OPCW was wrong in that assessment, or does she have separate intelligence that the nature of those activities has changed within the last five months? In the light of the Chilcot inquiry, does she agree with a key recommendation about the importance of strengthening the checks and assessments on intelligence information when it is used to make the case for Government policies? Given that neither the UN nor the OPCW has yet investigated the Douma attack, it is clear that diplomatic and non-military means have not been fully exhausted.

While much suspicion rightly points to the Assad Government, chemical weapons have been used by other groups in the conflict—for example, Jaish al-Islam, which was reported to have used gas in Aleppo in 2016, among other groups. It is now vital that the OPCW inspectors, who arrived in Damascus on Saturday, are allowed to do their work and publish their report on their findings, and report to the United Nations Security Council. They must be allowed to complete their inspections without hindrance, and I hope the UK will put all diplomatic pressure on Russia and Syria, and other influential states, to ensure that they are able to access the site in Douma.

There is a bigger question. More than 400,000 Syrians are estimated to have died in the Syrian conflict—the vast majority as a result of conventional weapons, as the Prime Minister indicated—and the UN estimates that 13.5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance and that there are more than 5 million refugees. It is more important than ever that we take concrete steps to halt and finally end the suffering. Acting through the UN, she should now take a diplomatic lead to negotiate a pause in this abhorrent conflict. This means engaging with all parties involved, including Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US, to ensure an immediate ceasefire.

We have the grotesque spectacle of a wider geopolitical battle being waged by proxy, with the Syrian people being used as pawns by all sides. Our first priority must be the safety and security of the Syrian people, which is best served by de-escalating this conflict so that aid can get in. Will the Prime Minister now embark, therefore, as I hope she will, on a renewed diplomatic effort to try to bring an end to this conflict, as she indicated she would in the latter part of her statement? She stated that diplomatic processes did not work. This is not exactly true. The initiative negotiated by John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov led to the destruction of 600 tonnes of chemical weapons, overseen by the OPCW. No one disputes that such diplomatic processes are difficult and imperfect, but that should not stop us continuing diplomatic efforts.

The refugee crisis places a responsibility on all countries. Hundreds of unaccompanied children remain in Europe, but the UK has yet to take in even the small numbers it was committed to through the Dubs amendment. I hope that today the Government will increase their commitment to take additional Syrian refugees. Will the Prime Minister make that commitment today?

The Prime Minister: I will start by responding to the Leader of the Opposition's comments on the Syrian conflict more generally. I think that everybody in the House recognises the nature of the conflict and the impact it has had on the Syrian people, including on the millions of people displaced either within Syria or to countries in the surrounding region. As I said in my statement, the UK, having given almost £2.5 billion, is now the second biggest bilateral donor for Syrian refugees in the region. We have been clear that we believe we can help more people by giving aid in the region, and we have been able to support hundreds of thousands of children in the region through the aid we have given to them. We will continue to provide that support, and we continue to be grateful for all that is being done, particularly by Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, to support refugees in the region. It is a significant task for those countries, and we are supporting them in their effort.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me to launch a new diplomatic effort. As I said in my statement, we will indeed be continuing the work in relation to the wider issue of the conflict in Syria. As I said, that means continuing and concluding the fight against Daesh; it means our humanitarian work, as I have said, and continuing to press for humanitarian access; and it means supporting the international efforts to reinvigorate the process to deliver a long-term political solution in Syria. It is necessary for all parties, however, to be willing to come together to discuss and develop that long-term solution.

I come now to the strikes at the weekend and the issue of chemical weapons. The right hon. Gentleman asked about the legal basis. We have published the legal basis for our action, and I have been very clear—I went through the arguments in my statement—that this is about the alleviation of humanitarian suffering. That is a legal basis that has been used by Governments of all colours. As I said, it was used in 1991 and 1992. It was also used by the Labour Government to justify intervention in Kosovo as part of the NATO intervention.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to other areas of conflict in the world. Let me say to him that what sets this apart particularly is the use of chemical weapons.

[*The Prime Minister*]

This is about alleviating the suffering that would come from the use of such weapons, but I believe it is also important, and in this country's interest and the interests of other countries around the world, for us to re-establish the international norm that the use of chemical weapons is prohibited. We cannot allow a situation to develop in which countries and people think that their use has been allowed to become normalised. That is important for us all.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and about its investigation in Douma. As I said in my statement, the problem is that the investigation is being stopped. The regime and the Russians are preventing the OPCW from investigating. Moreover, again, the regime has reportedly been attempting to conceal the evidence by searching evacuees from Douma to ensure that they are not taking out of the region samples that could be tested elsewhere, and a wider operation to conceal the facts of the attack is under way, supported by the Russians.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the possibility of chemical weapons being used by other groups. As I pointed out in my statement, it is understood that these chemical weapons were delivered by barrel bombs, which are normally dropped from helicopters. There is the evidence that I cited in relation to regime helicopter activity in Douma on the date in question, and it is not the case that the groups to which the right hon. Gentleman referred have access to the helicopters and barrel bombs that would be able to deliver such a chemical weapons attack.

I think that that is clear, and it was on that basis that the Government decided to act, together with the United States and France. I think it important that this was a joint international effort. The strikes were carefully targeted, and proper analysis was carried out to ensure that they were targeted at sites that were relevant to the chemical weapons capability of the regime. We did this to alleviate further human suffering. We targeted the strikes at the chemical weapons capability of the regime to degrade and deter its willingness to use chemical weapons in future, and I continue to believe that it was the right thing to do.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I fully support the proportionate, targeted action that we have taken against these sites, and I hope that the Government will consider similar action in future if anyone is so foolish as to repeat chemical weapons attacks. We can all debate these matters, but it takes a real Prime Minister to actually face up to the grave responsibility.

As for the question of the parliamentary role, I think that the Prime Minister was not relying on the archaic narrow interpretation of the royal prerogative, which no Government have invoked in this country for more than 50 years. Governments will always come to Parliament for debate, and votes if possible, on any military action. The Prime Minister said that there was a problem of time, but surely once President Trump had announced to the world what he was proposing, a widespread debate was taking place everywhere—including among many Members of Parliament in the media. However, there was no debate in Parliament.

Would the Prime Minister consider establishing, once the immediate issues are over, a cross-party commission of some kind to set out precisely what the role of Parliament is in modern times in the use of military power against another state, and what exceptions, if any, there can be to the usual rule that the Government need parliamentary approval before taking grave actions of this kind?

The Prime Minister: Let me first thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his comments about the action that was taken in Syria by the United States, the United Kingdom and France. He referred to the parliamentary position. The decision to act was made on this basis: first of all, obviously, an effort was made in the United Nations Security Council to propose and pass a resolution that would have enabled investigation and enabled accountability for the chemical weapons to be determined. That was vetoed by the Russians, so it was not possible to follow that diplomatic route, but the timing enabled proper planning to take place so that this was a targeted and effective set of strikes, it was done in a timely fashion and it maintained the operational security of our armed forces. Any Prime Minister who commits any of our armed forces into action of this sort must have a care for their safety and security in doing so.

I also refer my right hon. and learned Friend to the written ministerial statement in 2016 on the war powers convention, which concluded:

"After careful consideration, the Government has decided that it will not be codifying the convention in law or by resolution of the House in order to retain the ability of this and future Governments and the armed forces to protect the security and interests of the UK in circumstances that we cannot predict, and to avoid such decisions becoming subject to legal action.

We will continue to ensure that Parliament is kept informed of significant major operations and deployments of the Armed Forces."—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 11WS.]

That is what I have done today: I have come to Parliament with a statement on the action that took place. As I said in my statement, Parliament will hold me to account for the decision that has been taken.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks on the sad demise of Sergeant Matt Tonroe and pass on condolences to his family and friends? May I also thank the Prime Minister for the phone call ahead of the engagement at the weekend, as well as for advance sight of her statement today?

All of us in this House have an absolute revulsion for the use of chemical weapons, and we need to work here and internationally to make sure that we remove the scourge of chemical weapons from the landscape in Syria and elsewhere.

The Government now seem to have accepted that this House needed time to debate Syria, but why have we had to wait for today? When the Prime Minister called a Cabinet meeting last week, she should have recalled Parliament. The Prime Minister leads a minority Government. As was the case with the action against Daesh in 2015, this should only have happened with parliamentary approval. It was perfectly possible for the House to have been recalled in advance of the Saturday morning airstrikes. Why was that not done? And what does this mean for the Prime Minister's position if there are further chemical

attacks in Syria? Will she continue to authorise military action without consulting and without the authorisation of Parliament?

I am glad to hear the Leader of the Opposition support our calls for a war powers Act, because that is the best way to protect us from getting into this situation again. Have the Government learned nothing from the Chilcot review? Once again we have been dragged into military action with little regard for the humanitarian situation on the ground and no long-term strategic plan. The human suffering in Syria knows no bounds: hundreds of thousands dead; millions fleeing for their lives and 400,000 civilians still trapped in appalling conditions, deprived of food, medicine and basic aid; and over 13 million civilians in desperate need of humanitarian aid. Will the Prime Minister revisit the issue of refugees, particularly child refugees? We must do more than we have been doing.

Why was action taken before international weapons inspectors completed their investigation? In February the Prime Minister told me in this House that she was committed to

“finding a political solution for Syria.”—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 153.]

Why, then, did the UK not support Sweden’s draft UN resolution calling for an international investigation into chemical stockpiles reportedly held by the Syrian regime?

Is the Prime Minister as surprised and concerned as I am at the US President’s language that the situation in Syria was “mission accomplished”? Who does she agree with, the US President or the UN Secretary-General, who like most of us is clear:

“There is no military solution to the crisis. The solution must be political”?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has raised a number of issues.

I recognise that the issue of refugees, particularly child refugees, has been of concern to Members across this House for some time, and has been raised in this Chamber on a number of occasions. We took the decision that we could help and support more children and more refugees in general—men and women, as well as children—by acting in the region, and, as I have said, we have become the second biggest bilateral donor to the region. But we also took the decision that there were a number of refugees who were particularly vulnerable and who perhaps required particular medical support, and that it was right to bring them to the United Kingdom under our commitment to the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which we have been putting in place and continue to put in place. We are operating a number of other schemes to bring refugees—children in particular—here to the United Kingdom, but we continue to ensure that we are supporting the greatest possible number of refugees by acting in region, and that continues to be what we should be doing.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the issue of Parliament. I am sure he would recognise that it is always necessary for the Government to be able to act when decisions need to be taken, but to ensure that if a decision is taken that has not been discussed by Parliament, an opportunity for Parliament to discuss it and ask questions on it should be given at the first opportunity.

That is exactly what we have done in this particular circumstance. We have also been as open as possible in terms of publishing the legal basis on which we have taken this decision, making information available to a number of parliamentarians on a Privy Council basis, and trying to ensure that we provide the maximum possible briefing, commensurate with the fact that some of the intelligence on which we are operating cannot be shared with Parliament. We will be as open as possible with this Parliament and, as I have said, I will continue to answer questions from this Parliament on this issue.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Given my right hon. Friend’s narrow target of stopping the Syrians using chemical weapons further and given the need to take swift action, I commend her for taking that action, notwithstanding the fact that others have criticised her for not coming to Parliament. Coming to Parliament is a must, and the Prime Minister has done that today and will do it later on as well. I also want to raise the issue that the Russians and the Syrians are blocking the OPCW from going into the target area, and I understand that a lot of clean-up and change is happening while that block is in place. I therefore have a simple question for my right hon. Friend: given the confusion among some about who is the greatest threat to world peace, does she think it is Russia or America?

The Prime Minister: I think that people are seeing the actions that Russia has taken in support of the Syrian regime. As my right hon. Friend has pointed out, efforts are being made in Syria to ensure that it is not possible for OPCW inspectors to go in to ascertain the truth about what happened in Douma. We took a decision, and we made an assessment, together with our allies. The three parties that took part in the strikes agreed that all the evidence we had seen—from open-source reporting, and from the reporting of non-governmental organisations and the World Health Organisation—suggested that this was a chemical weapons attack. As I have indicated, a number of pieces of information and intelligence showed that it was highly likely that that was undertaken by the Syrian regime.

My right hon. Friend is right that more could have been done by the OPCW if Russia had not vetoed the resolution in the United Nations Security Council, and it would be possible to make greater efforts on the ground now to establish what happened in Douma if Russia and the regime were not blocking the opportunity for the OPCW to go to the site and if efforts were not being made by the regime to ensure that material from the site was not available for analysis. It is quite clear that every effort is being made. As I pointed out in my response to the comments made by the Leader of the Opposition, it is perfectly clear that Russia is preventing, stopping and blocking our opportunities to ensure that we can properly hold to account those responsible for chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I also regret the fact that the Prime Minister did not seek the prior approval of Parliament, especially as at least some of her arguments are compelling. Further to a question from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) that the Prime Minister did not answer, if the Syrian regime is now foolish enough to use its residual stocks to attack other holdouts, such as Idlib,

[*Sir Vince Cable*]

does the Prime Minister intend to order fresh strikes, or was this, in the words of President Trump, a one-off operation and “mission accomplished”?

The Prime Minister: This was a limited, targeted set of strikes by the United Kingdom, the United States and France. The targets were carefully chosen, and the intention was to degrade the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons capability and to deter its willingness to use those weapons. Nobody should be in any doubt about our resolve to ensure that we do not see a situation in which the use of chemical weapons is normalised.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that the public well understand that when our forces need to act quickly, decisively and safely, in concert with our allies, it must be right to authorise strikes without giving notice? Is it not also clear that if the use of chemical weapons goes completely unchallenged, dictators in other countries will use these awful weapons to suppress opposition?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comment. In fact, the 2016 written ministerial statement from which I quoted earlier was made in my right hon. Friend’s name. It states:

“In observing the convention, we must ensure that the ability of our armed forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised.”

It is important that we are able to do that, and I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): This was clearly a vile attack by Assad on his own people, and we have a responsibility to consider how to respond while also not escalating global conflict. However, Parliament has considered these kinds of complex issues before. We have voted for and against military action. We have got things right and got things wrong, and so too have the Executive. The Prime Minister and her Cabinet appear today not just to be arguing about the circumstances of last week, but to be rejecting the entire principle of consulting, debating and voting in Parliament in advance of military action. Given the importance of us pioneering democratic values across the world, will she clarify her position on that and say how important she thinks it is for Parliament to decide on issues of war and peace?

The Prime Minister: It is not a question of the Government rejecting that principle. If I can return again to the written ministerial statement, it observes:

“The Cabinet Manual states, ‘In 2011, the Government acknowledged that a Convention had developed in Parliament that before troops were committed the House of Commons should have an opportunity to debate the matter and said that it proposed to observe that Convention except where there was an emergency and such action would not be appropriate.’”

It subsequently goes on to make other references and, as I just said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), states:

“In observing the convention, we must ensure that the ability of our armed forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised.”—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 10WS.]

When the Government take a decision and act without a debate in Parliament, as has happened on this occasion, it is right that I come to Parliament at the first opportunity to explain that decision and to give Members an opportunity to question it, and to hold me and the Government to account.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I can only imagine the burden on the Prime Minister’s shoulders as she took this onerous decision. From the other side, I can say that when such orders are received, they are about the most sobering thing that one can ever get. I congratulate her on taking action that I believe to be not only legitimate, but right and, indeed, urgent. I also congratulate her, her colleagues and our international partners on standing together on this matter. However, will she reinforce the efforts of the Foreign Office? Few have been shouldering the burden as heavily as Karen Pierce at the United Nations, although others in our diplomatic network have done so. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Foreign Office’s role is to promote the aims and interests of our Government and our people whom we are here to represent, not to wait for a veto and the news that Moscow says no?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it must be the UK Government who determine UK foreign policy. We must not hand over our foreign policy to a Russian veto. It is absolutely essential that we determine our foreign policy; the Foreign Office, of course, is a key part of delivering that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): There are many who support the principle of humanitarian protection and what it achieved in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, and who recognise what its absence cost in Rwanda and, indeed, Syria. Of course we must uphold the international prohibition on the use of chemical weapons but, as someone who supported military action against Daesh in Syria in the vote in December 2015, I say gently to the Prime Minister that she should have come first to the House before committing our forces to action. Therefore, may I ask her to give us an assurance that in the event—heaven forbid—that President Assad chooses to use chemical weapons against innocent civilians once again, she will come to Parliament first, she will share such evidence as she can with us, as she has done today, and she will trust Parliament to decide what is to be done?

The Prime Minister: I set out in my statement the basis on which we took this decision. I recognise the importance and significance of Parliament and of Parliament being able to make its views known on these issues, but it is also important that the Government are able to act. There will always be circumstances in which it is important for the Government to be able to act and, for the operational security of our armed forces, to be able to do so without a debate having taken place in Parliament. There will be circumstances where that is the case, and the Government have consistently set that out. If those are the circumstances, as I have said, it is right that the Prime Minister comes to Parliament at the earliest opportunity.

In relation to potential future action, as I said in response to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), this was a targeted attack. It was

targeted at degrading the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. We now look, alongside that, to undertake international work through diplomatic and political channels to ensure that we reinforce the international norm of not using chemical weapons. Nobody should be in any doubt about our resolve to ensure that we do not see a situation developing in which the use of chemical weapons is normalised.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): If the Leader of the Opposition persists in changing the Labour party's previous adherence to the rule that international law justifies taking unilateral action in the event of humanitarian necessity, does my right hon. Friend agree that the consequence will be that any tyrant, megalomaniac or other person intent on carrying out genocide, if they have the support of an amoral state on the Security Council will be able to conduct that genocide with total impunity, even if it were within our power to act to prevent it? Does she agree that in those circumstances, far from upholding the international rules-based system, the reality is that it would be dead?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. If we were to say that we are prepared to act only when we have the support of the United Nations—given that, as we have seen in this circumstance, a member of the UN Security Council is willing repeatedly to veto the ability to investigate these issues—any tyrant could determine that they can act and use these weapons with impunity. We must not allow that. The use of these chemical weapons must be stopped.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I associate my right hon. and hon. Friends with the Prime Minister's remarks on the passing of Sergeant Tonroe? His courage and valour is another example of the courage and valour of all our servicemen and women, as was exemplified in Syria at the weekend. I thank the Prime Minister for her call with me prior to the action on Saturday morning and for her statement today. Its cogent and well-argued nature in addressing the challenges of these difficult times stands in stark contrast to today's contribution made by the Leader of the Opposition in this House. Given that this is limited and targeted action, and that diplomacy was tried and, sadly, was unable to succeed, the Prime Minister is utterly justified in the action that she has taken. She should have the support of every right-thinking Member of the House in upholding international law and defending the national interests of the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right: we undertook this action because we believed it was the right thing to do and it was in our national interest. I believe it is important that all of us across this House recognise the need to uphold the international rules-based order and do what we can to ensure that we maintain it.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I welcome the calm and measured assessment of the Prime Minister, as I suspect do a considerable number of Opposition Members. She mentioned the year 2011. Bearing in mind what happened in Libya after the House retrospectively approved air action in 2011—namely the toppling of the regime—will she give us an absolute and unequivocal

guarantee that the use of airstrikes now, specifically, as she says, to degrade and to deter chemical atrocities, will absolutely not be allowed to lead to the Royal Air Force becoming, in effect, the air arm of the jihadist-led rebel forces in Syria? The two roles are and should be held to be entirely separate.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right—they are separate. This was about the degrading of chemical weapons capability; it was not about regime change and it was not about an intervention in the civil war in Syria. It was about the use of chemical weapons and the prevention of future humanitarian suffering.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): There are no easy solutions to the appalling humanitarian crisis and civil war in Syria, but Assad's repeated use of chemical weapons against his own people, in violation of international law, cannot go unanswered. What is the Prime Minister's assessment of Assad's chemical weapons capability after these strikes, and what further and urgent humanitarian action is she planning to protect Syrian civilians?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her words. We, of course, continue to complete assessments of the action, but the assessment of the strikes that took place in the early hours of Saturday morning is that they were successful and that they will have degraded the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. But we will continue to ensure that we are encouraging humanitarian access to those people in Syria who require it. Again, attempts have been made, through the United Nations, to encourage that access and so forth. Sometimes those have not been successful, but we will continue to press, because we believe it is important that we can ensure that support is available to those people in Syria who need it.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): As a former Secretary of State for International Development, I can say that the harrowing stories I heard from Syrian refugees—men, women and children—will stay with me for the rest of my life. Does the Prime Minister agree that, on their behalf, we simply cannot turn a blind eye to this breach of international law and that there will be times when action is urgent and must be taken? Does she also agree that we cannot also allow countries such as Russia and Syria to simply dictate our foreign policy through barring action?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. As she said, she had the opportunity in her former role to speak to and hear from Syrian refugees about their experiences. Nobody who has seen the pictures or read the descriptions of what happened in Douma can think anything other than that this was an absolutely barbaric act that took place, and that it is right that we act in response to that and to the continued use of chemical weapons, because this was about the continued use of chemical weapons and the potential for those weapons to be used in future.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The sight of children and adults suffering from the effects of chemical weapons cries out to all humanity for a humane response, but planning for war without equally robust planning for peace is anything but humane. Conventional

[Liz Saville Roberts]

and chemical weapons are indiscriminately horrific. In what way will this weekend's strikes protect children from future monstrous attacks?

The Prime Minister: We have undertaken a limited and targeted set of strikes, alongside our allies in the United States and France. The purpose of those strikes—as I just indicated in response to a previous question, our assessment is that they were successful—was to degrade the Syrian regime's capability to use chemical weapons. They were also intended to deter the regime's willingness to use chemical weapons. It is that degrading of the regime's capability that we believe will have an impact and will help to alleviate the situation and ensure that we do not see the same humanitarian suffering in future.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend will agree that the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere, under any circumstances, is illegal, contrary to all the laws of war and utterly reprehensible. Will she therefore confirm that the Government will at a later date seek the arraignment at an international court of those who instigate these vile acts, whoever they may be?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the illegality of the use of chemical weapons and the impact of their use. We believe that those who are responsible should be held to account.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The pinpointing and degrading of Assad's chemical weapons was necessary and appropriate. Intervening to save civilians from future gas attacks was, although not without risks, absolutely the right thing to do. Does the Prime Minister agree that a policy of inaction would also have severe consequences and that those who would turn a blind eye—who would do nothing in pursuit of some moral high ground—should today also be held accountable for once?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and agree with him. Many people focus on the impact of action, but inaction would have given a message that these chemical weapons could continue to be used by the Syrian regime and, indeed, by others, with impunity. We cannot allow that to happen. The use of these weapons must be stopped.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): There are no words to describe the appalling nature of the humanitarian disaster that confronts Syria, which is why I commend my right hon. Friend for the strong action that she has taken and the support she is giving to the Syrian people. Will she assure the House that in the face of the abhorrent abuses perpetrated by the Assad regime, hers will continue to be a strong voice in favour of the international rules-based system, and will she show that Britain will not stand idly by when cruel weapons are used to murder innocent children and families?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. We will ensure that our voice is heard. It is absolutely right that it was the right thing to do and was in our national interest, but it is also important that we are standing up for that international rules-based order and continue to do so.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Britain was absolutely right, with France and America, to take this long-overdue action in response to Assad's proven and repeated use of chemical weapons. Since 2013, his regime and the Kremlin have lied and lied again about the continued development of his chemical weapons programme and their continued use. Will the Prime Minister reassure the House that if this does not prove to be a sufficient deterrent, she and our allies will not hesitate to act again? In those circumstances, though, I urge her to come to the House to seek Parliament's consent first.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to refer to the proven and repeated use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. As I said earlier in response to a number of other questions, nobody should be in any doubt about our resolve to ensure that we alleviate human suffering by dealing with the use of chemical weapons and to ensure that their use is not normalised.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Prime Minister was indeed heard in respectful silence because her moderate, determined and sensible attitude deserves respect from this House. May I ask her a question on behalf of the persecuted Christians of the middle east who will face further persecution if it is believed that their sponsors in the west are taking sides in the civil war? Will she assure us that, not just in terms of this airstrike, but generally, we are no longer in favour of regime change, that we do not take sides and that we are only on the side of peace? While we Back Benchers can of course not have access to intelligence, she does, and having had that access, can she look me in the eye and say that she is absolutely clear in her own mind that, beyond reasonable doubt, the regime was responsible for this attack?

The Prime Minister: On the first point, I recognise my hon. Friend's concerns about persecuted Christians in the region. Indeed, we are discussing with the Foreign Office how we can look at this issue of Christians and other religious groups who find themselves persecuted in wherever they might be, including in this region. I can give him the absolute assurance that, from the intelligence that I have seen, from the analysis that I have seen and from the assessments that I have heard, I am in absolutely no doubt that the Syrian regime was responsible for this attack in Douma.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister has said that the legal basis relies on there having been no practicable alternative to the use of force. Further to that, can she confirm exactly when the UK identified Him Shinsar as a chemical weapons storage facility, when it identified the chemical research facility at Barzeh as a chemical weapons research centre, when this information was reported to the OPCW and whether the UK has asked the OPCW to inspect both sites?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear that we would like it to be possible for the OPCW to investigate sites in Syria, for there to be proper identification of the chemical weapons and for there to be proper accountability for the use of those chemical weapons.

Caroline Lucas: Did you ask?

The Prime Minister: Well, I say to the hon. Lady that, last Tuesday at the United Nations Security Council, there was going to be a proposal and resolution that would have enabled a proper investigative mechanism to be re-introduced to look at the use of chemical weapons and at what chemical weapons were available in Syria and held by the regime and at their capabilities and to be able to ascertain accountability for those chemical weapons. That draft resolution was vetoed by Russia.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the coming days, weeks and months, the image that we must hold in our minds is of children coughing up their lungs? Does she understand that many of us, from all parts of this House, want an Executive, when they are planning such a limited operation, to act in the full knowledge that if they do not and if they try to lay the matter before the House at great length, we will not only put at risk the operation, but possibly put at risk our airmen and complicate working with our partners?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that, when we think about this issue, we should hold in our minds the horrific suffering of children and others in Douma as a result of the use of these chemical weapons.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has just said that we should hold in our minds the images of the suffering of those children—the human cost of the consequences of Assad and his Russian backers using chemical weapons against the people and it becoming normalised—but we know that this is not the first time. With that in mind, may I beg the Prime Minister to rethink her approach to those Syrians who have fled to Europe, because they are the same people fleeing this horror? They are the people who needed a safe haven. Forty per cent. of those in the Greek camps are Syrian, a third of whom are children, and there is only one Home Office official to deal with the issue for the entirety of Greece. Do those people not deserve more direct support from us, too?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office has been looking at this issue very carefully. We have changed the arrangements to ensure that a wider group of children will fall within the remit of our proposals for bringing refugee children into the United Kingdom. There are a number of ways in which we are ensuring that we accommodate, and offer shelter and security to, refugees from Syria, including refugee children. But as I said earlier, we must also recognise the many millions of people from Syria who have been displaced both within and from their country. It is right that we look to ensure that we can provide as much support as possible for them, and that is best done by supporting them in region.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): May I offer the Prime Minister my support for the action that was taken at the weekend and for her stance on Parliament? She is absolutely right that Members of Parliament are there to scrutinise the decisions of the Executive, but it is the Prime Minister's right, with her Government, to make the difficult decision that she made at the end of last week. In her statement, she talks about continuing to work with "international partners on tough economic

action against those involved with the production or dissemination of chemical weapons". May I suggest to her that that should extend to those who are complicit in the use of chemical weapons, those who turn a blind eye to the use of chemical weapons and those who veto resolutions of the United Nations? I am talking about much tougher sanctions on Russia and Russian citizens.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her contribution and for her specific proposals. We will be looking very carefully at what further levers can be used. I am pleased that the European Union Foreign Affairs Council has today agreed that it is willing to look at what further measures could be taken, and I will certainly take on board and note the specific suggestions made by my right hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: It is always good to be able to call a fairly new and young Member, particularly when that Member is celebrating her birthday. I call Paula Sherriff.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

After the appalling scenes we saw in Douma, all of us in this House agree that there is a desperate need to provide humanitarian relief and medical care to the civilians who have fled the city and to those who have remained. What action has the Prime Minister taken to that end?

The Prime Minister: May I first wish the hon. Lady a very happy birthday?

We will be continuing to work with our international partners to see what more we can do regarding our humanitarian support and to press for humanitarian access. As the hon. Lady and others will know, this has been one of the problems. Time and again, groups of people in Syria have been suffering as a result of the conflict and it has not been possible to get humanitarian access to them. We will continue to press for that access at the international level.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On Sunday's "The Andrew Marr Show", the Leader of the Opposition said that

"our exports that go to Saudi Arabia...end up somewhere in very bad hands, in Syria and other places."

The Leader of the Opposition has rightly called for evidence to support this intervention and for the Government to be satisfied about it. People who demand evidence and then repeat malicious gossip for which there is not only no evidence, but which is contradicted by the non-governmental organisations that are specialists in the area, are guilty of very poor double standards.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree.

Mr Speaker: On the subject of new, young Members who are early in the parliamentary careers, let us hear from Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is not my birthday, but I was born in London on the worst weekend of the blitz. My next-door neighbour's family were killed that night, including the two children, so I want action when I hear of a tyrant killing children. I have no criticism of the Prime Minister, but I do have one problem and demur. I have been a passionate pro-American for all the time that I have been in this House, and I have seen America as a beacon of our democratic world. But I was at the United Nations on different business last week when all this happened, and

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

the conversations there were quite chilling. Many of us passionate pro-Americans could not remember a time when we were seriously worried about American leadership and the American President at the same time that we did not trust Putin and his horrible gang. We need a Prime Minister and European leaders to show the way in these troubled times. Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: I think that the hon. Gentleman has seen from the fact that the United Kingdom and France came together with the United States in this action that there is leadership being shown in Europe on this matter. We will continue to work with France, as I said, on the international grouping that it has put together on the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons. It is clear that Europe has taken a stance on this and has shown the way on the importance of the international rules-based order.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Had the Prime Minister first sought our consent, with what detail might she have persuaded us without fundamentally compromising our intelligence-gathering capability?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has put his finger on a particular aspect of this issue. It is not possible to bring all the intelligence through to this House; it is not possible to make all that intelligence public. Sometimes, actually, more information can be made available after the event than in advance of the event, because we do need to maintain the operational security of our armed forces.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Among those of us who have been trying to follow President Trump's tweets over the past week, I cannot be the only person who has found it extremely difficult to keep track of whether he was for military action or against military action, so I wonder whether the Prime Minister can tell us at what point the President instructed her that military action would be taken.

The Prime Minister: The answer to the hon. Lady's question is this: at no point at all. I took this decision, because I believed it was the right thing to do and it was in our national interest. It is a decision that should, I believe, be supported by anybody who recognises that we need to re-establish the international norms in relation to the use, and the prohibition of the use, of chemical weapons.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Prime Minister deserves the support that she is getting from across the House for the action she has taken, just as it has had support from democracies not just in Europe but all around the world. Is not the problem for those who are advocating any and every type of action except military action that the action by the Assad regime was part of a repeated pattern of barbaric use of chemical weapons and that therefore, if she and our allies had not taken military action, we would have sent the message that using chemical weapons was no big deal, thus encouraging their further use on innocent civilians around the world?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was important, I believe, that we took action because what we saw in Douma was part of a repeated

pattern of behaviour by the Syrian regime. It was precisely to degrade its capability and to prevent further humanitarian suffering that we took this action.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I accept that the Prime Minister had no real easy options in making this consideration, but given that members of the Security Council are now acting outwith the norms that she says she has acted to defend—ultimately, if the veto is dead for Moscow, it is dead for London—how exactly does she plan to restore order and reform the Security Council?

The Prime Minister: We will continue to operate through the United Nations Security Council and continue to make the arguments for ensuring that every country recognises the importance of ensuring that we maintain the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. As I said earlier, the strikes that took place were about degrading the Syrian regime's capability, but I believe they should have given a message to others as well that we will not accept the use of chemical weapons with impunity.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the Prime Minister on her leadership and on her sheer guts to take a decisive decision over the weekend to deal with Assad and his friends? In the event of a retaliatory cyber-attack from Russia on our NHS or any other vital part of our infrastructure, would she then, working with our NATO allies, consider invoking article 5?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises the issue of potential cyber-attacks. We have done a great deal as a Government to reinforce our capability to identify and deal with any potential cyber-attacks. The establishment of the National Cyber Security Centre has been a very important development from the United Kingdom's point of view, enabling us to deal with the issue of cyber-attacks. We always remain on the alert for any such attacks, and we continue to enhance our capability to deal with them.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister referred to the actions of previous Governments. May I remind her and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) that it was a Labour Government, with Robin Cook as Foreign Secretary, that carried out airstrikes in Iraq under Operation Desert Fox in 1998 without a UN resolution, that it was a Labour Government that restored President Kabbah in Sierra Leone without a UN resolution, that it was a Labour Government that stopped the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo without a UN resolution, and that there is a long-standing and noble tradition on these Benches of supporting humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; decisions have been taken by Governments of all colours to take action where it was believed to be in the national interest and important in order to prevent humanitarian suffering. As he said, there has been a long-standing and proud tradition in the Labour party of being willing to step up to the plate and take those decisions when it is necessary to do so.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Such decisions are always difficult, and Prime Ministers must retain the leeway to commit armed forces in extremis,

but I hope the Prime Minister will understand that many are concerned, given our track record of errors in previous interventions and in Syria, that Government should be properly scrutinised before committing troops. Given the possibility of future interventions in Syria, under what circumstances does the Prime Minister think it right to come to this place and consult before committing armed forces?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely understand the concern that my hon. Friend and other Members of the House have in relation to the role of Parliament, particularly given the experience, and I know that he has in the past and continues to be concerned about that issue. As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), we are not saying that no debate should take place in Parliament; we are saying simply that there needs to be a recognition of the fact that there will be occasions when it is important to act in a timeline and with consideration of the operational security of our armed forces, which means it is not possible to have that debate in advance of a decision being taken.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): One of the last discussions I had with our murdered former colleague Jo Cox was on the need to protect civilians in Syria. We cannot fire and forget, but neither can we simply debate and talk and forget. What is the Prime Minister's comprehensive political, diplomatic and humanitarian strategy—not just one-off military actions—to protect civilians in Syria? Does she agree that councils around the country, including Vale of Glamorgan Council in my constituency, need to do much more to support the resettlement of Syrian refugees under the resettlement programme, which they are currently not doing?

The Prime Minister: Certainly. There are two areas in which we will undertake this diplomatic and political process. The first is in relation to the use of chemical weapons, following up within a number of international forums on the military action that has taken place. As I said, there have already been comments coming out of the European Foreign Affairs Council and the Gulf Co-operation Council, and we will be discussing with a number of leaders around the world how we can re-establish the international norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. That is one strand of activity we will undertake.

The other strand is the full support we will continue to give to the United Nations process in trying to find a solution to what is happening in Syria. We support the work that Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations envoy, is doing in that area. We hope that the Geneva process can be reignited and that we see the parties coming together around the table to find a genuine solution; that means not just all the parties in Syria but actually the backers of the parties in Syria being willing to do that.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition has argued that the airstrikes were illegal, but is it not true that the only illegal act that has taken place in this situation was the war crime—and it was a war crime—of using chemical weapons to murder families and children? Was the Prime Minister not entirely right to authorise these airstrikes to defend the principles of the chemical weapons convention and, in so doing, to uphold international law?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. What is illegal is the use of chemical weapons, and it is entirely right that we have acted.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have not heard much clarity on this, so will the Prime Minister tell us whether she is planning to use Executive powers again with regard to military action in Syria—in breach of the commonly understood parliamentary protocol that would have given the House a say in a matter of war? There is clear opposition from British people to airstrikes, and I think the public are right to be sceptical, so will the Prime Minister also explain how Friday night's airstrikes have improved the safety and security of Syrian people practically, when we are aware that the bombing and violence are continuing unabated throughout the region?

The Prime Minister: I have responded to a number of questions in relation to Parliament. In the second part of the hon. Lady's question, she asks about what impact this will have. The strikes that took place were about degrading the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. As I have said in answer to other questions, the assessment we have made is that the strikes were successful. We obviously continue to build that picture, but that is our assessment of the strikes that have taken place. It is by degrading its chemical weapons capability that we can have an impact and ensure that we are reducing the likelihood of the humanitarian suffering in the future.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The conflict in Syria has had the most serious impact on other nations in the region, not least countries friendly to the UK such as Jordan, which has done so much to accommodate refugees from the fighting. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that our regional allies have been kept fully informed about the action we took last weekend, and that they will be similarly informed should any future action be necessary?

The Prime Minister: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. He specifically mentions Jordan. In fact, I spoke to His Majesty the King of Jordan on Saturday about this and about the support that the United Kingdom continues to give to Jordan, which is important. There are a large number of refugees in Jordan, and it is absolutely right that we continue to support that country in providing for those refugees and in other ways.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The policy paper on the UK Government's legal position says:

"The UK is permitted under international law, on an exceptional basis, to take measures in order to alleviate overwhelming humanitarian suffering."

It does not, however, cite any authority for that proposition: it does not quote the UN charter, and it does not refer to any Security Council resolution nor any international treaty of any kind. Will the Prime Minister tell us why that proposition is unvouched for in the policy paper?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. and learned Lady that the basis on which we undertook this action is one that has been accepted by Governments previously and one under which previous action has been taken. I believe that it continues to be the right basis for ensuring

[*The Prime Minister*]

that we can act to alleviate humanitarian suffering, and I would have thought the alleviation of humanitarian suffering was something that should gain support from across the whole House.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is an historic reality that, of the many hundreds of occasions on which this country has gone to war or committed troops, only four have been voted on in this House prior to taking place, the most notable being when Tony Blair illegally committed our troops to war in 2003—not a great precedent. Does the Prime Minister not agree that she has the secret intelligence, she has the legal advice and she has the military advice to take that most awful and terrible of decisions—to commit our troops to war—and that by coming here and looking for political top cover, rather than empowering Parliament, she is actually emasculating it?

The Prime Minister: I think the position that the Government have taken on these matters, as set out in 2016, is absolutely clear: we must retain the right to be able to commit our armed forces where it is necessary and right to do so in a timely fashion, without having a debate in Parliament. However, we recognise the significance and importance of Parliament, and if it is the case that a decision is taken without that prior consideration by Parliament, the Prime Minister should come at the first possible opportunity to the House, which is what I have done.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I am glad that we are finally debating this situation in Syria, but the Prime Minister could and should have recalled Parliament to discuss and vote on this issue last week.

The heartbreaking and sickening images of these chemical attacks leave us in no doubt why so many Syrians have felt forced to take their children and flee their homes and their country. In the same circumstances, which of us would not do the same? But with deeper engagement comes greater responsibility, so does the Prime Minister recognise the jarring contrast between the humanitarian arguments she makes for this military action and her Government's inhumane and inadequate approach to Syrian refugees, which has left vulnerable children stranded and alone?

The Prime Minister: We have been providing significant support to Syrian refugees since the start of this conflict—it is the biggest single humanitarian intervention that this country has made. We have been providing water, food and medical consultations for tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Syrian refugees, and we continue to do so. I believe it is right that we continue to recognise the need of those people and that we continue to provide for it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend for making sure Britain stands up against these chemical weapons attacks. Did she see the investigation in *The Times* on Saturday, which shows that a number of senior academics across universities, including Sheffield and Edinburgh, are disseminating extremist Assad propaganda? *The Times* describes it as “an insult to the victims of a depraved regime and a stain on the reputation of the institutions which host its authors.” Will she act to stop this extremism in our universities?

The Prime Minister: I have to confess to my right hon. Friend that I had not seen that particular report, and I will, of course, look at it. There are a number of values that underpin our society; of course, academic freedom is one of them. However, I will certainly look at the instances he has referred me to.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I regret that there was not a parliamentary debate and vote on this military intervention. However, standing by and letting President Assad use chemical weapons against his own people would have been the wrong thing to do. To prevent the further deterioration of the humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding in Syria, and has been for the last seven years, will the Prime Minister support President Macron's initiative to push for humanitarian corridors to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people?

The Prime Minister: We will be pressing for humanitarian access. The exact form in which that humanitarian access might occur, of course, might vary, but we will continue to press with our international allies for humanitarian access.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am very grateful for the Prime Minister's robust action over the weekend. Given that this action has been legal, precise and timely, would she agree that those who seek to play politics around this issue by raising spurious legal questions do a great disservice to their office and a grave disservice to the innocent civilians in Syria who have faced the horror of chemical attack?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. From the contributions that have already been made, it is clear that, across the House, there is support for action being taken against the use of chemical weapons and in support of those who have been suffering so abominably from the action of the Syrian regime.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The military action that took place was both correct and proportional in response to the horrific spectacle of women and children being gassed in their own homes in Douma. The military action is, though, only part of the strategy, so could the Prime Minister expand a little further on what will take place in the next few weeks in terms of the broader strategy, including the suggestion from the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) about economic sanctions against those who support the Assad regime?

The Prime Minister: There are a variety of ways in which we will be pursuing further action on the international stage. We will be looking at various economic levers, as I have said, and I take on board the comments that have been made in the House about the importance of doing that. We recognise that it was not just a case of the strikes taking place on Saturday morning and that we need to follow up with international action. We will look at the economic levers that we can use. As I have referenced, the Foreign Affairs Council in Europe has already been looking at the willingness to take further action. I have discussed that with a number of European Union leaders as well.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Prime Minister has today made a compelling case for limited military action against the use of chemical warfare in Syria,

but the wider diplomatic and political initiatives to bring about the end of these ghastly conflicts in Syria and to achieve a lasting peaceful solution seem no closer to success today than they were five years ago. What does my right hon. Friend believe is possible in trying to refocus all the parties involved on achieving that desperately difficult goal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that it has been difficult over the years that this conflict has taken place to bring the parties around the table. It is important not only that the opposition parties in Syria are willing to come around the table, which they are, but that the regime is, and Russia needs to play its part in ensuring that the regime is willing to come forward and to sit down and discuss the future of Syria.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): We all know that the Syrian civil war will end only through diplomatic means, which is why this evening's Stop the War demonstration should be taking place outside the Russian embassy and not outside this Parliament. The truth is that, had the UN Security Council fulfilled its obligations, we would not be facing the scenario that the Prime Minister described this afternoon. However, can I ask her to look again, with the same degree of urgency and same scale of response that she has provided in the last week, at the humanitarian crisis? This country has taken only 11,000 refugees. Syria's neighbours, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, are bearing the brunt of the humanitarian crisis. We have a responsibility to protect Syrian civilians, whether they are in Syria, in surrounding countries or making their way to this country, and we have not stepped up to the mark, not nearly enough.

The Prime Minister: As I said before, we are of course providing support in the region to those refugees. We have done so on the basis that we believe it is important. We want to see a resolution to the Syrian conflict, such that people will be able to return home in the future. That support in region is more likely to enable that to happen. However, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right when he says that Russia must bear its responsibility for what is happening in Syria and for the continuation of this conflict.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the level of interest in the House. This is an extremely important occasion, and in my experience the Prime Minister never complains about having to answer questions—or at least she never does to me anyway. I am very grateful for that, and I appreciate that, but it would be helpful if colleagues could be succinct. I know that that quality will be magnificently exhibited now by Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Don't hold your breath, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister was absolutely right in ordering the airstrikes this weekend. Does she agree that the Leader of the Opposition, however, was completely wrong—wrong in his failure to blame Assad for the chemical attacks on his own people and wrong when he said that this country has not been playing its part in assisting refugees? We are the second biggest donor in the world. Broxtowe has taken four—soon to be five—families, and we are

very proud of that. For a borough of our size, that is a serious achievement, and we hope to take more. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that it is now imperative that countries across the world play their part in providing humanitarian relief for those who have had to flee from Assad's regime?

Mr Speaker: I can deal with most things, but it is quite difficult dealing with lawyers.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend asks about other countries playing their part in providing humanitarian support and support for refugees. She is absolutely right. I hope, at the conference due to take place in Brussels towards the end of this month, that countries will step up so we can ensure that support is available.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): In the Prime Minister's statement, she said:

"We are confident in our own assessment that the Syrian regime was highly likely responsible".

Surely the burden of proof should be beyond reasonable doubt, as opposed to being "highly likely"? In addition, I would be interested to know who "we" are, given that Parliament was not consulted.

The Prime Minister: The Government made their assessments. Those were not just the view of the UK Government; they were shared by our allies and on that basis we acted.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I support my right hon. Friend's decisive action this weekend. Were we waiting for war crimes prosecutions to take place, we would still be waiting for prosecutions dating back to the events she described that took place in 2013. I urge her to collect evidence relating to war crimes, but if this position arises again may I urge her to act as she did this weekend?

The Prime Minister: We will always act in the national interest and there should be no doubt about our resolve in ensuring that we return to the international norm of the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): From Prime Minister Trudeau in Canada to Prime Minister Abe in Japan, and from European leaders to leaders in Australia and New Zealand, the leaders of international bodies around the world stand shoulder to shoulder with my right hon. Friend, France and the United States of America in taking this action. Will she assure me that she will not listen to the increasingly small and isolated number of voices who insist that the Russian regime has a veto on our international actions? Will she instead listen to the numerous voices around the world who support the action she took at the weekend?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Inaction and indecision has its cost. So far in Syria it has been met by the children of Syria, the parents who have lost their homes, the people who have lost their lives and the families who have been displaced. The Prime Minister is, of course, right to take action when there is an emergency—she

[Chris Bryant]

has that prerogative right. Nearly always, however, it is better to come to the House of Commons first. In the end, the most pernicious role in Syria has been played by Russia: it has systematically refused to allow people to investigate where war crimes have been committed, and it has advanced its own territorial ambitions. Is it not right that we must ensure that it pays the price in the end?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Nobody should be in any doubt about the role that Russia has played. Russia could play a role to ensure we find a diplomatic and political solution to what is happening in Syria. It has been unwilling to do so and it has supported a regime that has illegally used chemical weapons to kill and injure its own civilians, including young children.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Many of the ghastly chemical attacks my right hon. Friend announced this afternoon would be classed as war crimes, so she was absolutely right to take the action she has taken. In contrast, what would have been the consequence for future tyrants if the Leader of the Opposition had failed to take military action?

The Prime Minister: The fact is that without action the message would have been sent that it was okay for this regime, and any other regime that chose to do so, to use chemical weapons. It is very important that we re-establish the fact that chemical weapons use is illegal and that the international community will not stand by and see them used.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It seems this is a week in which the Government have sought to lead the Commonwealth, but have nearly deported its citizens; to defend the international rules-based system by ignoring the United Nations; and to reclaim parliamentary sovereignty by not using it. Will the Prime Minister advise the House on where that all fits in with the plan for a global Britain?

The Prime Minister: We have not ignored the United Nations. We have tried to work through the United Nations, but Russia has vetoed action in the United Nations. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that this country should effectively give Russia a veto over our foreign policy, then I have to say to him that I absolutely disagree. The United Kingdom Government will determine the United Kingdom's foreign policy—nobody else.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Russia is waging a propaganda war and it is involved in the cover-up. It is reporting that the attack was staged and it has, over many months, systematically and strategically used social media to undermine western engagement and intervention in Syria. While it is right to hold the Government to account, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Leader of the Opposition is at risk of becoming a voice for our country's enemies?

The Prime Minister: It is important that everybody across this House is in no doubt about the way in which Russia has supported the Syrian regime and the way in which Russia has acted. That has meant it has been much harder to do what the Leader of the Opposition

and others have looked for, which is to bring an end to the conflict in Syria. Russia is playing a negative role. It could play a positive role. We should be in no doubt about the actions Russia has taken and the role it is playing.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When David Cameron came to the House in 2011 following the start of our intervention in Libya, it was for a full debate on an amendable motion. He got that approval by 557 votes to 13. I offer no prizes for guessing who was in the 13, Mr Speaker. Will the Prime Minister follow the precedent set by David Cameron and tomorrow allow the House a vote on an amendable motion, not just a general debate?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman quotes the former Prime Minister. The former Prime Minister also said to the House of Commons in 2014:

“it is important to reserve the right that if there were a critical British national interest at stake or there were the need to act to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, you could act immediately and explain to the House of Commons afterwards.”—[*Official Report*, 26 September 2014; Vol. 585, c. 1265.]

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The Prime Minister was absolutely right in the actions she took and the way she took them. She was also right, in her statement, to continue to press for the re-establishment of the international investigative mechanism. Does she believe that that mechanism and that ambition will be thwarted unless Russia gives up its veto on the Security Council and the OPCW is allowed to continue its investigations unhindered in Syria?

The Prime Minister: I want the OPCW to be able to continue its investigations unhindered, but my hon. Friend puts his finger on it: unless the Russians are willing, within the Security Council, to put aside the position they have taken previously and accept it is important that we re-establish the international rules-based order, we allow the investigations to take place and we hold the Syrian regime accountable for its actions.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This debate is heavily coloured by the vote that took place in this House in 2013 against the use of military action, after the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons at that time. Can the Prime Minister tell the House how many times the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons against its own people since we took that vote and since Russia promised to oversee the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme?

The Prime Minister: I made reference in my statement to a number of occasions on which the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, as evidenced and accepted by the United Nations. This is exactly the problem. The Syrian regime said it would get rid of its chemical weapons and the Russians said that they would guarantee that that would happen. It did not happen. Chemical weapons have been used on a number of occasions since.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I support the decision that the Prime Minister took both to authorise action that degraded chemical weapons capability and to send a very clear message about its unacceptability. I have listened carefully to the Leader of the Opposition and looked at what he has done in this House when

opposing military action, whether it was authorised by the UN or, indeed, asked for by the Government of Iraq to deal with Daesh. I know that the Prime Minister took this decision with great care and attention, as a Prime Minister must do, but a Prime Minister who is never willing to use military action is not fit to hold that office.

The Prime Minister: There is no harder decision for a Prime Minister to take than to commit British armed forces to action. It is a grave responsibility, but sadly there are occasions when it is necessary to take that decision—and yes, be held accountable for it. But the idea that we would never commit our armed forces to action is completely unacceptable. We have to accept that there are occasions when it is right for our armed forces to be sent out there into action on our behalf, and that is what we have done.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The international community has a responsibility to protect civilians caught up in conflict, so would the Prime Minister explain how she and the international community intend to hold Assad and his allies fully to account in the interests of preventing further atrocities?

The Prime Minister: The first step we have taken in the interests of preventing further atrocities is to take action to degrade the chemical weapons capability of the regime. We also want to follow this up with diplomatic and political pressure on the issue of using chemical weapons. We believe that this is not just about degrading the chemical weapons capability of the regime; I hope that it has sent a message to others as well that the international community is resolved in not being willing to see the use of chemical weapons being normalised.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition suggested that Britain acted only because it was instructed to by the US. I find that hugely disrespectful to the British Government, the British armed forces and our allies in France. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that the Government can take action rapidly when it is needed and that it is vital to send a message to Putin and Assad that we are ready to use such powers?

The Prime Minister: Let nobody be in any doubt: we did not act under instruction from anybody. We acted in the national interest.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): So far today the Prime Minister has ducked out of questions about Saudi Arabia's involvement in the biggest humanitarian crisis in the world—Yemen—and she has not answered why she did not wait until the outcome of the OPCW inspections. She has not explained why a parliamentary recall would jeopardise the action that President Trump had already tweeted about. She has not answered about providing further humanitarian assistance and additional support for refugees, and yet she talks about parliamentary scrutiny. How is a statement after the event parliamentary scrutiny when she will not answer any hard questions?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about me not answering questions on refugees, but I have done so, or on the OPCW, but I have done so. I have answered many questions and I have to say that I will be answering many more on this particular issue.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The UK and the men and women of our armed forces should be enormously proud of being part of a triumvirate that over the weekend delivered necessary, proportionate and humane military effect, and the Prime Minister should be proud of her leadership. Would the Prime Minister agree that Russia, in addition to its disgracefully deployed veto at the UN Security Council, has another veto that it is able to exercise—by virtue of shifting its military assets around Syria?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we should look very carefully at the role that Russia is playing in Syria. Russia has the capability of acting in a different way by ensuring that the parties can sit down together, resolve this issue and find a political solution. It has not been willing to do so thus far, but we will make every effort to ensure that all parties are willing to do that and to ensure that we can find a political solution.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): If the targeted buildings were not empty, what assessment does the Prime Minister have of the casualties?

The Prime Minister: We have no evidence of casualties so far. If there are reports of casualties, those will be properly investigated. Of course, that is in sharp contrast to the approach taken by the Syrian regime and its Russian backers. The planning was done very carefully to ensure that we minimised the possibility of casualties.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend put to bed the less than constructive comments we are getting from some Members of the Opposition—that Friday's action was taken as a knee-jerk reaction to President Trump? Rather, can she give assurances that action was taken in the national interest to give a clear message that using chemical weapons anywhere, whether in Syria or Salisbury, is simply unacceptable, and that we cannot turn our backs on action like this?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to repeat to my hon. Friend that this action was taken and we believed that it was the right thing to do. It was in our national interest. It was not under the instruction of anybody else. We determined that it was right for the United Kingdom to be part of this action in order to degrade a chemical weapons capability that could have been used to inflict further humanitarian suffering.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): If not regime change, what is the endgame?

The Prime Minister: The step we want to see is the parties coming together around the table to agree a political solution to the future of Syria. There is a key role; we have been pressing for that. We have been supporting the Geneva process. We continue to support Staffan de Mistura and the work that he is doing. It is up to not just the Syrian regime but its backers to ensure that they are willing to see that discussion take place and a proper solution for Syria being resolved in the interests of all its people.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Leadership takes great courage. My right hon. Friend has shown it in spades and I commend her, as do most in the House today. I am sure she would agree that I would be failing

[*Richard Drax*]

if I did not mention the money spent on our armed forces in difficult times such as this. I ask her, please, to consider spending more money on our defences so that we are ready if, God forbid, they are needed more in the future.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the interest that my hon. Friend has shown in this topic and the way in which he has championed the armed forces in relation to the financial settlements. Prior to Easter, I was able to announce that some extra money was being made available to the Ministry of Defence, and we have in hand the modernising defence programme, in which we are looking to ensure—he referred to our capabilities—that we have the capabilities necessary to deal with the variety of threats that we face. The capabilities for our security will be of a variety of sorts, not all of which will lie in the Ministry of Defence.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), after this House voted against strikes in 2013 the Government and the Opposition accepted Russia's assurances that it would oversee the dismantling of Assad's chemical weapon capability. Yet over the past five years, Russia has used its veto no fewer than five times at the Security Council. Five of those vetoes were specifically on motions that could have hampered the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Does she believe, like me, that we were wrong to accept Russia's commitment, and can she tell the House about what her next steps will be at the UN Security Council?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I was one of those who voted in favour of action being taken when the vote was taken in this House in 2013. A guarantee from Russia was accepted, and it has been proved that that was wrong because it did not deliver on that, and the Syrian regime has not delivered on its commitment. It is important that we take the issue of the use of chemical weapons into the United Nations. I spoke to the United Nations Secretary-General about further steps that can be taken over the weekend.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend reassure the House that, contrary to claims over the weekend, there is no evidence that any British defence export products have ended up in the wrong hands in Syria?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I pay tribute to our Royal Air Force personnel, some of whom I had the privilege to meet on a NATO delegation to Qatar last month. Does the Prime Minister agree that international humanitarian law is clear that there is no time and no place, ever, where chemical weapons may be used, and that enforcing that law—that taboo—is absolutely imperative, whether the weapons are used on the streets of Salisbury or the bunkers of Douma? Many Labour Members support the action that she took, and we also support Labour's proud tradition of taking action to

intervene in conflicts to provide humanitarian protection, notably in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. We will act to protect that tradition.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. She is absolutely right that we should be proud of our air force personnel, as we should be of all our armed forces and the work they do to keep us safe. As she said, there is a proud tradition in the Labour party of being willing to take action on these matters when necessary, and she has reflected that proud tradition today.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Following the British military action in Syria over the weekend, what assessment have the Government made of the asymmetrical threats facing the UK, and what actions are being taken to combat them?

The Prime Minister: We have been enhancing our ability in a number of areas to deal with potential threats—I referred earlier to the potential for cyber-attacks, and we have enhanced our capability to deal with those—and of course we continue to ensure that we have the right defences whatever the potential threat.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I regret that there was not a parliamentary vote on this issue, but I wish to tell the Prime Minister and the House that she would have had my vote had I been asked to give it. In the future, however, it would be better were the country able to understand what was going on. I also rise to ask that everybody in this place try to have better faith in one another in critiquing whether this is right or wrong. This is not an opportunity for politics about the local elections; it is about children being gassed, and I have heard ridiculous politicking and bad faith on both sides. People need to have good faith in us. And it is not about our voices; it is about the Syrian people's voices. So with that, I ask: where are they in all this, and what are the British Government doing with aid to try to build Syrian civic society?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and she is right. It is important that across the House we deal with such issues with the solemnity they require. As she says, at the end of the day this is about the impact on children and men and women in Syria. We will continue to work with Syrian refugees in the region and we want to ensure, of course, that when it is possible for them to return they are able to build a stronger and more stable and secure Syria.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Does the Prime Minister believe that when urgent targeted action is required, waiting for a parliamentary vote could not just put our armed forces in harm's way but give those stockpiling chemical weapons time to conceal them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that in deciding whether to take such action, it is imperative that we consider the operational security of our armed forces as well as timeliness to ensure that we have the impact we wish to have.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the professionalism of the Royal Air Force in carrying out its task last week, and I agree that deciding to take military action is the most difficult decision a Prime Minister or parliamentarian can take, but does she not understand the frustration of elected Members of the House of Commons at being sidelined in last week's decision? We had to rely for information on the Twitter account of the US President and the mainstream news. *[Interruption.]* We did. We should have been consulted, because that Twitter account was giving away all America's future actions, and we had to find out that way. We should have been called back to the House of Commons to offer our support to the RAF and others.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the support he has given to the Royal Air Force. I simply say to him, as I have said to others, that this is not a question of whether on every occasion one particular approach or another is taken; it is about ensuring that action can be taken in a way that will ensure it meets the need. This was limited, targeted action taken on a legal basis that had been accepted by several previous Governments.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for so clearly laying out the humanitarian grounds on which she made the very difficult decision to take action last Friday. What more humanitarian aid could be provided if only Assad and Putin would allow access to Syria?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. If we could have that humanitarian access, many more people in Syria could be supported and provided with the medical support they need and with food and water and the other necessities of life. Sadly, the Syrian regime and its Russian backers are preventing that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Hundreds of thousands of people lie dead, 1.5 million people are injured and millions have been displaced by the use of chemical and conventional weapons. Should the House not have been recalled last week to discuss how a de-escalation of the crisis can be brought about? Such de-escalation is vital to long-term security within the region.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, this action was limited, targeted and taken with a view to minimising the possibility of civilian casualties and the risk of an escalation of the conflict.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Russia and Syria have lied and lied again about the use of these vile weapons for the mass murder of civilians in Syria, but this is not just a distant conflict; we have also seen these vile weapons used in Salisbury, where they would have resulted in the deaths of three people had it not been for the intervention of intensive care and the expert medical help we have access to here. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is time for people to stop acting as the useful idiots of the Russian regime by appearing on networks such as Russia Today and to look at the facts and bear their own responsibility?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Nobody should be in any doubt about the actions of Russia, and nobody should be supporting them. We should all recognise the role that Russia has played in backing the Syrian regime and in failing to guarantee that it was dismantling all its chemical weapons, and that it continues to play in vetoing action on the UN Security Council and in not encouraging the Syrian regime to come to a resolution of this conflict.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The UK should be proud of the role it has played in advancing the principle of intervention to prevent humanitarian catastrophe, and it would be shameful if that were abandoned now by people who in fact would not countenance intervention under any circumstances. But something else is necessary to enable humanitarian intervention in Syria, and that is the military's guaranteeing the safety of aid convoys getting into besieged areas. It meets the Government's test. Will she consider it?

The Prime Minister: We have, over the time of this conflict, looked several times at how we can ensure humanitarian access to those who need it in Syria. Our overriding consideration must be to ensure that, whatever decisions are taken and whatever access is given, it will genuinely work and provide that access. Unfortunately, of course, the Syrian regime and its backers have been preventing that humanitarian access so far, but we will continue to press for it.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her leadership on this very difficult issue. The use of chemical weapons, whether in Syria or on the streets of Salisbury, is completely unacceptable. Will my right hon. Friend confirm to the House that she will stay absolutely resolute and continue to advocate against the use of chemical weapons, and not listen to those in the House who seem happy to put the interests of countries such as Russia before those of our great country?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to press this case to ensure that we can restore the international norm of a prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister set out what her Government are actively doing to prevent the further escalation of the conflict in Syria, given that she has apparently left open the possibility of more strikes should another chemical attack take place? Does she think there is sufficient public support for more strikes?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we took limited and targeted action to degrade the chemical weapons capability, to deter the willingness of the Syrian regime to use chemical weapons and to give a clear message to others on the use of chemical weapons, but we are resolved—and no one should doubt our resolve—to ensure that we can restore a position in which no one believes that the use of chemical weapons has been normalised.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Given that representatives of a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council have blatantly lied and suggested that Britain somehow staged the appalling

[*Alberto Costa*]

atrocities that we have all witnessed, can my right hon. Friend confirm that she had no choice but to take the actions that she took to help the Syrian people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. These actions were taken to alleviate future humanitarian suffering by the Syrian people. I continue to believe—and I think this has been made clear by many Members—that they were the right actions to take.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Following the UK's military intervention in Kosovo in 1999 on humanitarian grounds, Russia invaded Georgia using the same legal justification. What assessment has been made of the misuse of humanitarian reasons for military intervention that may be used by other states in the long term?

The Prime Minister: We are responsible for the actions that we take. As the hon. Lady has said, and as I said in my statement, we have used this legal basis on a number of occasions, and I think it was absolutely right to use it on this occasion.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): In 2013, I voted against action in Syria. I did so on the basis of no more information than I had seen on the six o'clock news. That is why we have an Executive, drawn from and accountable to Parliament, and that is why the Prime Minister's action was 100% correct in this case. The vote that we took in 2013, and the question of whether we were responsible for some of these attacks, will weigh on my conscience ever more.

This afternoon, Members have stood up and accused the Prime Minister of operating on the basis of instructions from Washington. Will she go further and say that not only are their suggestions wrong, but they are a smear, they are disgusting, and they are insulting to our troops?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I think that that accusation is indeed insulting. It is certainly not true. It is insulting to the Government, and, as my hon. Friend has said, it is insulting to our troops who so professionally and bravely carry out the action that we need.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Prime Minister acted entirely appropriately. If these chemical weapons became normalised, not only would they be used against civilians in the future, but the time would surely come when our own servicemen and women would go into action for our country and they would be used against them too. That would be unforgivable. However, military action is not a replacement for diplomacy. Does the Prime Minister accept that we need a global response on the scale of the Gleneagles summit—when we focused the world's attention on international development—to tackle Syria and put strategy behind it once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making the point that if chemical weapons were allowed to continue to be used, they would be used by other people not just against civilians, but potentially against service personnel.

We do want to ensure that there is a major effort on the diplomatic side to find a resolution to the situation in Syria. That is why we continue to back the Geneva process and will work to ensure that it is reignited.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the clear and calm, but courageous and decisive, leadership that she has shown over the past week. As a humble Back Bencher, I also thank her for not placing on me the responsibility to make this decision without having the full information and intelligence that were available to her. Does she share my view that while we need to learn the lessons of the past, it is time for the House—and, indeed, our country—to get over the mistakes of the past and stand proud on the international stage again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Information will be available to the Government that it is not possible for them to make available to the House on all occasions, and it is important to be able to operate in a timely fashion to protect the safety and security of our armed forces when that is done on a legal basis that is accepted.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Children escaping from war and terrible atrocities in Syria have been refused asylum and protection by this Government in the past. Let me be clear: Britain is better than that, and this military action has not been taken in my name. May I ask the Prime Minister whether bombing a country, then refusing to give asylum to children seeking refuge, reflects the Government's idea of British values?

The Prime Minister: We have been granting asylum to both children and adults from Syria, through a number of schemes. However, we have also been supporting and maintaining, and providing food, medical assistance and water for, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in the region. Members of this House, including the hon. Lady, should be proud of the fact that we are the second largest humanitarian bilateral donor.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her leadership in the face of the awful atrocities that we have seen in Syria and the use of these chemical weapons, and for trying to prevent them from being used in the future. A decision to use military force is clearly a very serious decision, and serious decisions need to be made by those in possession of all the intelligence and advice and in full knowledge of our military capabilities. Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether making such information available to Parliament in advance of military action could risk the lives of our intelligence and military personnel and the effectiveness of the operation itself?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is one of the factors that a Government must bear in mind in weighing such decisions. We must bear in mind the extent to which information can be made available—and, as I have said, not all of it can—and also the impact that making information available in advance of a decision to act could have on the operation and security of our armed forces personnel, on capability, and on whether or not the action, when it is taken, is successful.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister referred to casualties with foam in their mouths, with burning eyes and in respiratory distress, and to an associated chlorine-like odour. Those symptoms are more in keeping with Assad's repeated use over the last five years of the respiratory corrosive chlorine gas than with the paralytic neurotoxin sarin, which seemed to be the main target of the military action. Given that chlorine is commonly available, how, without an overarching plan to end the war, does the Prime Minister hope to limit the production and dropping of chlorine gas by the regime on its own civilians?

The Prime Minister: This is about chemical weapons, and about continuing action against chemical weapons. The hon. Lady is right: some of that action will have been in relation to the capacity and capability of sarin, which, of course, has been used by the Assad regime. The regime's willingness to use a variety of types of chemical weapon is what underpins this, and our need to act to degrade that capability and deter its willingness to use such weapons in future.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Eleven million Syrians have been either displaced or killed since this action was taken by Assad's Government. Like a number of other Members on both sides of the House, I met many of the refugees in the camps that British aid is supporting. Those people want to go home. Does the Prime Minister agree that we have two options? We can either send the message that we will not stand up for chemical warfare that kills and maims, or we can close our eyes, pretend that this is not happening, talk about diplomatic solutions that cannot be delivered, and effectively condemn more innocent people to their deaths.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is imperative for us to act, and to give a very clear message about the use of chemical weapons. This is about preventing humanitarian suffering in future. To stand by would have given the message that such weapons could be used with impunity, and we cannot accept that.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): One of my constituents, who is from eastern Ghouta, came to me inconsolable, in floods of tears, to plead for a ceasefire that would help to protect her family, who are still in the area. May I ask the Prime Minister what comes after military action, and what long-term strategy is in place to prevent this humanitarian crisis and more civilian casualties, to assist my constituent's family and everyone else who is suffering?

The Prime Minister: Sometimes what appear to be simple solutions in relation to matters such as ceasefires do not operate or act on the ground. We have been encouraging ceasefires and humanitarian access. The hon. Lady asks about the longer-term solution. As I have said, this is not just a question for the United Kingdom; it is a question for us and our international allies to work on. We continue to work, and we want to see the Geneva process—the United Nations process—under Staffan de Mistura once again able to come together to find a long-term solution. But it is also necessary for the Syrian regime and its backers to be willing to see a political solution in Syria, and to be willing to come round the table and provide peace and stability for people in that country.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): In recent weeks we have heard claims from the Russian Government that the British Government were behind the nerve gas attack in Salisbury. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is typical of Russian propaganda, that it shows that Vladimir Putin is not serious about stopping the use of chemical weapons, and that he must not be given a veto over this country's foreign policy?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): First, I want to pay tribute to our armed forces, who serve so bravely and professionally whenever they are called upon. My husband served in the armed forces, and absolutely nothing would have stopped me returning early from recess last week to Parliament to deliberate such grave matters—not specifics that put service personnel at risk, but the premise of action, as has been the parliamentary precedent. We cannot set the opposite precedent, so will the Prime Minister reassure the House that matters will be debated and agreed by Parliament in the future?

The Prime Minister: I have already made reference to the 2016 written ministerial statement, which set out the position. I stand by that and suggest that the hon. Lady looks at it. I thank her for her comments about the armed forces; their professionalism and bravery are beyond doubt.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is unfortunately clear that some who claim to support the introduction of a war powers Bill actually wish to see the introduction of a no war powers Bill, the main beneficiary of which would be countries and groups around the world whose interests and values are diametrically opposed to ours? Ultimately, that would make the world a far more dangerous place.

The Prime Minister: I sympathise with my hon. Friend's comments. The Leader of the Opposition says that he wants United Nations support for action, but I believe that even when it supported action in Syria against Daesh, the Leader of the Opposition opposed that.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Recognising that there can be circumstances that preclude a Government from consulting Parliament before taking military action, does the Prime Minister agree that the default position, as per convention, is that Parliament should be consulted in advance—not on operational details, but on the strategy within which those operational details fit? Nothing that she has said so far convinces me that on this occasion there was not the time or opportunity to consult this House. In relation to the future strategy, given that the action was taken to limit further humanitarian catastrophe, what action does the Prime Minister believe that Britain should take? How will it garner international support to prevent the loss of civilian lives in Idlib on the scale of the loss of life in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to others, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman looks at the position set out in the 2016 written ministerial statement about Government action versus parliamentary debate. We have

[The Prime Minister]

set out very clearly that we will be working with international partners in a number of ways. We have worked with France on the international partnership to ensure that chemical weapons cannot be used with impunity, which has now been established, and through the United Nations and in other forums.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement, which included a timely reminder that the UK is the second largest bilateral aid donor to the region. Does she agree not only that this action sends a clear message to despots who might consider using chemical weapons in the future, but that by taking out the chemical weapons facilities, we will make sure that more vulnerable innocent citizens in Syria are protected?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: by degrading the chemical weapons capability, we will ensure that we alleviate further humanitarian suffering.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The situation in Syria is clearly very grave and complex, and we cannot ignore it, but for the Government to continue their systematic contempt of Parliament with a retrospective statement is to be regretted. To avoid such an event in the future, will the Prime Minister commit to heeding the calls of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for a war powers Act that would allow the House to debate the exact parameters within which a Prime Minister could order military action without prior parliamentary approval, which would be useful to Members on both sides of the House?

The Prime Minister: This is not about saying that Parliament can never have the opportunity to debate these matters. It is about saying that limited and targeted action can be taken on a legal basis that had been accepted by Governments of all types, over a number of years, and that that can be done in a timely manner, allowing for proper planning and also ensuring we are able to have an impact and be effective in our action.

Mr Speaker: I hope the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) is comfortable; I am quite bothered that he might not be.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I am trying to avoid walking between the Prime Minister and her questioner.

Mr Speaker: That is characteristically solicitous of the right hon. and learned Gentleman; we would expect nothing less of him.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Without the support of the Kremlin, it is unlikely that Assad would have been in a position to carry out this and many other atrocities on his own people, but according to a leaked EU report last week, Russia is using its gas supplies to the EU to further its foreign policy ambitions. Does the Prime Minister agree that every nation should seek to reduce its reliance on Russian oil and gas supplies?

The Prime Minister: Everybody should think very carefully about the role that Russia is playing in a number of ways—not just in Syria, but in its activities across Europe and elsewhere—through destabilising activities, propaganda, cyber-attacks and the like.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I support the Prime Minister's action and I am sure that the decision weighs heavily on her shoulders. Does she accept that her Government still have a job to do to convince millions of people in this country that they can show the same resolve and commitment to the search for an end to this conflict that she has been able to show over the way she has dealt with this matter?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that, seven and more years on, we have not been able to find a resolution to this conflict. We retain our determination to do so, but it is not just about the UK's determination; it is about the determination of a whole variety of parties, including the Syrian regime and its backers.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I totally and utterly support my right hon. Friend's actions. It was right that she took her decision because capitulation allows chemical weapons to be used. The idea that we must come to Parliament and ask first—especially coming from the Leader of the Opposition, who once said that the Falklands conflict was a Tory plot to enrich our business friends—is simply ridiculous. On not taking action—as in 2013, when there was a clear chronological link to the actions that President Putin later took in Crimea and east Ukraine that led to the deaths of tens of thousands more people—does my right hon. Friend agree that inaction has its consequences?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that inaction has its consequences. If people take a particular action such as using chemical weapons but see that there is no reaction or response to that, they assume it is possible to carry on using chemical weapons. It is important that we as an international community have said that we do want to restore the international norm against the use of chemical weapons. We have acted in this way to give that clear message about degrading such a capability in order to alleviate future humanitarian suffering.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): That the butcher Assad and his Russian backers hold the lives of the Syrian people cheap is evidenced by the use of not only chemical weapons, but other weapons of war, siege and barrel bombs. Does the Prime Minister agree that, whatever happened this weekend, the hideous Syrian civil war is not “mission accomplished”? Does she agree that we urgently need to do more to raise the costs of those Syrian lives by taking far tougher action in respect of sanctions and restrictions on the activities of Russian state banks?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we need to put every effort into finding ways to ensure that the parties come round the table and that we see a political solution in Syria. That is the way to ensure the security and stability of the country such that people can return and get on with their lives in peace.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): One of the darkest stains on the international community's conscience was the inaction by the EU and the United Nations in preventing the massacre of Muslim men in Srebrenica. International humanitarian and military action was right then. It was right in Bosnia and it is right now to prevent the massacre of innocent people in Syria. We have a moral duty to act.

The Prime Minister: I agree with what my hon. Friend has said.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I for one will not be congratulating the Prime Minister on the action taken this weekend. The reason why I say that is that only one day before the airstrikes on Homs and Damascus, the US Defence Secretary, James Mattis, told Congress that the US did not have any hard evidence concerning the chemical weapons attacks, only social media indicators. Can the Prime Minister tell us whether more evidence emerged in the space of those 24 hours, or did she take her action on the basis of social media indicators?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady looks at my statement, in which I set out what led to our assessment in relation to the Syrian regime's actions.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Having seen the sickening photographs of suffering children who have been poisoned by their own regime, I am in no doubt whatever that the Prime Minister took the right action. Does she agree that that is one of the reasons why so many global leaders of different political persuasions have backed the humanitarian action that she took?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had support from around the world—from Europe and elsewhere—and from people of all political persuasions who saw the humanitarian suffering, and the need to act to alleviate it and prevent it in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her courageous decision—well done! Last weekend, sources of chemical substances were destroyed. Should another chemical attack take place, can the Prime Minister assure the House that the apparatus of war—helicopters and aeroplanes—will be destroyed next time?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, when we took this action, we looked carefully at targeting it so that it would have what we believed to be the necessary impact on the capability of the Syrian regime in relation to chemical weapons. It was a limited attack, and its intent was to degrade capability and deter future use.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): In my previous role, I was security cleared and briefed to the highest level; as an MP, I am acutely conscious that I am not so well informed. While it is right that the Prime Minister comes to the House to explain these matters to us and to listen to sensible voices from across the Chamber, will she assure me that in future she will take action where necessary in an emergency to protect humanity?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that the Government must have the ability to act in an emergency, where it is necessary to do so in order to alleviate human suffering, as was set out in the ministerial statement in 2016.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will want to congratulate the armed forces on their forensic and brilliant intelligence gathering on the location of those chemical weapons dumps, but can the Prime Minister now give us an assessment of Assad's remaining stockpile and capabilities after this strike? Families in Syria will not be able to sleep easily in their beds if they know that they could still die at night, choking with their children in their arms.

The Prime Minister: The action was targeted very carefully on chemical weapons capabilities. It was designed to degrade those capabilities and also to deter the willingness of the regime to use those chemical weapons and to give a message to others about the resolve of the international community to return to a situation in which it is accepted that the use of chemical weapons is prohibited.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): In contrast to the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), I should like to say that taking action to prevent the gassing of men, women and children will always be done in my name. Does the way in which the Russians and the Syrians are now attempting to cover up their crimes in Syria not speak volumes about what has occurred and the wilful naivety of those who attempt to deny it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have set out, attempts are being made to ensure that it is impossible to collect evidence on the ground about what has happened. That speaks volumes about what has been done by the Syrian regime and the position taken by Russia.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Our response to the atrocity of a chemical weapons attack must be measured and made in the interests of the Syrian people, not just to reassure ourselves that we have taken action. This year, the UN has received only 5% of the \$3.5 billion that it needs to assist the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people, so will the Prime Minister now increase the aid that we send to help to alleviate the suffering on the ground?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we are the second biggest bilateral donor of humanitarian aid for the Syrian refugees. We will be working with others at the conference that is taking place in Brussels towards the end of this month to ensure that people step up and provide the support that is needed.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Permanent membership of the Security Council is a privilege, but it is one that comes with huge responsibilities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in acting as it has done over this whole issue by blocking peaceful diplomatic solutions and defending the actions of Bashar al-Assad at every stage, the Russian Federation is not only shirking those responsibilities but complicit in the continued horrendous suffering of the Syrian people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Russia has the ability within the Security Council, and also in its relationship with the Syrian regime, to stop the use of chemical weapons, but it has not done so.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): This is a matter of concern across the country, and I want to thank my constituents who have written to me about this issue to reflect their real and urgent concern that we will not see an end to the Syrian conflict without a diplomatic and political solution for the long term. I am concerned that this does not seem to be happening with the same urgency as military action in a humanitarian emergency. Can the Prime Minister confirm that there will be redoubling of diplomatic efforts and other non-military muscle, that any further military action will be subject to a debate and vote in this House, and that there has been no discussion of any extension of the role of our armed forces as a result of this decision that has not yet been brought to the House?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, I recognise that, in relation to the wider Syrian conflict, we need to ensure that we press ahead with every effort possible to bring that conflict to an end, but this is not just about the position that the United Kingdom has taken. There are other parties that need to be willing to come to the table and to develop that political solution for the future of Syria, not least the Syrian regime and its backers.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is frankly astonishing that over the past week the Leader of the Opposition has spent more time and effort attacking us than attacking President Assad? Does she also agree that it is therefore hardly surprising that some people question whose side he is on—theirs or ours?

The Prime Minister *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that that was, of itself, not disorderly—if it had been, I would have intervened straight away—but I want to say this to the House. “Erskine May” underscores the importance of moderation and good humour in the use of parliamentary language. Very politely, I say that it is all very well for Members to nod approvingly when someone says that we should respect each other’s motives—and to either imply or say, “Hear, hear”—only for someone effectively to attack someone else’s motives a few minutes later. I say to the hon. Gentleman that that is a technique to be used very sparingly, if at all. We are democrats in this place, and we attack each other’s political positions but we should not impugn each other’s integrity—

Gareth Johnson *rose—*

Mr Speaker: No, no! No response is required from the hon. Gentleman. I have said what the position is, and I suggest that we leave it there.

The Prime Minister: Like me, I am sure that my hon. Friend welcomes the many statements of support that have come from the Labour Benches, as well as from our Benches. Many in the Labour party recognise that it has a long, fine and proud tradition of being willing to take action not only in our national interest, but to ensure the alleviation of humanitarian suffering in the world.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Many of my constituents have contacted me with their fears about the potential escalation of conflict with Russia and to say that we might be sleepwalking

towards it. They are also worried that their voices were not heard before the Prime Minister launched this attack, because as their MP I was unable to debate the issue. Will the Prime Minister please reassure the House that the Government have a plan for the de-escalation of the conflict now that airstrikes have taken place and that her decision to act without a parliamentary vote has not set a precedent for the future?

The Prime Minister: When the decision to act was taken and when the planning was put into place, we were careful, and one of the issues that we considered was about ensuring that we reduced the risk of escalation. The way in which the strikes were undertaken and the action that we took were about minimising not only civilian casualties, but the risk of escalation.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my hope that the events of Saturday and subsequently have sent a clear message to Mr Putin and, indeed, to President Assad that the so-called protective arm that Putin believes he has put around the shoulders of Assad and Syria, effectively making them inviolate and untouchable, is not true? When small children gurgled their last soaked in chlorine and when our values and international law are undermined by the Putin-Assad axis, we will not stand by; we will always be active.

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that we have sent a clear message to the Syrian regime, to Russia and to the Syrian regime’s backers that we will not stand by when we see chemical weapons being used. We have taken action, and we will now follow that up with diplomatic and political action, but we are clear about our resolve to ensure that we return to the international norm of prohibition of the use of chemical weapons.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It adds nothing to our debates if people suggest that Members on either side of the Chamber are not determined to see chemical weapons eradicated. They may will different means, but everyone is equally determined. With that in mind, I believe that Bashar al-Assad should be pursued for all his days until he is arraigned before a court to answer for the crime of using chemical weapons on his people. Having said that, when the Prime Minister comes to this House to speak to Members of Parliament and answer questions, she is speaking to the people of this country, and she missed an opportunity to do that last week. Nine days elapsed before the airstrikes, and if these circumstances arise again in future, she must come to this House and account for what she intends to do.

The Prime Minister: A number of actions were taken last week. An attempt was made within the United Nations Security Council to get an investigation, but that was thwarted by Russia. I gave several interviews indicating that we were considering what action was necessary, but we needed to make an assessment of what had happened on the ground. There were different elements to the timeliness, including assessment and proper planning, but also ensuring that the action was effective.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): In September 2013, the OPCW secured an agreement with Syria, Russia and the United States to dispose of

such weapons, starting in the middle of 2014, but we are now in 2018 and have seen atrocities committed time and again. Does the Prime Minister agree that the judgment of the Leader of the Opposition is flawed, because the decision was legal and we carried it out on a legal basis?

The Prime Minister: I reiterated the legal basis in my statement this afternoon, and that legal basis has been used by Governments of all colours to support action when it has been considered necessary.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Prime Minister prayed in aid the written ministerial statement from 2016 by the previous Defence Secretary. I have read it carefully, and the problem is that it re-emphasises the Government's support for the convention and mentions airstrikes carried out in 2013, 2014 and 2015 that were not materially different from the action taken just this weekend. Is it not the case that the Prime Minister could and should have used the convention and come before the House before taking that action?

The Prime Minister: I will repeat what I said previously. One element of that written ministerial statement states:

"In observing the Convention, we must ensure that the ability of our Armed Forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised."

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Prime Minister was absolutely right to take action with her allies, and it is the sort of action that should have been taken five years ago when this House rather disastrously decided not to act against the Assad regime. Does the Prime Minister agree that not acting now would have been a complete abdication of our moral responsibility both as a nation and as a member of the international community?

The Prime Minister: I agree. Failure to act would have sent a message that chemical weapons can be used with impunity, and we must not allow that message to go out. We must show that the international community is resolved to ensure that chemical weapons are not used.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Her Majesty's armed forces enjoy the respect and admiration of Members right across the House, so the Prime Minister is wrong to suggest that her critics are somehow insulting our armed forces; we are all proud of them regardless of her decisions.

As for the legal basis for the decision—the alleviation of humanitarian suffering—the vast majority of Syrians murdered by Assad have been killed with conventional weapons. Is the Prime Minister only alleviating the suffering of those who are killed with chemical weapons, or does she consider there to be a legal basis for alleviating the suffering of those killed by conventional weapons, too?

The Prime Minister: Resolution of the wider conflict in Syria needs to come through a political solution that ensures the security and stability of Syria's future peace, and that is where we will put our diplomatic and political efforts, which is what we have done in the past and will continue to do.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): There should be no acceptance of and no place in this world for the use of chemical weapons. However, there seems to have been worrying increase in tolerance of their use. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that we send a clear collective message that the use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that that is an important message for us to send. Our action with the US and France has sent that message, and it is an important message for this House to send, too.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Given what the Prime Minister said about the careful targeting of the strikes, will she tell us what sites involved in the manufacture and stockpiling of chemical weapons had to be ruled out from the scope of the strikes due to their location and proximity to civilians, what the risk of those sites continues to be and what the anticipated consequences of any future attack on them might be?

The Prime Minister: We obviously looked at where we felt it was possible to have a clear impact on degrading the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime, and that is what we did.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the Russian veto on the Security Council not just on investigations in Syria, but on referring Syrian matters to the International Criminal Court, only the use of force is left to deter the usage of chemical weapons. What message would we send to despots around the world if we just sat down, wrung our hands and did absolutely nothing?

The Prime Minister: I fear that the message those despots would have taken is that they could use chemical weapons with impunity, and that is unacceptable. We must ensure that the use of such weapons is stopped.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): With two brothers having served, past and present, as officers in the British Army, I of course commend the bravery of our armed forces personnel.

No evidenced chemical attack can go by without consequences, but when our national security was not at immediate risk and when the Prime Minister had time to consult her Cabinet, why did she not recall Parliament so that my constituents could have had their say, as I am convinced they would have done had last week been a sitting week?

The Prime Minister: I have already set out the basis on which we took the decision: the need for timeliness and an opportunity for proper planning to ensure that we were able to act in a way that would be effective.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Will the Prime Minister do me the service of responding to some concerns raised by my constituents over the weekend drawing a comparison with the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan by explaining to them precisely what the UK action was—how many missiles has the UK launched in Syria this weekend—and by explaining to them why that comparison is without foundation?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to do that. Eight Storm Shadow missiles were launched from our RAF jets, and of course more missiles were launched by the French and Americans together. What I can say to my hon. Friend is that the key issue for his constituents is that this was a targeted and limited action taken in relation to the use of chemical weapons. There has been for nearly a century an acceptance in the international community that chemical weapons should not be used. We have seen the Assad regime use them on a number of occasions, and it was important that we gave the very clear message that we will not accept their use and that we will not stand by and see these weapons being used.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As my party's defence spokesman, I commend what the Prime Minister has said thus far. When she is asked why she has not built that cohesive agreement at the UN, would it be useful to reflect that in 2013, when the UN Security Council did pass a resolution, articles 1 and 21 specifically envisaged and outlined coercive action to secure adherence to the protocol?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information and for the support he has shown for the action.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement, which I fully support, and for the leadership—indeed, statesmanship—she has shown in the measured, appropriate and clearly reasoned action she has taken in this grave matter and in the manner in which she has taken it.

The Prime Minister has spoken today of the need for a wider diplomatic effort to strengthen the global understanding that chemical weapons should never be used. To ensure those diplomatic efforts are most effective, will she confirm that not only the UK as a country but she personally, as Prime Minister, will continue to take a similarly strong and engaged global lead?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. This Government and the United Kingdom have a role to play in ensuring that we continue to uphold the international rules-based order both in this and in a number of other areas.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been categorical in explaining that the need to take action was based on principle. As I was not here in April 2017, may I simply ask why the same action was not taken then?

The Prime Minister: I assume that the hon. Gentleman is referring to Khan Shaykhun. The United States of America did take action in relation to Khan Shaykhun, and we supported that action. A wider action was undertaken this time to degrade the chemical weapons capability, and it is right that a wider international community took part in it.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Britain hosted the London conference in 2016, bringing together international donors and humanitarian supporters to help civilians in Syria. Will my right hon. Friend commit to showing British leadership in this area in the years ahead?

The Prime Minister: There is to be a Brussels conference later this month that will build on the work done at the London conference, and we will continue to put our efforts into ensuring that that humanitarian support is available.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I understand fully the purpose of the action that has been taken this weekend, and I understand that it was both targeted and limited to degrade chemical weapons and to reinforce the international norm that we do not use chemical weapons. I support the Prime Minister in the action she has taken, but the vast majority of civilian deaths in Syria are a result of bombs, barrel bombs, torture, starvation and other means, not chemical weapons. If this is not about intervening in civil war or about regime change, as the Prime Minister has said, what is the Government's wider strategy to save Syrian lives? If Assad is still in power in a year's time and killing and maiming with impunity, what will that mean for "mission accomplished"?

The Prime Minister: It is, of course, through the diplomatic and political process that the final resolution of the Syrian conflict can be brought about. That is why we will continue to support the United Nations efforts and the Geneva process, but it needs all parties to be willing to accept the need for bringing about a solution and for ensuring that we can see a peaceful Syria to which displaced people can return and in which the Syrian people can live in peace and security for the future.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the obvious and inevitable consequence of seeking prior parliamentary approval for airstrikes would have been to give the Syrian regime a heads-up on our plans? A debate on what, where, how and when the attacks would take place would have given the regime the opportunity to move the very weapons that we were seeking to destroy.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is important to plan, to ensure that we are able to do these strikes in a timely and effective fashion. From one or two of the questions that I have been asked this afternoon, it seems that some Members do not realise the importance of keeping certain operational information not public, to protect our servicemen and to ensure that we are effective.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister has repeatedly said that she wants to deter dictators who may be minded to use chemical weapons against their own people or against anyone else. Does she also agree that we need to deter dictators who commit other heinous war crimes against civilians, including the dictatorship in Saudi Arabia that currently stands accused of around 150 separate war crimes against innocent civilians in Yemen? Does she not see the slightest contradiction between the severe action she has taken in Syria and her willingness to sell another £2 billion-worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia and to invite the Saudis to investigate themselves, rather than submitting them to an international court of inquiry?

The Prime Minister: What we are talking about in relation to what has happened in Syria is the use of chemical weapons. Chemical weapons are prohibited—they

are illegal—yet we see a Syrian regime that has continued to use those chemical weapons over a number of years. It is important that the international community has come together and said that we will not accept this use of chemical weapons. We must return to a situation in which people accept that the use of chemical weapons is prohibited. We have taken this position to alleviate the humanitarian suffering that comes from the use of chemical weapons, and we continue to support the work that will be necessary to ensure the continued prohibition of the use of these weapons.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her calm and well-calibrated response to this situation. Some Opposition Members have questioned the decision to proceed without a vote. Does she agree there are circumstances in which we need to act without a prior vote? If the speed of military or diplomatic movements on the ground make it impossible, if the disclosure of intelligence to the House would make it impossible for the House to make a decision, or if such disclosure would give adversaries a sense of the scope, scale and timing of what is going to happen—if one or more of those conditions applies, it is neither reasonable nor necessary to seek the House's consent first.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend speaks appropriately about the need to ensure, when one is looking at taking action, that that action can be effective, that nothing is done that reduces the effectiveness of that action, that the action is taken on the basis of intelligence—not all intelligence is able to be made available to everyone—and that we respect and recognise the need to maintain the security and safety of our armed forces personnel.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): When last week did the Prime Minister decide not to recall Parliament? Did she discuss that with the Cabinet on Thursday?

The Prime Minister: Of course we looked at the timetable for the action we were going to take. The Cabinet considered a number of matters when it met, and it was fully informed of all aspects of this decision.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): When this country was subjected to a chemical attack just a month ago, we called on the support of our allies, and they supported us with strength and speed. They have now asked us for that same support. How credible would we look to the international community, and to those same allies, if we turned an ideological cold shoulder on them when an attack was made on a much greater scale against the innocent civilian population of Syria?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend; it is right to remember, when we talk about the use of chemical weapons, that they have been used at scale in Syria, but of course we have seen one—a nerve agent—used on the streets of the UK. It is imperative that we give a message that these weapons cannot and must not be used.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): A decision of this magnitude required a parliamentary debate and vote. Will the Prime Minister commit to respecting that convention in the future?

The Prime Minister: Once again, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the position that has been taken in relation to that convention, which is to accept that there are circumstances in which it is necessary for Government to be able to act without coming to Parliament first, but that when Government do so act, they should come to Parliament at the earliest opportunity to explain that action.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The situation in Syria is deeply complex and full of uncertainties, with perhaps the only certainty being the tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children who have been butchered and killed. Further bombs will result in further death, and we need to pursue diplomacy and the political solution. Will the Prime Minister therefore inform the House what actions she has recently taken to pursue all political channels?

The Prime Minister: The strikes that took place were about degrading the chemical weapons capability such that we can alleviate and prevent further humanitarian suffering. Of course it is right that we need diplomatic effort to get a political solution to what is happening in Syria, and we will continue to push on that diplomatic effort, as we do with a variety of international partners. We will continue to support the UN intervention and the Geneva process.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister has described this action as a targeted strike that does not increase tensions in the region. If that is the case, can she confirm that she has ruled out the possibility of any retaliation from Russia?

The Prime Minister: As I have said in response to a number of questions, when we were looking at this action, one of the issues we took into account was the need to ensure that we minimised the risk of escalation—we did that.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I value the aid we give to the region and the urge that says aid is better provided to refugees in the region, but parts of that region are full to capacity. One in four of the population of Lebanon is now a Syrian refugee, and Lebanon is struggling. Is it not now time for the Prime Minister urgently to review, at next week's Brussels conference, as many different options to help refugees, both in and out of the region, as we can?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for what the hon. Lady says about valuing the support we are showing to refugees. It is important that we have been providing support in those countries of the region that have accepted significant numbers of refugees from Syria. She refers to Lebanon, but of course Turkey and Jordan have also accepted significant numbers. So we are addressing this across a number of fronts, both providing that support in the region and bringing some refugees here to the UK, and encouraging other countries to ensure that they step up to provide that support as well. As she says, we value the fact that we are the second biggest bilateral donor, and we want to encourage others also to step up in the support they are giving.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Obviously, this is the first major military action since the publication of the Chilcot report, which recommended the need for

[Chris Stephens]

public support and public understanding, and for sound legal advice. Given that Parliament was not recalled and legal advice was published after the fact, is it the Government's position that they reject those Chilcot recommendations?

The Prime Minister: The Government were clear in their response to the Chilcot recommendations and I suggest the hon. Gentleman looks at the response we provided.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): For this action alone, eight Storm Shadow missiles cost £6.32 million. Deploying an RAF Tornado GR4 reportedly costs £35,000 per plane per hour. How much money is the Prime Minister willing to invest in winning the peace in Syria and rebuilding?

The Prime Minister: We have also provided nearly £2.5 billion of humanitarian support for the refugees from Syria. I say to the hon. Lady that we acted because the Syrian regime was using chemical weapons and had done so on a number of occasions, and it is important that we alleviate future humanitarian suffering by degrading its capability to do that.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Except for the target list, there was very little in the Prime Minister's statement that could not have been said to Parliament and to the public last week. In reviewing what has happened in the past week, will she and her advisers review whether she could have been clearer about the strategy, objectives and legality ahead of action, as that could have taken more of the public with her? I fear that those actions and decisions not to reveal have produced the opposite effect with the public.

The Prime Minister: I have answered the question about the timetable for the decision, and the fact that that was taken and Parliament did not have an opportunity to discuss it in advance. That is why I have come here at the first possible opportunity, to enable everybody to question me on that and to set out clearly in my statement the basis on which we took the action.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Although I readily acknowledge that the Democratic Unionist party is the largest party representing people in Northern Ireland, the 10 DUP Members do not speak for everyone in Northern Ireland and they certainly do not speak for me. So may I reflect to the Prime Minister, as graciously and gently as I can, that many, many people in Northern Ireland, including me, are bitterly disappointed that she did not recall Parliament to seek our approval? It is a different matter when individual MPs have on their conscience walking into the Lobby to support or vote against military action—I know because I have the

scars on my back to prove it. I would like the Prime Minister to address the real risks, which none of us should minimise—I am not suggesting we are—of escalating the appalling conflict in Syria and inviting upon us retaliation from Russia. Those are the assurances I seek from the Prime Minister, not just for the people of Northern Ireland, but for the entire country.

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady, as I have said in response to others, that that issue of the risk of escalation, which I recognise she and others have identified, was considered when we took the action. The action was taken in a way so as to minimise the risk of escalation; this was targeted and limited, and it was about degrading the capability of the Syrian regime in relation to its chemical weapons. I continue to believe it is important that we give a very clear message that we will not accept the use of chemical weapons.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): All right-thinking Members of this House will utterly abhor the atrocious use of chemical weapons against the civilian population of Syria, which constitutes a gratuitous war crime upon that population. But the Prime Minister said there was an immediate need to act—contravening the normal practice of consulting Parliament prior to any military action overseas—due to the immediate need to alleviate further humanitarian disasters in Syria. Was that based on a specific intelligence report that there was an imminent risk of further chemical weapons attacks in Syria? Does she accept that the key way of preventing further attacks in the future is by achieving a no-fly and no-bombing zone, internationally policed by the United Nations in Syria? That would be a way of denying the Syrian air force access to the delivery of these weapons.

The Prime Minister: As I laid out in my statement, there has been clear evidence of a continuing use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria. We saw what had happened in Douma. We gave time to make the appropriate assessments of what had happened in Douma and to make the proper planning for strikes. We took those strikes in a timely fashion to ensure that they were effective and had an impact on the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. That was the basis on which we took the decision we took. It was clear from the behaviour we have seen from the Syrian regime that it would be prepared to continue to use chemical weapons, with the danger to civilians that we had already seen in Douma and elsewhere, and we were seeking to prevent humanitarian suffering for the future. That was the basis on which we took that action.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we move on to the next business, I would like to thank the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the Scottish National party and all 140 Back-Bench Members who have questioned the Prime Minister over the past three hours.

Business of the House

7.29 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, I wish to make a short statement about this week's business.

MONDAY 16 APRIL—The House awaits your decision on the application for an emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24, Mr Speaker. Notwithstanding your decision, the House will no longer proceed with today's announced business.

TUESDAY 17 APRIL—General debate on anti-Semitism, followed by a debate on a motion on redress for victims of banking misconduct and the Financial Conduct Authority.

WEDNESDAY 18 APRIL—Second Reading of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [*Lords*], followed by a general debate on industrial strategy.

THURSDAY 19 APRIL—Backbench Business Committee debates on surgical mesh and on cancer treatment.

I shall make a further business statement in the usual way on Thursday.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for early sight of it. It is disappointing that the Government have not bowed to the inevitable pressure to hold a debate on the action in Syria in Government time. Earlier, the Prime Minister said that she wanted to be held accountable, but the Government seem to rely on the outcome of an application under Standing Order No. 24 to debate this important issue.

The Prime Minister was right when she said that there is no graver decision than to commit our forces to combat. A debate is not about interfering with operational matters, which are left to our brilliant armed forces and defence capabilities, who defend this country every minute of every day, for which we thank them. A statement, although welcome, allows only short answers and questions, as we have just seen—I thank you, Mr Speaker, for sitting through the questions from 140 Members. A debate is about Parliament and Members from all parties having the views of the country, through our constituents and as elected Members, heard and responded to in full. A debate in Government time would have respected conventions, democracy and Parliament.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I join the hon. Lady in thanking our armed forces for the superb work that they did. I point out to her that in fact the Prime Minister did seek an urgent debate today, but that was not to be granted. I also point out that the Prime Minister just answered questions for three and a quarter hours. I hope that the hon. Lady feels that that was something of a useful contribution to the parliamentary debate.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Many important issues that came out of today's exchanges will continue to cause interest and concern for Members of Parliament. Will the Leader of the House make sure that in the months ahead the Backbench Business Committee has plenty of days to allocate, to ensure that all Members of Parliament can continue to raise their concerns on the Floor of the House?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Procedure Committee is absolutely right that it is vital that all Members get the chance to debate a wide range of subjects. There is a huge number of interests across this place, of which tomorrow's debates on anti-Semitism and the Royal Bank of Scotland redress scheme are two examples. I assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to work carefully with the other business managers to ensure that there is always plenty of time for Back-Bench debates.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your steadfastness and mettle in sitting through those few hours of the Syria statement. I am glad that the Leader of the House sort of knows what is happening with the business this week, because the timetabling of business has been nothing other than the usual shambles and chaos that we see from this Government. They were going to apply for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 themselves, but that was taken away, and apparently we are going to have a debate under Standing Order No. 24 again tomorrow.

We need the Leader of the House to come to the House to say that we are going to get a full debate tomorrow, with an amendable motion, and that directly elected Members of Parliament will get the opportunity to vote on behalf of our constituents, who expect nothing else. We have been denied a say before the Government took us into military action; they should now be doing everything possible to ensure that we can reflect our constituents' views on such an important issue.

Andrea Leadsom: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the decision to allow or not to allow an urgent debate under Standing Order No. 24 is a decision for Mr Speaker. The decision as to which application, if any, Mr Speaker chose to take was for him. I also point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Prime Minister has made it clear that she is always willing to come to the House. She has just been on her feet for three and a quarter hours, answering questions from across the House. She fully intends to be, and has shown her commitment to being, accountable for the decision that was taken.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I very much welcome the Leader of the House's statement, but I welcome even more her reference to the three and a quarter hours that we have just been through. Does she agree that in the course of that extraordinary sequence, we not only had the opportunity to hear my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) make important points about international law and many other Government and Opposition Members make important contributions, but were able to witness a Prime Minister who showed, in the moderation, good sense and compelling arguments that she put forward, the capacity to lead this country at a time when we need such a leader?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my right hon. Friend is exactly right. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) made some important points of law, and there were many good contributions from throughout the House. I was delighted to see that a good number of Opposition Members support the Prime Minister's decision to protect our armed forces and ensure operational success while taking moderate steps to make sure that chemical weapons cannot be used with impunity.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, pay tribute to the Prime Minister's dedication this afternoon—it was a remarkable performance—but, with respect, she did not answer all the questions put to her. In particular, I asked her why she was not following the precedent set by David Cameron in 2011 in respect of the intervention in Libya by granting the House a vote on an amendable motion. That is surely the precedent that should be followed. Why are the Government so resistant to it?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will recall that the Prime Minister alluded to the 2016 written ministerial statement that set out the position in terms of the need to take urgent action for humanitarian relief. He might also be aware that the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, has supported the action taken by the Prime Minister for the reasons given.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. One of the accidental and perhaps injurious by-products of the postponement today of the Second Reading of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [*Lords*] is that the House will not have the opportunity to hear the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) expatiate on the matter, to which I know that he enthusiastically looked forward. Nevertheless, we can have a mini version of his oratory now.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): That will be a cause of grave disappointment to many Members in all parts of the House. Nevertheless, also displaced from today's business was an important debate on housing. Members from all parties have expressed strong views about homelessness, home ownership and the Government's consultation. The Leader of the House has announced that we are going to consider the laser Bill to which you referred, Mr Speaker, but she did not mention that debate on housing. Can she tell the House that that general debate on housing will indeed take place, so that we can explore the matter in full and to the degree it deserves?

Andrea Leadsom: Like you, no doubt, Mr Speaker, I was very much looking forward to hearing my right hon. Friend's contributions to that debate. It is certainly a top domestic priority for the Government to improve the plight of those who need their own home and, of course, to alleviate homelessness. Those are incredibly important issues, so we will certainly reschedule that debate in Government time as soon as we can.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I remind the Leader of the House that the Prime Minister does not need to brief the media or indeed ask Mr Speaker for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 to have a matter debated in the House. The Government control the House's timetable, so why on earth were they trying to use that procedure to do something that they have the power to do anyway?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said previously, the Prime Minister requested an urgent debate under the Standing Order No. 24 procedure, and it was not granted.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister has explained why Parliament was not recalled. Would it not be a good idea to have a full debate on a

voteable motion about Syria tomorrow, so that the House can show its support for the Prime Minister's view? I think the House would vote overwhelmingly in favour. Will the Leader of the House consider coming back later to make another business statement to announce a full debate for tomorrow?

Andrea Leadsom: I would be delighted to change the business of the House every few minutes, but the patience of the Chamber might wear a bit thin. My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and without giving too much away, Mr Speaker, you will be getting another application for a Standing Order No. 24 debate, which may have a bearing on tomorrow's business.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady agree that, although coming to this House and answering questions for three and a quarter hours is commendable, it is actually the Prime Minister's job in a moment such as this, and that the job of this House is to debate important matters, and this is a very, very important matter? Answering a series of questions is not the same as having a full, frank and detailed debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very fond of the hon. Lady, but that was quite an ungenerous response to a three-and-a-quarter-hour marathon. Let us be clear: in a statement, there is a personal reply to every single question, which does not happen in a debate, so that was actually commendable of the Prime Minister.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I listened carefully to what the Leader of the House said. The Prime Minister set out in her statement, and in her replies to the questions from Members, the very clear reasons why she did not recall Parliament last week for a debate and a vote before the decision for military action was taken. I accept her decisions for doing so, but I do think that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has a point when he says that the precedent set in 2011 for a statement by the Prime Minister followed by a debate is a good one. Having listened to every question in today's statement, my judgment is that a full day's debate tomorrow, opened by the Prime Minister and followed by the Leader of the Opposition, would lead to a very clear judgment by this House that would strengthen, not weaken, the Government's position.

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I feel like I am on shaky ground here, because as you will be aware, Mr Speaker, the Government did offer a debate for tomorrow, but I think that you already had applications for Standing Order No. 24 debates for tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the Leader of the House is trying to respond to the question that she has been asked, but it is extremely important that the procedural position is understood.

First, it is a fact that applications for debates under Standing Order No. 24 are applications in the first instance to me and then to the House. I have invested in me by the House the power to grant the right for the application to be made, and if support exists in the House, such a debate, with my approval, can go ahead.

Secondly, however, the Government control the Order Paper for future days. It is therefore open to the Government to table a motion—a substantive motion or a take-note motion and if a substantive motion, an amendable motion—on any matter that they choose.

I know that the Leader of the House, whom I have known for a long time, would not seek to misrepresent the position—she was just trying honestly to answer the question of the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper)—but it is important to be clear that I am not an obstacle to an amendable Government motion. If the Government had wanted to table such a motion, they could have done so. If they had told me that they were going to do so, that would have been fine, but they did no such thing. I am simply discharging my obligations to allow SO24 applications and to adjudicate on them. The waters must not be muddied.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): If the Government wanted to have a debate earlier today and had pursued an SO24 application in order to secure it, why do they not want a debate now, and why do they not table a motion now in order to have a debate tomorrow? It is within their power. Why should they be using powers that are available for Back Benchers to call on the Government when they have the power to do so themselves?

Andrea Leadsom: We are now awaiting an SO24 emergency debate on the subject of Syria.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Mr Speaker, you probably were not aware of my interest in the Second Reading of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill until now. We are now due to have it on Wednesday, but on Wednesday we should have been considering the Committee and remaining stages of that Bill. Can my right hon. Friend shed some light on when that might now take place?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right: it is a very important Bill that will help ensure the safety of vehicles from laser misuse, and we will schedule it as soon as we can.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): No parliamentarian worth their salt should accept this flannel from those on the Government Front Bench. Will the Leader of the House outline from that Dispatch Box why she will not leave this Chamber after this statement and table an amendable motion for the House to debate tomorrow?

Andrea Leadsom: I have made it very clear that the Prime Minister has just made a statement and taken questions for three and a quarter hours. We are awaiting an SO24 emergency debate. The Prime Minister applied for an urgent debate for today. We looked at having a debate tomorrow, but we understand that there will be another SO24 application heard later for a further debate tomorrow, so we have decided to leave the business unchanged. I hope that that is clear.

Mr Speaker: As the Clerk has just advised me, my judgment on the SO No. 24 debate—I know this because we discussed it earlier—could have been impacted by a Government decision to table a motion for a substantive debate tomorrow. I am sorry but I cannot overstate the importance of accuracy and correctness in these matters.

My decision about an SO No. 24 application is independent of, and can be separable and distinguishable from, a Government decision to table a substantive motion. It is entirely open to the Government to do that if they so wish. I was pleased to see the Father of the House nodding from a sedentary position when I was making that point. I do have the advantage, procedurally, of being correct.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Given what the Prime Minister just said about the urgency of taking action on Saturday and the fact that she did want to listen and respond to the House, the business statement that we have just heard is utterly extraordinary and flies in the face of everything we heard during the Prime Minister's statement. My constituents expect me to tell them how I would have responded to this matter, and it is a matter of record that may last for many years in the future.

I support entirely the SO24 application of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), but it is not the same as an amendable motion, in Government time, where we as Members of Parliament are asked to justify to our constituents our view on this matter. The response of the Leader of the House is utterly unsatisfactory and demeans Parliament. She should go away and come back with a much better response.

Andrea Leadsom: As I have already said, the Prime Minister has just answered questions for three and a quarter hours. She gave individual responses to individual questions, which is a much more detailed response than in a general debate. We are now looking forward to the urgent debate put forward by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), and that is what we are all waiting for.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I have been asking myself for some days why the Government would not table a substantive motion in this House and put the matter to a vote. I cannot rid myself of the unworthy suspicion that there may have been some doubts as to whether we would get a majority for it, and whether we might repeat the 2013 experience.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, having listened to three and a half hours of questions—a performance by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister of outstanding endurance and assurance—it is quite obvious that there is a large majority in this House in favour of the action that the Government have taken? Will the Leader of the House discuss the matter further with colleagues and lay any fears on one side? We would be in a stronger position if the House gave a big majority for the action.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful to the Father of the House for his advice, and I will, of course, take it away.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): After the farcical and contemptuous folly of not recalling Parliament last week and given what Mr Speaker has just said, why does the Leader of the House not have the courage to come forward with an amendable motion for us all to debate and vote on tomorrow?

Andrea Leadsom: I am in danger of repeating myself. We have just had a three-and-a-quarter-hour statement from the Prime Minister, with individual replies to

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

individual detailed questions. We are now looking forward to a three-hour debate under Standing Order No. 24, with the prospect of a further such debate tomorrow.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Leader of the House has said that she is a champion for the will of Parliament. On this gravest of grave issues, regarding conflict, does she agree that we should test the will of this House by having a vote?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there can always be a Division when the House does not agree on two different sides of an argument. We are now looking forward to an urgent debate on the question of Syria, the application for which will be made momentarily by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern).

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Leader of the House quite often tells us that Parliament is taking back control, so hon. Members can imagine my surprise when I sat in front of my TV set on Saturday and watched the Prime Minister in a wood-panelled room taking questions from journalists, rather than from Members of this House. But there is a wider point about the recall of Parliament. People have been calling regularly for the recall of Parliament over the past week, which only the Government can currently do. If the Leader of the House is serious about Parliament taking back control, will she support changes to the Standing Orders that would allow Members of the House—not just the Government—to recall Parliament and at least allow us to take back control?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have always made clear, I will always listen to sensible proposals about changes to procedure with recommendations from the Procedure Committee. It is right that we should take such issues seriously. The hon. Gentleman will, however, be aware of all the arguments that the Prime Minister has just made for taking action without recalling Parliament. That decision was entirely legitimate and justified.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House also consider taking away the excellent recommendation from the Father of the House to form a cross-party commission to examine and clarify the role of Parliament vis-à-vis the Executive on the question of deploying British forces in military action overseas?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there have been a number of reviews of the use of the royal prerogative and the way in which Parliament works in relation to Executive decisions about military intervention. The Prime Minister has clearly set out the written ministerial statement in 2016, which is the latest assessment of how we would act in the case of the need for urgent humanitarian relief, and I think that she answered all those questions.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Mr Speaker, you have made it absolutely clear that the Government have the ability to table an amendable motion on this subject. Why do they not do so?

Andrea Leadsom: We have just had a three-and-a-quarter-hour statement from the Prime Minister, with individual questions and responses. We are now looking forward to a further three-hour urgent debate on Syria. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Leader of the House must be heard, as she was answering the question. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked that question and there was a lot of bellowing—it was not chuntering—from a sedentary position from her party colleagues. The Leader of the House must be heard.

Andrea Leadsom: I had finished, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am very happy so to be advised. I am grateful to the Leader of the House.

I shall this evening hear two applications for debates under Standing Order No. 24. First, I shall hear the application from the Leader of the Opposition, who has up to three minutes in which to make his application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24.

Military Action Overseas: Parliamentary Approval

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

7.53 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I rise to propose that this House should debate Parliament's rights in relation to the approval of military action by British forces overseas. In the light of Friday's airstrikes on Syria, this House should urgently debate the important matter of the Government's obligations under parliamentary convention to seek the approval of the House before committing UK forces to premeditated, hostile military action overseas.

The Cabinet manual, published by the Government in 2011, confirms the Government's acceptance of that convention and guarantees that the Government will

"observe that convention except when there was an emergency and such action would not be appropriate."

Two years ago, even while reneging on the Government's previous commitment to enshrine that convention in law, the then Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), guaranteed in this House that the Government would

"keep Parliament informed and...of course seek its approval before deploying British forces in combat roles into a conflict situation."—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 630.]

Members on all sides are therefore rightly concerned that no such approval was sought by the Government prior to the air strikes against Syrian Government installations, to which the UK was a party last Friday night, alongside the USA and France. Indeed, this House was not only denied a vote, but did not even have the opportunity to question the Government in advance on the legal and evidential basis for their participation in this action, on their new strategy in regard to Syrian intervention, or on why they acted before the conclusion of the ongoing inspection in Douma by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Members will also be concerned that these strikes have been explicitly presented, by the Government and by the United States, as a possible precursor to even stronger intervention against the Syrian regime if that is judged to be necessary. Therefore, the Government's failure to seek—let alone obtain—parliamentary approval for these air strikes sets a precedent for potential and more dangerous future action, not just in Syria but in other countries where similar situations may arise.

I therefore ask, Mr Speaker, that you allow urgent consideration by this House of the Government's approach when it comes to the rights of Parliament to debate and approve military action overseas.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24—namely, Parliament's rights in relation to the approval of military action by British forces overseas. I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. Gentleman. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. Gentleman the leave of the House?

Application agreed to (not fewer than 40 Members standing in support).

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to colleagues for exercising their knee muscles. The right hon. Gentleman has secured the leave of the House. I should inform the House that the debate will be held tomorrow, Tuesday 17 April, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the right hon. Gentleman's application.

I said to the House a small number of moments ago that I would be hearing two applications for debates under Standing Order No. 24. I now call Alison McGovern to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

Syria

7.58 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I rise to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the current situation in Syria and the UK Government's approach.

The need for this debate first arose last week, during recess. As we know, on Saturday 7 April, two incidents were reported of bombs filled with toxic chemicals being dropped on Douma in Syria. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and I agreed during the recess that, on the House's return, we would seek an emergency opportunity for the House to discuss the atrocity. The need for such a debate is all the stronger now, given the Government's action in response. Members will have different views on the Government's action. However, whatever their view, it is pretty clear that the House ought to have the opportunity to debate the matter.

On the basis of that principle, and no other, I have been pleased to receive support for this SO24 application from the following Members: the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Father of the House; my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Mother of the House; the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis); my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper); the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling, as I mentioned earlier; the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell); my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty); and a whole host of Back Benchers who hold various different views on the situation in Syria and what the Government's actions ought to be but none the less agree that we ought to discuss it in this House, whatever the Government's attitude to process in Parliament. To quote the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield in a previous debate:

"In a hung Parliament, political power tends to pass from the Cabinet Room to the Floor of this House".—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 109.]

As I said, on Saturday 7 April two incidents were reported of bombs filled with toxic chemicals being dropped on Douma. Children suffocated in the street, frothing at the mouth as the chemical became acid in their lungs, and the powerful smell of chlorine was in the air—a vicious and disgusting chemical that tears into pieces the airways of those who breathe it in and the skin of those who touch it. This House, with 19 coats

of arms commemorating MPs who died in the first world war, should know better than most about the devastating impact of the use of chemical weapons in war. In the 1920s, Britain was at the forefront of efforts to ban these vile weapons. Our country's role in containing the devastation they cause is clear.

We have heard the Prime Minister's statement on the action the Government took over the weekend. However, I remain of the view that what is required is a much wider debate in this House on the UK's strategy for protecting civilians, including the need for much greater action on refugees than we have so far heard. Syria as a whole must be on the agenda, not just chemical weapons. That is why this debate should proceed urgently.

In the words of Jo Cox, whose coat of arms is on the wall of this Chamber, right behind me,

"despite all of the dangers and difficult judgements that lie ahead, burying our head in the sand is not an option. We must face up to this crisis and do all that we can to resolve it."

Her words, Mr Speaker, still stand.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, to whose application I have listened carefully. Colleagues, I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Lady the leave of the House?

Application agreed to (not fewer than 40 Members standing in support).

Mr Speaker: Very clearly, the hon. Lady does have the leave of the House, and to her debate, colleagues, you will be pleased to know, we will proceed momentarily. That debate will take place today for up to three hours.

Before I invite the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) to move her motion, it might perhaps be helpful if I explain the timing. Standing Orders do not expressly provide that a debate granted under Standing Order No. 24 is exempt from interruption at 10 o'clock on a Monday. They do, however, allow for business delayed as a result of such a debate to have injury time, if necessary beyond the moment of interruption at 10 o'clock. I have taken advice and benefited from the contents of the scholarly cranium of the Clerk of the House. On the strength of that, I am ruling that the debate can continue despite the moment of interruption because I am interpreting the power given to me under subsection (2) of Standing Order No. 24 to determine the length of a debate as embracing the power to permit the debate to continue beyond the moment of interruption. It will therefore continue for up to three hours. We now come to that emergency debate on the current situation in Syria and the UK Government's approach.

Syria

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

8.3 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the current situation in Syria and the UK Government's approach.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate.

On the morning of 14 April, British and allied forces conducted strikes on Syrian installations involved in the Assad regime's illegal use of chemical weapons against its own people. The strike was launched as a response to the Syrian regime's latest chemical weapons attack on 7 April in Douma, as I mentioned a moment ago, which killed up to 75 people, including young children.

I want to begin by quoting a Syrian, Bilal Shami from Rethink Rebuild Society, which is a Syria-led organisation that I have visited in Manchester. Bilal said:

"The UK's latest reactionary military response seems to be detached from a wider comprehensive strategy that helps end this devastating seven-year conflict."

It is that wider strategy that I want the House now to turn to.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making a very powerful case for this debate today. This week I have had several emails from Rethink Rebuild Society, which is based in Manchester, imploring Britain now to redouble its efforts to put civilians at the heart of its strategy and to make sure that the abhorrent actions of Assad that we saw a few days ago can never reoccur. I just wanted my hon. Friend to know that.

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend, and, through her, all those in the Syrian community in Manchester and in the UK beyond for the assistance they have given me in working on Syria.

We know that we cannot continue to allow the erosion of international laws that prohibit the use of chemical weapons. I explained earlier our country's historical role in containing the use of chemical weapons—and we ought not to forget our own experience. But I do not wish to constrain our discussion today merely to chemical weapons, because, vile though they are, they are not the only means of savage killing that has taken place.

Let me remind the House that the conflict in Syria began when Assad's forces opened fire on protesters demanding the release of political prisoners. They were not violent anarchists or subversives with questionable ties to foreign Governments, but a 13-year-old boy, his cousin and a dozen of their friends who had sprayed graffiti on a wall calling for Assad to step down. With the Syrian civil war now in its eighth year, the lack of a strategy from our Government beyond hoping that things will improve is leading only to more suffering. More than half a million Syrians have died, 6 million are internally displaced, and 5 million are refugees.

Today I call, as my colleague Jo Cox called, for a comprehensive strategy to protect civilian life. The Assad Government continue to commit violations of international humanitarian law on an almost daily basis. Let us take, for example, his barrel bombs: the brute force of dirty

explosives booted off the back of a helicopter, heedless of who might be beneath. The deliberate targeting of civilians is illegal in any case, but what makes this worse is Assad's continual terrorising of the civilian population without consequence.

That is not all. Siege warfare has returned in Syria. That is also illegal, but despite the best efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Red Crescent and other humanitarians, Assad simply will not comply with the right to food, the right to medical care, or the right not just to live but to exist in any normal understanding of the word.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the Assad regime's continued aerial bombardment against civilian populations in Syria. Does she agree that one of the Government's critical objectives must be to ensure that they pursue the objective of an internationally policed no-fly zone, as well as a no-bombing zone, over Syria so that we can eliminate that activity? There is a stark contrast between the situation in Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Assad's untrammelled power to bomb his civilians.

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend will know that a no-bombing zone was precisely one of the policies that Jo campaigned for when she was in this House.

This is why I will use my time today discussing what I feel we need to consider in beginning a new road map for Syria here in the UK. We need to start from a simple question: what can be done to save human life not on the basis of our simple short-term interests, but on the basis of the humanitarian principle? I know that some in the House will be sceptical. They will say, "We've seen this all before." They will say that my humanitarian principle is just words. Well, in some ways they are right, because we should always be judged by our actions and not just our words.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): After seeing the horrific pictures of suffering children, one with an oxygen mask over them, does the hon. Lady agree that had we not taken action over the weekend, it would have been more likely that more chemical weapons would have been used against the population of Syria?

Alison McGovern: We do not know, and we should not engage in crystal ball gazing over matters that are so serious.

Whatever actions we choose, we ought to do so in a way that promotes humanitarian principles in this country and everywhere else in the world. While actions taken in the name of humanitarian principles have not always been perfect, and we must always know and understand our own history, we cannot drive looking only in the rear-view mirror. We have to face what is in front of us and try to apply humanitarian principles in the most careful way that we can, with the benefit of past experience, rather than in an attempt to address issues passed. I ask all Members for the next three hours, whatever their view, to just focus on Syria. Do not the Syrian people deserve that from us?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alison McGovern: I will make a little progress and give way in a moment.

[*Alison McGovern*]

Because of what has happened, the international community is now seized of the importance of Syria, so it is important that we make the most of this window. The Prime Minister's actions so far are open to debate, but I ask that we use our time now not just to review what she has done, but to task her to do more.

Let me turn to what I believe the UK's role can be. As I said, Jo Cox asked—I ask again today—for the Government to bring forward a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians. What does that mean? In short, we need to get aid in, get desperately injured people out, deter further violence, defund Assad and demonstrate our commitment to the victims of war. All that must be done alongside a search for progressive partners around the world who wish to rebuild the consensus that saw the responsibility to protect passed in 2005. The UN needs reform—we know that—but the deadlock in the Security Council has meant half a million people dead on Syrian streets and the biggest movement of refugees since 1979. That is clearly wrong. There must be a better way, and we have to find partners who will help us.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison McGovern: I will not give way at the moment.

First, on getting aid in, medical supplies are desperately needed. I have been hearing from professionals in the region who are trying to help to save lives, and Assad's tactic has been simply to block them. We have the resources, and we have supplies in Jordan. We have to focus on getting medical supplies and other forms of necessary aid into the places where people are besieged. I will return to that in a moment.

I want to highlight the pledging conference coming up in Brussels shortly, which the Prime Minister mentioned. I am pleased that there is an overwhelming majority in the House in favour of our aid budget. Given that support, all we ask is that the Prime Minister makes the best possible use of the aid budget for people in Syria.

Secondly, on getting people out, the tactic of Assad and his regime has been to direct civilians to a concentrated area and to group them together, saying that that will make them safe, and then to attack them. It is a bitter falsehood to say to people, "We're going to shift you out of here to make sure that you're safe," before later coming back to attack them. We need to help to mount a rescue, and that means searching for the people who humanitarian organisations know are the most injured, as well as disabled children, and helping to get them out of there.

Thirdly, we ought to deter further violence. I caution everyone in the House against engaging in the behaviour of an armchair general. We should not be coming up with military solutions off the top of our head, but that does not mean we should not use the skill of our armed forces or that we should not say to our military advisers, "Look at the different groups of people in Syria, be they besieged or attacked, and give us a strategy to help each and every one of them. Tell us what we can do to deter further violence." It is not just chemical weapons that people are facing there. Barrel bombs ought not to be dropped on children's heads—it is as simple as that. If we cannot get the best advice on how we can deter that, I am not sure what we are for.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alison McGovern: I will give way in a moment, but I will come back to others first.

In addition, surveillance and reconnaissance assets can conduct monitoring and reporting of attacks against civilians. The UK and its coalition partners should be providing protection and support to the UN. It is within the coalition's gift to establish a favourable air situation so that we can ensure the safe delivery of humanitarian aid. We have to get the right supplies in, and I simply ask the Government to go back and find what more they can do to open humanitarian corridors and get aid in.

As a guarantor of the rules-based international order, the Government must now ask all parties to the conflict to permit the unrestricted delivery and distribution of that aid. This has to be put in as simple and stark terms as possible. We have to articulate what we see as the next stage for accountability and whether there is a role for other routes through the UN and the International Criminal Court. The Government ought to say what they think now. The French Government recently made a number of suggestions, and I ask the Government to look at those and work with the French to see what can be done.

Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on the case she is making. Like all hon. Members, I have had contact over the last few days from constituents who are very concerned about the plight of the Syrian people. Does she agree that what she is describing is not the kind of one-off event that occurred over the weekend, for reasons that I understand—immediately to degrade chemical weapons—but a long-term and sustained diplomatic, political and, if necessary, military response? Part of that must be a communications strategy to ensure that the public in this country and more widely understand what we are seeking to achieve.

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend makes an important and wise point, as she does normally.

We have been coming back to this place after each horrific event and asking ourselves, "How did we let this happen?" Let this time be different. Let this be the moment when we decide to take a long-term view and bring together all the best efforts of everybody in Britain to secure peace.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case, particularly about the importance of aid. What does she think should be done to ensure that other countries follow the UK in standing by their responsibilities to deliver aid to Syria?

Alison McGovern: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention. As someone who fought the battle to get a Bill through Parliament to guarantee the aid of this country, I would happily talk to parliamentarians in other countries about what they ought to do, but this debate is not about what others should do. Our Prime Minister is here, and my focus is on what she can do and what our country can do to try to assist vulnerable Syrians.

Fourthly, we need to defund Assad. Unfortunately, Syria has still managed to function as an economic actor in the world, but that cannot be right. It cannot be okay that business goes on as normal in the face of such brutality and inhumane actions by that country's Government. I ask the Prime Minister to investigate what actions we can take to remove Syria from the SWIFT system, which provides for international financial transactions. That would send a strong signal that we are no longer prepared to tolerate Syria just going on as normal. It has involvement in a number of forums around the world, and we must go through each one and remove Syria. We need to send a message that the Syrian Government are beyond the pale and that their actions prove that they can no longer be treated as a normal member of the international community in any sphere of life, especially economically.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): One thing that has been absent from these debates—whether we are talking about Iraq, Libya or Syria—is that what would offer the people of Syria a lot of hope is a reconstruction plan for after we achieve peace in Syria. That has always been absent from the Government's thinking.

Alison McGovern: At some point, Syria must be rebuilt, but right now the bombs are falling. We ought not to have an idea that we can somehow put money into Syria and that will make it better, because my argument is actually the opposite: that would make it worse. My hon. Friend is right, however, in the sense that we have to work with Syrians—especially those in this country, and all those who are our constituents—and talk to them about the kind of vision they have for Syria post conflict. I will come on to the precise point he mentioned in a moment.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work not just on this, but, like all its members, on the all-party friends of Syria group. Does she agree that, in relation to Russia and finance, the UK could look at taking a similar approach to that of the US towards oligarchs? The rouble actually dropped 30% 10 days ago because of measures that the Trump Government brought in. Does she think that such an approach would be relevant, to apply financial pressure on Russia?

Alison McGovern: I do. My hon. Friend pre-empted me, and she is quite right. In my view, the sanctions we have currently levied against Syria and its backers are insufficient. She is no longer in her place, but the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), spoke very well earlier about the need to look again at this situation and to consider secondary sanctions to reach those who trade with those trading with Syria and its backers. I am pleased that the Treasury Committee is going to investigate this matter in detail.

Fifthly and finally, we have to demonstrate our commitments to the victims of this war. We now have a large number of Syrians—people from Syria who were here before the conflict and those who have come in since—who form part of our UK society. I really think we ought to listen to and work with them and that we should build up another track of peace building. We know that the

Geneva talks have stalled and that the Astana process is not going to produce what we would see as an answer, so why do we not learn the lessons of Northern Ireland and recognise that peace needs to involve not just the warring parties but all those with a stake in Syrian society? Why can we not reach out across Syrian civil society and have a British-led effort to consult those impacted by the war and who hold no power but may do so in the future? I really believe that in working with Syrian civil society, most especially women, we would find some of the answers to peace. That will not come immediately or straightaway, but by doing such early work, we could put in train a better Syria for the future.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I have been listening very carefully to the hon. Lady's well-informed and very correct speech. I was pleased that she mentioned the Geneva process. One of the reasons why the process has not actually produced any positive results is that the west—the Europeans and the Americans—could not decide whether Assad should play a part in the peace process or in any interim Government. Will the hon. Lady give us an idea of her views on this subject?

Alison McGovern: I have a very firm view, which is that that is a question for Syrians to decide. In this country, the United Kingdom, we are a democracy, and we decide who we are led by. I believe that that should be the same for every country in the world, especially for Syria. It will be for Syrians to decide their leadership, not a British politician in the British Parliament.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I appreciate that my hon. Friend is making a very important speech. While we may be on different sides of the argument on bombing—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Wait a second, because I want to say something positive—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say very gently to the hon. Gentleman, blurt it out briefly, man.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I spent the first week of the recess in northern Syria—I left the day before the attacks happened—and I met the Kurdish leaders. My hon. Friend mentioned the involvement of women. Does she recognise that the role of the Kurdish people in involving women is really important and that any discussions must include the Kurds in northern Syria?

Alison McGovern: That is extremely helpful. I would just say to all Members that if they think they can do politics without women, well, they are wrong.

As I say, we have the potential to show British leadership in bringing people together for a longer-term vision of the peace. It will not be easy, but work invested in this now would bear fruit in the future.

On demonstrating our British commitment to the victims of war, I must ask the Prime Minister to turn her attention to the refugees. I am pretty sure she is not going to agree with me. The Government previously committed to taking 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, but I am afraid that, to me, that is not good enough. It is just 4% of the number taken in by Germany. When it comes to the figure of 3,000 children taken in under the Dubs amendment—they are not all Syrian, but some are—I just think that that is not nearly good enough, given the size and scale of this conflict. We have to

[*Alison McGovern*]

demonstrate good faith, which means putting our arms out and offering a chance of life—not just to be alive, but to truly exist—to people who are some of the most unfortunate in our world. Surely, it is in our British nature to do that. Our reputation is really being diminished on the world stage, and the issue of refugees has rubbished our global reputation.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point. Does she agree that it is particularly sad that even where British communities have reached out and wanted to help Syrian refugees, as people have done in Penarth in my constituency, the logistical and bureaucratic hurdles they have had to go through mean that they have been unable to do that, even when supported by the Home Office to resettle them? They have raised the money, got the property and put everything in place, and they want to welcome Syrian refugees, yet they are being prevented from doing so, and that has been replicated up and down the country.

Alison McGovern: I am afraid that that is the case. I agree that it is very important to get this right—it is very important to take a cautious approach and especially to work very closely with local authorities—but I am afraid the point my hon. Friend makes is true everywhere in our country. The level of foot dragging by the Home Office reveals the kind of hostile attitude that has been created when it comes to people from elsewhere. Conservative Members will disagree with me, and it is not in my nature to be unduly partisan, but I can only say to them that this is an issue on which I truly believe that to be the case and I would honestly say to them that they should look at it again.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I totally respect what the hon. Lady is saying, but I have been to a refugee camp on the borders of Syria, and most of the people there just want to go home. Does she not agree that, if we could facilitate some way of letting those people go home from the camps, it would make Syria a better place after the war?

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman is right in a sense. In a conflict, we know that it is by and large better for people to be in the region if there is a possibility of their going home. That may have been a relevant argument seven years ago, but, unfortunately, the likelihood of the conflict coming to an end anytime soon is less than it was then.

Given the size and scale of the refugee camps and given the fact mentioned earlier this afternoon by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) that 25% of citizens in Lebanon are now refugees, the fact that we have committed to take 20,000 by 2020 is just insignificant given the task in front of us. There will be many people for whom a return to Syria is neither appropriate nor what they want, and I simply ask Members whether it is not part of our national character to be welcoming and to bring people here if they really need it.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and she is making an incredibly powerful point. On one occasion, she and I were in the

same Lobby when it came to one of the Syrian refugee votes, but it is important that we take refugees in the context of the overall package of support that the British Government are giving to the Syrian region. We are the second largest bilateral donor in terms of international aid—second only to the United States. The hon. Lady referenced Germany, but we have given more in international aid than the rest of the European Union combined.

Alison McGovern: As I said earlier, I am very proud of my country's record on aid. It is a record I believe all of us, right across this House, should be proud of. Unfortunately, our country's record on aid does not do much for a sick Syrian child in a refugee camp who needs to come here and be treated by the NHS. That is the reality of the situation we face: we cannot hold up our record on aid to a family who desperately need a roof over their head—we just cannot. All I am asking is that the Prime Minister do a little more.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, and I share the admiration of everyone else for the speech she is making. We have heard a great deal today about the aid cheques we have signed, but her speech is revealing that a huge amount of that aid is not actually getting through to the people who so desperately need it. Is not part of our commitment to those people not just to sign the cheques but to have the political will to ensure that the aid gets to where it is needed?

Alison McGovern: I could not have said it better myself.

I want to offer the Prime Minister another chance to do something about this. I accept that, immediately, this may be a forlorn hope, but I still want to offer her the chance. I would like her to stand at the Dispatch Box and tell me that she will double the number of refugees that we will take by 2020. Then we will know that she is really serious about global Britain. She should stand at the Dispatch Box and tell me that we will double the number of Dubs kids that we will accept, and then I will think that she really means it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way in what is an incredibly powerful speech. I am so pleased that she raised the issue of the Dubs children, because we know that there are Syrian children in the refugee camps in Greece. This conflict has been going on for seven years, and of course people have fled further than just the nearest camps. Turkey is taking 3 million, and we have not even taken the 3,000 we said we would take when we passed the Dubs amendment. We are talking about a small fraction, but it is a fraction that is life or death for those we do not take. The Prime Minister is shaking her head. I urge her to go to the camps in Greece, see those children and tell us that they are not as worthy as the children in Ghouta, because they all need our help.

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I will mention her activism again in a moment.

I just want to say to the Prime Minister that I am really serious about my request. I really feel that if we are to restore our global reputation, bring true meaning to global Britain and send a message to the world that Britain is back on the world stage, it is, as she will know, deeds, not words, that we require.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just in the large urban areas that people care about suffering and that the same welcome would be there in our smaller communities, our rural communities and our small towns? There is a welcome there, too. I believe that the people in this country are deeply, deeply compassionate. That may not always be the case in the abstract, in terms of concepts such as the refugee community, but when it comes to meeting others one on one, I think people behave differently.

Alison McGovern: There is certainly nowhere more welcoming than Clwyd South.

I will conclude on refugees by reminding the Prime Minister that the reputation of our country—our honour—is at stake. As a proud British person, I cannot accept that there is will enough to send our incredible and brave armed forces to attack Assad's killing machine, but little will to reach out to those who ran from him. The current situation is simply unacceptable, and if the Government think this problem will go away, it has been shown that it will not. I, my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Bristol West and many, many others will never, ever stop demanding that the Government do more.

In conclusion, let me be clear that I do not seek to exaggerate the British role. We should be asking neither to be the world's policeman nor some rehashed imperialist power. We should simply be acting like a paid up member of the human race. If our open eyes see innocence treated with brutality, we should think of ourselves neither as their only saviours nor helpless to do any good. We have the capacity to work with others to help; that is all. No grandstanding is needed, just practical help. Britain on the world stage used to have a reputation for reliability and competence. It is time we got it back. I believe the five approaches I have detailed could provide practical help to those who need it: no heroics, just assistance to bring the peace.

I want to leave the House with the words of a Syrian doctor, Radwan Al Barbandi, who now works in our NHS in Liverpool. This morning, he reminded me of the words of Martin Luther King Jr:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Radwan said to me:

"We need this domino effect to stop in Syria. We do not want any nation to be gassed by a dictator."

I simply ask the Government to listen to Radwan and to listen to Syrians. The world will be a safer place if we can rebuild the simple principle that no ruler has the right to brutally slaughter their own citizens, not in Syria and not anywhere.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask you to clarify whether, at the conclusion of the debate, there is a difference of view within the House, it is in order for the House to divide in the normal manner even if we are beyond the moment of interruption?

Mr Speaker: Yes, because if the matter can be debated, the matter can also be resolved by a Division of the House. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, to all Members.

8.36 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on her very eloquent, if rather idealistic, speech. I think we all share her ambition that we should make the maximum possible contribution to humanitarian relief in Syria. The issue is what is actually practical and deliverable. On the Conservative Benches, I think we all think the British Government's record is exemplary compared with that of most other powers.

I also congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this emergency debate, which was a splendid initiative on her part. I was rather bewildered by the whole issue being reduced, in a way I had never seen before, to applications for emergency debates. It is my opinion that we should probably be having a two-day debate on a Government motion, so that everybody could have a reasonable length of time in which to speak. I must keep my contribution very short on this occasion and I will say no more about parliamentary accountability. At least we are having a debate now.

I am in the position of being a strong supporter of the action taken, while holding the view that we should have followed the precedent set when we liberated the Falkland Islands, when the House was recalled on a Saturday to give its approval. Margaret Thatcher did not invoke royal prerogative on that occasion. On the action that has been taken, I strongly support it. I strongly supported the action that should have been taken in 2013, when I was a member of the National Security Council. We resolved that the really serious use of chemical weapons that had taken place on that occasion should have been met with a military response as both a punishment and an attempt to deter any future use of chemical weapons. Despite the fact that I support parliamentary sovereignty on this matter, Parliament got it wrong on that occasion, as it did on Iraq a few years before. Nevertheless, the policy on Syria was, with hindsight, plainly correct. We should have responded to that attack. That we did not is one of the things that has slightly contributed to the temptation, which has been given into by Assad, to see how far he can go in using chemical weapons.

It is extremely reassuring that the British Government and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have played such a strong role in supporting this three-nation intervention, which has given a targeted, very precise and proportionate attack on sites associated with chemical weapons. As I said earlier, we should hold ourselves ready to do the same thing again if Assad is in any doubt about whether he might get away with going further.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: No, with great respect, I should not take too long, so I will not give way. The hon. Member for Wirral South rightly did because it is her debate, but I do not think I should.

The reason I feel so strongly is that unless we respond properly, there is a very serious danger that the use of chemical weapons, nerve agents and so on will rapidly spread. The nature of warfare in Syria and in a lot of other places in the middle east and elsewhere at the

[*Mr Kenneth Clarke*]

moment is essentially urban, guerrilla-type and militia-based. It is not only regimes such as Assad's who can see that if they wish to take somewhere like Ghouta, it is much quicker, easier and less of a risk to use chlorine gas, Sarin or whatever they have than it is to rely on bombardment and street-to-street fighting, where forces are engaged in long, dragged-out, dangerous activity in which they take heavy casualties. If someone has no regard for the ethics of warfare, it is obvious common sense for them to use a substance that will wipe out every living thing in the area that they propose to occupy, once it has all blown away and been cleared up.

If we look at the world at the moment, we see I think that not just Assad but countless groups will be tempted to do that. If we had not acted last weekend, Assad, who probably intends to go on to conquer Idlib next to recover control of his country, would undoubtedly have used bigger chemical attacks. We wait to see whether he will do so in the face of threats from the United States, France and the United Kingdom. I very much hope he does not, but we should not underestimate the importance now, in the real world, in several political crises, of establishing the principle that the British Government will react and will not tolerate and allow a return to the use of chemical and similar weapons, which the world community has at least managed to ban. We have not done much else to improve warfare in this world, but we have at least managed to ban that for decades, and we should stop it coming back.

As I said, that is the reason why I feel so strongly and, for what it matters, why I was arguing in the interviews I gave last week not only for parliamentary accountability, which got picked up, but for targeted action of the kind we have had. I realise, as I said, that courage is required on the part of those who took the decision. Of course there were risks. The Russians tried to terrify the population with their usual propaganda stuff, but I suspect that we did not have public support when the attack took place, because people had got disturbed about the risks of world war three and what was going to happen, and whether we would get immersed. With hindsight, we see easily that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Cabinet showed the right judgment. It has not led to any wider risks and they were rightly not deterred, but it cannot have been an easy decision at the time.

I have already said that I support all that has been said about the maximum humanitarian contribution that the British should make to relieve distress in Syria and elsewhere, in all these war-torn places, but if we take the realistic capacity of Britain, its population, its budget and everything else, I think we are doing pretty well to make a contribution to alleviating the suffering.

On the broader point about the politics of Syria and other places generally, I hear what everybody says in asking, what is the strategy? What is the next step? Why are the British not taking the lead in making sure that all is calmed down? I wish I felt that those who said that had the first idea about exactly what solution they think they are offering to the Syrian crisis. How will the British initiative bring the Turks, the Russians, the Iranians, the Israelis and many other powers all together to produce a peaceful settlement in the country? I am sure that the British Government's influence will be among the more useful in the Geneva process and elsewhere—our values

have a great deal to offer—but let us not pretend that Britain at the moment can usefully take a political role. I see nothing that could happen that would call for military intervention by the British Government in the Syrian civil war, whether seeking regime change or anything else; indeed, that would be madness. I think that the Government have retained influence by taking part in this tripartite attack. They have acted courageously, sensibly, in the national interest and in the interests of proper humanitarian values and proper international rules of law—even in warfare—in the action they have taken.

8.45 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on having made this application for an emergency debate and on the passion she showed in her speech—a passion she has shown over many years in pursuit of principle.

There will not be any victors in the war in Syria; there are only victims—the 400,000 or so whose lives have been lost and the many others whose lives have been changed by the injuries they have suffered. More than half the population have been forced to flee their homes, which have been destroyed, and large parts of the country have been laid waste. We all, without any equivocation, support the upholding of the convention on the prohibition of chemical weapons, and I am sure that the House would support effective action to stop their use—we shall see whether the action taken on Saturday has a deterrent effect on President Assad—but as I said in my question to the Prime Minister, I genuinely believe that if military action is to be taken in these circumstances, it must be Parliament's decision, not the Cabinet's. If we do not get Parliament's support, I do not think we will win the support of the public and give our decisions the greatest force they could have.

Why does that matter? First, ever since the vote on Iraq in 2003—I had forgotten about the Falklands vote, to which the Father of the House referred—Parliament has been asked to approve the commitment of UK forces to action: in Libya in 2011, Iraq in 2014 and Syria in 2015. That gives me the opportunity gently to point out that, two and a bit years after we took that decision, following the combined effort, on the ground by the Iraqi forces and the Kurds in the main, with the support of a number of countries from the air, more than 3 million people have been liberated from the cruel rule of Daesh, which committed genocide, war crimes and many other things. Parliament rejected both motions on Syria in 2013, although in the retelling of that story the House needs to remember that either of those resolutions, had they been carried, could have resulted in military action against Assad for the use of chemical weapons. If it was right to seek Parliament's approval then, in respect of exactly the same country and exactly the same issue—the use of chemical weapons on innocent Syrian civilians—it was right to have done so last week, for exactly the same reasons.

The second reason I argue that Parliament should have taken the decision is that military action is never without risk, particularly in this case given the number of states that have become directly involved in the Syrian conflict. I freely confess that the temperament of the current occupant of the White House, who shows little if any understanding of the responsibilities he

holds as the President of the United States, made me worry last week very considerably about the consequences of what he might do. I also freely admit that those worries have since been considerably assuaged by the targeted nature of the strikes and the great care taken to ensure that there was no collateral damage, physical or diplomatic, while seeking undoubtedly to damage Syria's chemical weapons capacity.

By definition, there are no easy choices and no certainty in the response to this conflict. There is also no shortage of advice on what we should not be doing. Earlier today, in Parliament Square, we saw the placards that appear from time to time, bearing the words "Don't Bomb Syria". I say from time to time because their appearance is somewhat erratic. I have never seen those placards, or reports of their appearance, outside the Russian embassy—or, indeed, the Syrian embassy while it was still open prior to 2014—although Russia and, in particular, Syria have been bombing Syrian civilians for years. Selective silence in the face of brutality is neither principled nor a policy.

Then there is the issue of humanitarian protection. If we accept the argument that no action to protect civilians can ever be undertaken or will ever have any legitimacy unless it has been authorised by the United Nations Security Council, we will have accepted that the use of a veto by any one of the five permanent members will prevent the taking of any unilateral action to protect human beings in need. I want the United Nations to work, and I want the Security Council to do its job, but the question for the House is whether the Security Council's decisions—or the lack of them—can always be the end of the matter.

As we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), who is no longer in the Chamber, we should remember the no-fly zone in northern Iraq. The Kurds were profoundly grateful for what this country did to prevent them from being bombed from the air. We should think of the action that we took in Kosovo, or the action that we took in Sierra Leone. If I were asked whether I thought that we were doing the right thing at the time, I would say yes. Would we have been wrong—I use the word "we" in the collective sense, meaning the world—to intervene in, say, Srebrenica or Rwanda to prevent the massacres? No, we would not, and it is to our eternal shame that we, as the world, failed to do so.

To the charge of selectivity, which has some force, I simply respond that the fact that we cannot do the right thing everywhere has never struck me as a very good argument for not trying to do the right thing somewhere. The truth is that airstrikes will not end this civil war, and they may not stop the use of chemical weapons. I therefore strongly agree with my hon. Friend that we need to reflect on the situation in which we find ourselves, and ask how we got here and how we can be more effective in the future.

We have been here before. The United Nations was created out of the ashes of the second world war because the world wanted to do better. In 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted and proclaimed the universal declaration of human rights. Article 3 states:

"Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."
Article 28 states:

"Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized."

Yet for millions of people in Syria, those rights, so nobly expressed all those years ago, have remained only words on paper—because they have lacked the means to protect themselves and their families from the attacks being made on them, because we have lacked the will to act or have acted imperfectly, or because some have chosen to look the other way and to pass by on the other side of the road. I believe that we all support the principles of the universal declaration of human rights, but we should ask ourselves how we are to uphold them in practice. They mean something—they are the ultimate expression of our responsibility for one another—yet we live in a world in which they cannot be fully realised. Let us imagine for a moment a United Kingdom in which there was peace and stability in London, genocide in Manchester, and civil war in Leeds. We would not regard that as in any way acceptable. We live in a country where it is not the case, because we have established the rule of law and democracy, but we live in a world where it is the case.

What are we discussing here? We are discussing how we fashion the means, collectively, through the United Nations, to ensure that those rights and principles are applied to all our fellow citizens.

The reason why this matters is that now, at the beginning of the 21st century, more than at any other time in human history, our relationships are defined by our interdependence. There are those who argue—I have heard them: "It is not our problem; it is not our business. We really feel sorry for them, but there's nothing we can do about it." The truth is that we live with the consequence of this in our minds, in the shame or concern we feel, and also in respect of refugees. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South made that point extremely forcefully, because that is a consequence of allowing conflict to happen that is not brought to an end. We cannot shut the door and close the curtains and wish that what is happening in other countries will go away.

It was out of this concern that the idea of the responsibility to protect was born—developed by the Canadian Government, adopted by the world summit. In 2009, following Ban Ki-moon's report, the UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution on the subject. It was based on the simple but important idea that state sovereignty is a privilege, but it also comes with a responsibility. The responsibility to protect is concerned with preventing genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

Of course, that responsibility is not without controversy. Some argue that the nation state should be sovereign, and some object to military action in all circumstances. Others say its scope is too narrow or that we have been selective or inconsistent in how we have chosen to act in the world, and I freely grant that that is the case. But the answer is to make the system work more effectively, and I want that system to be the UN. It has a unique responsibility because of its authority and legitimacy, but it is not always capable of acting. That is why the question of the veto and whether that will in all circumstances stop us doing something is so important. I commend to the House the initiative the previous French Government took to try to persuade the five permanent members of the Security Council to agree that they would forgo the veto in circumstances where there were war crimes—crimes against humanity, genocide.

[Hilary Benn]

I am the first to recognise the difficulty of trying to persuade countries to do that in those circumstances, but it was, and is, an attempt to deal with the conundrum we are facing. One has only to read the list of the UN Security Council resolutions that have been vetoed or threatened with vetoes or the list of the resolutions on Syria that have been passed, including at least three that call for ceasefires. We do not want in this conflict for resolutions, even passed by the UN Security Council, which call for a ceasefire.

The second issue is how we build diplomatic and public pressure and capacity to act. We know that one of the most powerful forces for action is bearing witness to what has happened—those who risk their lives to go and report on what has occurred. That is why President Assad is so anxious to kill those who are reporting and the doctors who say, “Why have so many hospitals in Syria been bombed?”

We must also acknowledge that we live in a world in which fake news is becoming ever more common. We used to call it lies. It is lies, but for a purpose; it is about sapping morale, undermining understanding and preventing people from acting.

I make this argument because the truth is that we have been here before, and we will be here again unless we can build a better system for stopping conflict before we get to this point. Let us be honest: in relation to this conflict, the chances are that President Assad is going to win, although what he will do with his country—which he, more than anyone else, has been responsible for destroying—I have no idea whatever.

In conclusion, I simply say that we can debate particular action at particular times and we hope it will have a beneficial effect, but the truth of this tragedy is that we can, and we must as a world, do much better.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. It will shortly be necessary to impose a time limit. Before that, I will call the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who will be free of said limit, to which, however, I know he will have informal regard.

8.59 pm

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am going to keep my remarks brief, Mr Speaker, as previous speakers have done justice to a huge range of subjects. I shall try to stick narrowly to the subject of the Government’s role. First, I should like to compliment the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing the debate. I listened with great interest to her speech and will make a couple of comments about some of the things she said, but I will not follow her down that road, if she will forgive me. I want to deal specifically with what took place in the past few days and the reasons for it.

It is important to get the background absolutely straight and to consider what led to the Prime Minister having to take this decision. Sometimes it is easy to skate over some of these things. I was looking at the House of Commons Library paper on this, which is well worth reading. It lays out in considerable detail the

number of times that the Syrians have broken all the accords they made on chemical weapons. It goes on to point out, as the Prime Minister did, that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons does not apportion blame, even when it inspects. It was supposed to be going in fairly shortly, but it is now blocked from going in and we have deep suspicions about the reasons for that. There is a major effort to clear up what is in there and to get rid of people who might be able to show that they have been attacked by these weapons.

Russia has vetoed every single resolution in the Security Council. Something else that is quite interesting, and that has not come out so far, is that in December 2017 an attempt was made to get an extension of the OPCW–United Nations joint investigative mechanism’s mandate. That would have enabled the JIM to look at what was going on and would have given it the power to apportion blame. The Russians vetoed the extension of that mandate without a single question, and it was clear that they did so because they did not want that investigation to take place.

It is worth reminding ourselves that, back in 2013—when I was a member of the Government—the Government came to the House to ask for a mandate to attack areas of command and control or of chemical stockpiles. I was sad to see, when the House voted against that motion, that there were some party politics involved. However, I am not going to revisit the past, other than to say that I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given due regard to the lesson from that. We had to take action then, and serious consequences flowed from our not doing so. Back in 2013, Assad was on the back foot. There were some quite reasonable groups—I do not say that lightly—opposing him, including the Free Syrian Army. Yes, some of the more extreme groups were there, including the jihadis, but there was perhaps an opportunity to influence the direction of what might happen in Syria.

The rejection of the motion in 2013 was probably the single most devastating blow to Syria, and it has led to serious consequences. It emboldened President Assad to believe that he could go on doing what he wanted. The Russians then persuaded President Obama not to pursue the matter by guaranteeing that President Assad would produce no more chemical weapons, and that he would never use such weapons even if he had them. Of course, they have failed completely on that. So perhaps they are complicit in the use of chemical weapons; I begin to wonder whether they are, as they have used them so liberally elsewhere, particularly here on our own home soil in Salisbury.

The vote also gave the Russians the green light to pursue their own agenda aggressively in Syria, and to make the war even worse than it might otherwise have been. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) mentioned the appalling attacks on hospitals, and he was absolutely right to do so, but the question is how closely Russia has been involved in the deliberate targeting and bombing of hospitals and other civilian areas. We are beginning to see all of that in this.

The final bit about the vote in 2013—I hope the House really considers this—is that it opened the door to the takeover of most of the opposition to Assad by jihadi groups, who were untrammelled and un-resisted. With America stepping back, the reality was that the rest was left to the influence of Russia. We then ended

up dealing with the worst of all worlds, with Daesh attacks both in Syria and subsequently in Iraq. That shut down many of the options that might well have been available to us.

I am in favour of the House being consulted, but the House also has to give a little leeway to the Executive when it comes to moments such as last week, when it was quite clear that urgent action needed to be taken. Urgent action is based on deep intelligence and if it is not taken quickly, there could well be further consequences later. Such circumstances are difficult, and it behoves a Government to ensure that the action they take is narrowly targeted and therefore effective in its limited regard.

Had the Government been proposing a wider operation, such as the one conducted against Daesh in Iraq or in northern Syria, they would certainly have had to come to the House to explain the nature of that. Last week was an exception; an Executive do need the ability to take such action and then come to the House to explain it and, as the Prime Minister rightly said today, take the consequences of the House's view about that action, including whether it was justified both legally and in moral terms.

The really important point here, which we do not talk about enough, is the reality that Russia sits like a great beast behind all of what is happening. Without Russia's involvement in Syria, much of what is going on would not be happening today. Russia's direct and selfish involvement, which is only about its procurement of a decent-weather port in the Mediterranean and its ability to position its aircraft in Syria and to involve itself in the region, has led it to get involved in some of the worst activities that it is possible to imagine, and with complete indifference to the world order.

If we look back over what Russia has done, we see not just its invasions of Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia and so on, but its involvement in chemical warfare. In 2013, the Russians guaranteed that Syria would not use chemical weapons again. What kind of a guarantee is that, coming from a nation that poisoned the President of Ukraine, killed Mr Litvinenko by radiation, and went on to use a nerve agent to attack Mr Skripal and his daughter on British soil? That is the kind of guarantee given by a criminal to another criminal, and yet we should somehow allow it to be the protector it has not been. It suits Russia's purposes to have Syria able to do as it pleases; that does not matter to Russia at all.

I say to the hon. Member for Wirral South that her speech was full of fine principle, which I of course absolutely sign up to and back her on, but even that fine principle prompts some serious questions. The most serious relates to what she said about keeping open the corridors of aid and about ensuring that the air is protected from attacks, because she immediately encounters the question: what do we do about the Russians? It is the Russians who have failed to allow—

Stella Creasy *rose*—

Mr Duncan Smith: I am not going give way. The hon. Lady is my constituency neighbour, but—

Stella Creasy: I was just going to ask a question.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am going to answer it myself, if the hon. Lady does not mind. I always find that they are the best answers.

I simply say to the hon. Member for Wirral South—this is exactly the point—that we come back to realpolitik. The Russians are sitting right at the heart of the problem and, while they are still able to control it, the Prime Minister is left with having to make this kind of decision: to say that we will not tolerate the use of such weapons, even if the Russians are behind it. That is the important point.

We have to pursue an aggressive position towards Russia. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said, Russia is not just producing disinformation but is lying outright about what has been going on. We need to pursue the money, and we need to put it to our European colleagues that they have to think carefully about the use of energy from Russia. It is the energy Russia sells to Europe and others that sustains this tiny economy to build its weapons and to produce its chemical warfare. If we can cut the money to Russia, we begin to cut its ability to interfere in nations such as Syria, Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia and others. The world will be a better place if Russia is restricted on that basis, and I urge my right hon. Friends to do so.

I fully accept the reasons why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took her decision, and she was right to do so. She was right in that sense to take the decision without coming to Parliament, and she is right to come to consult Parliament today. I hope we back her fully.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A four-minute limit on each Back-Bench speech will now apply.

9.11 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for securing it, and I thank Members on both sides of the House for supporting it at this important time.

I spoke in a previous debate on Syria about my experience of visiting Sarajevo and Srebrenica on a cross-party trip with Remembering Srebrenica. One particular thing that sticks in my mind is visiting an exhibition in Sarajevo of photographs of atrocities, of mass graves and of horrific scenes from Sarajevo, Srebrenica and other locations from the Bosnian conflict. The photographs were juxtaposed with images from the current horrific conflict in Syria, and I could not tell the two sets of images apart. We see all the same hallmarks: the same mass graves, the same attempts to hide evidence and the same utter violations of all the laws and standards of war, whether in the use of chemical warfare, the deliberate bombardment and barrel bombing of civilians, the denial of humanitarian aid or the denial of access to bodies such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South and particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and many others, have said has been excellent, but I will emphasise two or three key points. First, we must listen to what the Syrians themselves are saying. I have been repeatedly contacted by Syrians in my constituency, and I have met Syrians who fled the conflict. It is not just the horrific

[Stephen Doughty]

stories of those who have fled very obvious scenes of hostility but the families separated and denied access to each other. A family came to see me who had elderly family members suffering from terminal cancer, unable to access any form of medical treatment and trapped in Aleppo—the family in the UK are deeply worried.

We need to listen carefully to all those individual, personal stories, which is why I particularly support the strong points made about refugees. I have mentioned the situation of councils and what they can do. I am disappointed that the efforts being made by Croeso Penarth in my constituency to house Syrian refugees are being frustrated by the local council. I am disappointed to see the very strict rules on family reunion being interpreted in the way they are, which is why I was happy to support the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, and it is why my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and others have rightly campaigned so hard on the issue of the Dubs children.

We must also listen very carefully to the non-governmental organisations and those who are giving witness to what is going on. We need to listen to the likes of Médecins sans Frontières when it talks about 200 fleeing patients arriving at its hospital with trauma injuries in recent days, as well as women in childbirth and children suffering from malnutrition—the UN estimates that nearly 151,000 people have fled into north-west Syria. The International Committee of the Red Cross talks of the 13 million who need aid, the four in five now living in poverty in what was once a rich country and the 1.75 million children now not in school.

There is a danger that we get caught up in online conspiracy theories and fake news. We need to listen to those Syrians, we need to listen to those NGOs and we need to listen to those journalists who are giving that testimony, rather than engaging in some sort of fantasy about who is responsible. It is Assad who is responsible, it is his allies who are responsible and it is those who block humanitarian aid, like Hezbollah and others, who are responsible. That is where the responsibility lies, and that is where we should direct our anger, our frustration and our strategy.

I come to my greatest concern, whatever the rights and wrongs of this action: I believe the Prime Minister should have come to this House before now. I believe the Government have the right to act in certain circumstances without coming here, but I do not see why that applies in this case. There needs to be a clear strategy—a political, diplomatic and humanitarian strategy. We cannot simply fire and forget. We cannot simply talk, debate and too often forget. Not just on Syria, but on Yemen, Afghanistan and so many others, we take actions, we discuss the situation in this place, then we ignore it and do not come back, but that is what we need to do.

Mr Speaker: Order. I should advise the House that unfortunately, and most unfortunately for Opposition Members, the clock to my right is not fully functioning. Opposition Members are therefore not able to see the countdown. They will have to look at the clock on the other side and make a calculation as to when their four minutes are likely to be up, although I will do my best to help with appropriate gesticulation.

9.15 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I would like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), as she has done a service to the entire House. I do not agree with all her views, but I was more than happy to support her application. A number of right hon. and hon. Members have referred to what is sometimes called the endgame in Syria, and I think there are four possibilities. Option No. 1 is a negotiated deal with give and take on both sides, which seems to be almost out of the question. Option No. 2 is a de facto stalemate, with the effective partition of territory between opposing forces—that is possible but unlikely. Option No. 3 is a win by the rebels, which is now impossible, unless we enter the war, as we disastrously did in Iraq and in Libya. Option No. 4 is a win by the regime, which is highly probable.

In December 2015, the House voted to bomb Islamist terrorists in Syria, as we had been doing in Iraq for more than a year. For the next 17 months, we mounted more than 800 airstrikes in Iraq but only 95 in Syria. Why the huge disparity? It was because in Iraq we want one side, the Iraqi Government, to win and the other side, the Islamist fighters, to lose, whereas the situation in Syria is totally different. As I have said previously, it is a choice between monsters and maniacs, with the inhuman Assad regime on one side and the jihadist fanatics dominating the other. Right hon. and hon. Members should be in no doubt that the armed opposition in Syria is indeed dominated by vicious Islamist factions. Only the Syrian Democratic Forces, led by the Kurds, are at all acceptable to us, and they are now under attack from the Turks, who are supposedly our allies in NATO but are increasingly cosying up to the Russians.

Airstrikes risk inflicting lethal collateral damage, which is why the Prime Minister was absolutely right when she said to us earlier that this was a “targeted and limited” action. That is as it should be and that is how it must remain. I have been concerned about suggestions in the debate, once again, that we should widen this out into a broader intervention in the Syrian civil war. That will be to repeat the mistakes we made in Libya and in Iraq. I have to disagree with the Father of the House, because if we had gone to war in 2013, although there was talk about bombing to prevent chemical attacks, the reality is that it would not have stopped until we had toppled Assad and the result would have been similar to the one in Libya.

There are three guidelines we should follow in any further military action that we feel we have to take. First, we must remember that, apart from the SDF, neither side in the Syrian civil war deserves our support. Secondly, we must continue to impress on Russia that the action we are taking is solely to punish, degrade and deter the use of poison gas, and is not the thin end of a regime-change wedge. Finally, we must ensure that we have engaged in a one-off punishment that will not be repeated unless further chemical attacks take place.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: May I correct what my right hon. Friend said earlier? In 2013, we had discussions in the National Security Council and in the Cabinet, and we were absolutely clear that we were asking only for targeted, proportionate attacks on sites connected with chemical weapons. The then Government had discussed and agreed that we were not going to get involved in the

wider Syrian civil war, and I agree with my right hon. Friend that that is as desirable an objective now as it was then.

Dr Lewis: I am glad to have the extra time to say that my right hon. and learned Friend did not mention the conflict in Libya. With Libya, we were told exactly the same thing: that we were voting for a protective measure—a no-fly zone to protect the citizens of Benghazi—but the moment that we retrospectively gave our approval for that, it was all out for a bombing campaign to topple that regime. I do not doubt for one moment what my right hon. and learned Friend has said to the House, but I have it from other sources that I cannot quote that I am not at all far from the truth in saying that had we acted in 2013, the result in Syria would have been the same as the result in Libya. Even if that were wrong, the people who are at fault are the people who misled the House in 2011 about Libya when they did not say that we were going to try to topple Gaddafi. Had they said that, I would have voted against that action. I believe that I and the 29 other Conservatives who voted the way we did on Syria in 2013 were absolutely right to do so.

With that, my time is up, so I simply say that we should spend more money on defence so that we will have more defence options.

9.21 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Britain is an open and outward-looking country and our interests do not stop at our borders. The use of chemical weapons is a war crime, even within the context of the atrocities of war. This year, we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of world war one, in which we know and can recall from literature how gas attacks were used with such horrendous effect. That led to the processes in which the UK and others were so involved that led to the creation of the 1928 Geneva protocol and, indeed, the international consensus throughout the 20th century that the use of chemical weapons crossed a line and should not happen.

I recognise that the Government have set out some compelling points in the arguments that they have made about the need to uphold international law and the agreements that ban the use of chemical weapons. I take some reassurance from the fact that the strikes seem to have been so precisely targeted. I was concerned about the rhetoric in the run-up to the strikes about the risk of escalation, particularly with Russia so involved in the region, but the fact that there have been no hits on Russian infrastructure is certainly a positive sign. Indeed, there is a certain logic to making the attacks specific to chemical weapons facilities and research. The fact that it looks like there have not been any civilian casualties is very much a testament to the skill of our armed forces in their deployment.

Although the Government have made some strong points, I have some significant concerns. It is important in these matters to build wider support. An opportunity was missed last week, in respect not only of Parliament but of building the case with the country more widely. There was a vacuum in Government communication until the strikes had been launched. It is also important to build the case internationally. I recognise the support that has been obtained from NATO and EU partners, and I entirely appreciate the huge frustration of the

Security Council veto. Russia cannot even agree to hold, or at least withhold its veto on holding, an independent investigation of chemical weapons attacks.

There are avenues that can be pursued when the Security Council is paralysed, including the United Nations uniting for peace protocol, which uses the General Assembly. What is the Government's assessment of that? I imagine it is not without its problems, but has it been considered and could it be tried? The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked about the responsibility to protect, which is an important doctrine, but I slightly fear that if we do not get wider international buy-in, there is a danger that R2P being invoked by three Security Council members might undermine its wider legitimacy.

There are also concerns about President Trump. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that this was her decision, and we do not need to question her sincerity on that in recognising that, none the less, there are genuine concerns about the US Commander-in-Chief. He is erratic and unpredictable, and the question is not just whether the UK has an influence over him, but whether the sensible voices within his own Administration have an influence over him. Given that there are those within his circle who are looking for a fight with Iran, it is particularly important that we make sure that our view is expressed to them.

James Heappey: Does the hon. Lady have similar concerns about President Macron, who was also involved in the decision making last week?

Jo Swinson: There is a very easy answer to that. I have many, many more concerns about President Trump than about President Macron, in whom I have much more confidence as a world leader.

As I have said, there are people within Trump's inner circle who are threatening the Iran nuclear agreement, and who are suggesting that perhaps the sanctions should not be waived again when they come up for renewal in May. Given what the UK put into negotiating that agreement in the first place, it is incredibly important that we use whatever influence we can to maintain it.

In my earlier remarks to the Prime Minister, I mentioned the issue of refugees. I absolutely agree with the hon. Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) that we need to do more on that issue. There is also the long-term issue of how we create the conditions for peace. Anyone who says that that is simple, or that there is an easy soundbite for what to do, fails to understand the complexity of the situation. There is no obvious answer and no neat solution. I wish that I had one, and I am sure the Government do too. These atrocious attacks show us that, if anything, we must redouble our efforts to press, cajole and explore every possible way. I regret the way in which the Government brought this matter forward, though I accept that, in some areas, they have made a good case. I remain concerned about the issues that I have raised and hope to hear some reassurance. I recognise that there are no easy answers, but we must keep trying to find a way forward.

9.26 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): As we continue to learn—sometimes belatedly—from the lessons of conflict, it is right that we always strive to push ourselves forward as

[Priti Patel]

a nation to make better judgments about how and why we engage in conflict and who we serve to protect through our actions.

It is because of that responsibility to protect that we owe it to those who are suffering around the world not to simply stand back in the cases of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, and to be there for them in their hour of need. Knee-jerk isolationism, ideological pacifism and anti-interventionism are not in Britain's national interests, nor are they in the interests of the weakest and the most vulnerable in the world.

As a champion of international law, a rules-based international system, human rights, tolerance, openness and democracy, an engaged and activist foreign policy is part of who we are as a country, and those values are associated with our global influence and the leadership that we are demonstrating in the world. Of course that applies to Syria and the awful and abhorrent crisis that we have seen over the past eight years. This is the largest humanitarian crisis that we have seen in a generation, and we know that Britain stands tall, shoulder to shoulder with others, through the great leadership that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been providing to the Syrian people. I am talking about not just aid but the support within the region that she and her Government have been able to provide. That also applies to long-term reconstruction in the region and support to the countries around Syria.

At the same time, justice and accountability must be sought for the millions who have been displaced, killed and harmed through the brutality of this conflict. Those who are responsible should be subject to the right form of prosecution in the right way internationally.

As we discuss the recent events that have brought us here today—the murder of Syrian civilians, including innocent children, with chemical weapons that were outlawed by the world nearly a century ago—we know that the haunting images of human suffering will stay with us all for a very long time. Chemical weapons are uniquely indiscriminate, and we must never forget that. It is right that we proceed with care and that we openly hold the discussions that we are having today in the House. It is right that we ask ourselves the detailed questions that have been voiced here today. We must also ask ourselves what kind of nation we would be if we turned away and closed our eyes to the horrors that are killing women, children and many men every single day in the war and the atrocities that we have seen. It is absolutely right, as the Prime Minister has shown, that we send a clear message out that, if and when a brutal regime kills its people with chemical weapons that are prohibited under international law, the United Kingdom, with its commitment to peace and stability around the world, remains absolutely committed to upholding the principles of international law.

9.29 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Last weekend's chemical weapons attack on innocent civilians in Douma was a brutal and barbaric act. Seventy-five people, including children, have died. More than 500 have been treated for symptoms of nerve agent poisoning. This outrage clearly breached the Geneva protocol of 1925 and the 1993 chemical weapons convention. Only Assad has helicopters and barrel bombs. His culpability can be

in no doubt. It was at least the ninth time that Assad has used chemical weapons on his own people, and he chose to use chemical weapons in Douma specifically to target civilians. This was a war crime that led to unimaginable humanitarian suffering, death and destruction. Such barbarity cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

There should, of course, be a UN investigation, but that is impossible because the Russian Government continue to veto any attempts by the Security Council, and the Syrian regime is now preventing the OPCW from entering Douma. The Syrian regime is responsible for this chemical weapons attack, and its sponsors in the Kremlin are complicit, not only because of their support for Assad and his brutal regime but because of their relentless work to undermine the ability of international institutions to function properly, thereby rendering effective diplomatic action impossible.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I agree with the hon. Gentleman's sentiment that it was absolutely right for the Prime Minister to take this action. It is not only Assad who is using chemical weapons in Syria; he is being propped up very much by the Russians. We need to send a message to Assad and the Russians that chemical weapons are just not acceptable.

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is a universal message that needs to be sent to all those brutal dictators who may be considering going down this route.

With the Kremlin effectively dismantling the diplomatic route, we are left with no option but to apply military force. It pains me to say this, but the sad reality is that the future of Syria is in the hands of the Kremlin, Iran and the Assad regime. However, that does not mean that we have no agency or that we should allow the international norms around the prohibition of chemical weapons to wither on the vine. That is why it was right to act in the name of humanitarian concerns and assert the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. But Parliament should have had a say. That has been the way we have operated in this place for over a decade. The dispute about parliamentary authorisation reveals the shortcomings of a convention-based constitutional system. The Leader of the Opposition is therefore right that we should have a war powers Act. Of course, the devil will be in the detail. Such an Act must not be so loose as to allow the Government to do anything, but it must not be so tight as to bind the hands of the Government and those on the frontline to the extent that it would become an impossibly high bar to pass.

The costs of non-intervention are clear. Non-intervention would equate to a tacit approval of the abhorrent use of chemical weapons. A targeted strike on the installations that enable the use of chemical weapons not only degrades the Syrian capacity to deliver and use chemical weapons again, but sends a signal that their use will not be tolerated. We must therefore be steadfast and consistent. We must also do more to support those who have fled Syria to escape this barbarity, and step up to fulfil our obligations to address the refugee crisis.

My party has a proud history of standing up for the most vulnerable. We led the world to intervene in Kosovo to prevent genocide, understanding that the Russian veto precluded the UN route at that time. The Labour party is not a pacifist party. Indeed, it was a Labour

Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who was the driving force behind establishing NATO. I am truly proud of the Labour party's role, 60 years ago almost to the day, in the signing of the treaty of Brussels. We are a party that understands that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good men—and, indeed, women—to do nothing. We understand the costs of non-intervention, just as we appreciate and learn from the costs of intervention. Where would we be if pacifists had been in charge in 1939?

If the only intervention that we contemplate is that with UN Security Council approval, we will be allowing the Kremlin to dictate our foreign policy. I refuse to allow my country or my party to be held hostage by Vladimir Putin. I will always uphold the fine history of my party, which is to be ready, willing and able to intervene, and to shoulder our responsibility to protect.

9.34 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I think that most of us would accept that there are no easy answers to questions of this sort, just a series of hard and difficult decisions. I, for one, believe that Prime Ministers should retain the right—the leeway—to act in extremis, with the use of armed forces if circumstances demand. However, I also think that the Government accept that the reason why we are having this debate, in many respects, is that many of us believe that Government plans for military action should be subject to close scrutiny before being executed, because we have seen a litany of errors regarding our previous interventions, whether in Iraq, Helmand or Libya.

In Syria, our initial proposed policy was to arm the rebels, not realising that therein lay the greater danger. We then excluded the Russians and the Iranians from the diplomatic process. There has also been an inconsistency of objective on our part. One minute we are calling for Assad's removal; another time we realise that his opponents perhaps represent the greater danger. Only two weeks ago, President Trump suggested that the US would turn away from Syria, and that could only have sent the wrong message to Damascus and Moscow.

Perhaps the international community's biggest failure has been on humanitarian aid. We can be very proud of our record as a country in providing £2.5 billion since 2012–13. However, given the underfunding of the humanitarian effort in general—that contribution of £2.5 billion dwarfs those of other countries, apart from the US—the Government need to try to do more to encourage the international community to follow our lead and meet its obligations.

While acknowledging the debt that we owe to our armed forces, my concern about the latest missile strike is that our previous engagements in interventions suggest that there is a real danger of being dragged into a bigger conflict. There have been scores of chemical weapons attacks in Syria since this vicious civil war started and I worry about the risk of escalation. Russia has many more troops on the ground. This is a proxy war, as we well know, reflecting regional conflict. There are very few moderates left in Syria. The prospect of more violence, and even heightened violence, is very real indeed.

I believe that a policy is generally better if Parliament does have some oversight. I therefore suggest to the Government that they should focus on the question I

posed during our proceedings on the statement and at least give some consideration to the circumstances in which they would think it right to consult Parliament before actually committing our armed forces, and to what they should reflect on in order to avoid the mistakes of the past. The biggest danger is being dragged into this conflict. There is no easy answer. We need to focus on the fact that the humanitarian aid needs to be sorted out, and we need to learn the lessons of the past if we are to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

9.38 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to rehash the points made by other hon. Members, but generally I support the tone of the debate. I totally agree with many colleagues who have said that we must have a joined-up and co-ordinated strategy for how we support the people of Syria in diplomatic, humanitarian and other ways.

On the diplomatic strategy, resolution 377A of the General Assembly—the “Uniting for Peace” resolution—would allow this Government to convene an emergency session of the GA to seek a majority there. If that majority was found, it would provide a level of backing under international law that would give some legitimacy to further actions and strategies on Syria.

I want to focus most of my comments on my trip to northern Syria a week ago. I met a number of the Kurdish but also the Arab and Turkmen leaders who hold joint positions in the northern Syrian region administration. Often we talk about the disaster of Syria, but what the northern Syrian authority has managed to achieve despite all the disaster going on around it is rather remarkable, and we should be basing our strategy for Syria on that. It has achieved a bottom-up democracy in which local organisations co-ordinate at the parish level to ensure basic humanitarian provision, in which women must co-chair every single level of government—that is remarkable for the region and for the world—and in which there is a quota to ensure that 40% of seats in all authorities in the northern Syrian region are reserved for non-Kurdish minorities, which shows the pluralism that these people are trying to build. It also has a fighting force that led in fighting Daesh and its fascist ideology all the way back to the borders.

What I heard there was a feeling that these people are now being let down by the British Government. With the incursion into Afrin by Turkey, a supposed British ally, they feel that they have been left out in the cold. I spoke to the co-Prime Minister there, who said that Russia and Syria had made them an offer: if they got into bed with them, they would give them protection against Turkey. They rejected that offer; they could not get into bed with Assad because they wanted democracy.

We must ensure that we uphold the work that those people have done, rather than abandoning them to the onslaught. Hundreds of thousands of people have now been displaced in Afrin and hundreds have died. There is one thing that the Government could do. A number of military fighters in the region who have fought Daesh are ill and need advanced medical treatment, but the Government are refusing them visas through the new corridor that has opened up into Iraq—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we are time-constrained.

9.42 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this important debate and introducing it with such evident passion.

The barbaric attack on Douma killed around 75 men, women and children, with about 500 additional casualties. According to doctors and aid workers who treated the victims, their symptoms were characteristic of an attack utilising chlorine gas. Chlorine was first weaponised as a gas by German scientist Fritz Haber and was then employed by the German army against unsuspecting French troops at the second battle of Ypres in April 1915. In contact with the air, chlorine gas vaporises into a low-hanging cloud. That would collect in the trenches, much as it did in the cellars of Douma last week, one century later.

Chlorine gas reacts quickly with water in the airways to form hydrochloric acid, swelling and damaging lung tissue and causing death by suffocation. It is a truly horrific way to die. The war poet Wilfred Owen gave a graphic description of a gas attack in his famous poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

“Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”

The victims at Douma who choked and drowned were not soldiers, but innocent civilians, non-combatants, families, kids.

During the 1980s, at the height of the cold war, I served as an infantry officer in the Territorial Army. Our war role was to reinforce the British Army of the Rhine. We assumed that any conflict would go chemical almost from the outset, which is why I happen to know a bit about the subject. When we went to Germany, we trained in special protective suits to defend us against NBC—nuclear, biological and chemical—warfare. We were also equipped with gas masks or respirators, which were designed to give us at least a fighting chance against chemical agents in particular.

The citizens of Douma had no NBC suits. They had no respirators and they had no chance. They were sheltering in cellars as a defence against Syrian and Russian airstrikes, and that was precisely why the Syrians used gas against them, knowing that it would penetrate to the cellars and that the occupants would have no defence against it. This tactic was utterly barbaric, and I cannot believe any Member of this House would do anything but utterly condemn it.

Part of today’s debate has been about whether our airstrikes were illegal. They were not illegal; it was the Syrian chemical attack on Douma that was illegal. Our airstrikes were targeted to defend the principles of the chemical weapons convention and thus uphold international law. That is the stark reality from which the leadership of the Opposition cannot escape. We have already heard reference to Burke’s dictum:

“All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”
We in this country did something, and we should be proud of it.

9.46 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I want to focus on what I would like to call the Westminster paradox. While there are those who have taken the view that the something that must be done was the something done at the weekend, I cannot help but draw the conclusion that instead of reasserting the very best of the international rules-based system, we have set a precedent for an unfortunate and disturbing new normal that will be far more to the liking of those in the Kremlin than they would want.

It is important for all Members to recognise the difficulty that the Prime Minister faced last week. While I may not agree with the decision, I think every Member of the House should reflect on it. It was a difficult decision to make, as I think every Member recognises.

Nevertheless, I disagree with the answer the Prime Minister gave me earlier, which was that by asking that the United Nations is respected, we somehow give the Russian state—specifically the Russian regime—a veto on UK foreign policy. It seems that it is now United Kingdom Government policy that United Nations Security Council vetoes are no longer binding on the UK. That seems to be the precedent the UK Government are setting. Whether we like it or not, Vladimir Putin will be rubbing his hands at this small yet significant hypocrisy—magnified a thousandfold on Russia Today, in internet memes and in Stop the War coalition whataboutery—which contains just enough of a grain of truth to be accepted by the many who believe such things all too easily.

We know that the United Kingdom has not used its Security Council veto unilaterally since September 1972. It was, of all things, on a colonial legacy issue about the place formerly known as Rhodesia, and I am sure that the Government would not like to be reminded about that during this week of all weeks. Why does the United Kingdom have this veto? Many people have noticed the precedent that has been set. I do not doubt that the corrupt regime in Moscow will stop at nothing to prop up the wicked regime in Damascus. Equally, it will do so in relation to the various slivers of eastern Europe and the Caucasus that it has occupied, while China will supposedly do so in relation to North Korea or Burma.

So—this is a specific question that requires an answer—do the Government have any substantive policy suggestions for the structure and procedures of the United Nations Security Council now that it would seem that veto powers have ceased to work? To embark on a brave new world of UK foreign policy once since 2016 was foolish; to do so twice would be indescribable.

Let us get to the final point of the Westminster paradox. Over the course of the two referendums we have had on these islands in recent years, it would be fair to say we have been given the impression, particularly by Government Members, that the UK’s position on the Security Council was one of great responsibility and power that gave us immense privileges and, secondly, that it was derived in part from the status of this place as a cradle of liberal parliamentary democracy—something that should be restored to a supposed former glory. I fear that, in the same period in which they have diminished themselves by being about to leave the European Union, this Government have diminished the United Kingdom yet further by laying dynamite under the foundations of the international rules-based system that it did so much to create.

9.50 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) recalled the dreadful events in the battle of Ypres in 1915, which led in 1925 to the Geneva protocol, under which no country was allowed to use chemical weapons.

In 2013, Syria signed up to the chemical weapons convention. In 2014, the Russians signed an agreement with the OPCW that guaranteed that all Syria's chemical weapons would be destroyed. Russia has vetoed resolutions in the Security Council 12 times since 2011, so I agree with the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) that the UN resolution mechanism is not working.

Syria is one of the most persecuted countries on the planet. It will be one of the worst human catastrophes in the world in the 21st century. If the world does not stand up to the use of chemical weapons, as foreshadowed by the battle of Ypres, the world will have lost its moral compass. If we allow one or two dictators with warped minds to continue to use chemical weapons, the world will be a much poorer place. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was therefore absolutely right to send a signal with our allies last weekend by taking part in joint actions.

As I said, Syria is one of the most persecuted countries on the planet. The good Samaritan, all those centuries ago, did not walk by; he stopped to help that persecuted person. The world should be helping Syria; it has 6.3 million internally displaced people and 4.8 million externally displaced people. I have been to Nizip 2 refugee camp, and it is a pitiful sight.

Mr Nigel Evans: I have seen Syrian children being educated in the Lebanon, and I have seen Syrian children looking absolutely bewildered in camps in Jordan by what they have witnessed. Does my hon. Friend not agree that the international community should be stepping up to ensure that more money is made available to assist these Syrian refugees?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He, like me, has been to refugee camps—he in Jordan, I in Turkey—and we have seen the very difficult conditions these refugees live in. I am proud that our country and our Government, under the excellent leadership of our Prime Minister, is one of the largest donors in the world, helping make life just a little better in these camps.

In the last bit of my speech, I want to focus on one issue. A lot of people in this debate have said, "Well, we should do something," but nobody has actually come up with what we should be doing. If the United Nations system is not working, we have to find another mechanism, and it seems to me that the only other mechanism at the moment is the Geneva peace process. The problem with the Geneva peace process, which has been going for at least five years and probably longer, is that the Americans, the Europeans and the west in general cannot make up their minds whether they want to see Assad continue in power or whether they want to see Assad go—whether he should be part of an interim Government or whether he should not.

We should learn the lessons of Iraq. We deposed Saddam Hussein and all the Ba'athists who knew how to govern Iraq. We must not make the same mistake in Syria. If we depose Bashar al-Assad, we must not get rid of the Alawites. If we do, we will lose the ability of those who know how to govern this very difficult country, which is composed of a lot of ethnic minorities. If it is to succeed and we are to come up with any sort of peaceful solution, the Alawites have to be a part of it.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): I am listening with great interest to my hon. Friend's speech. What would be the plight of the Christians in Syria if Bashar al-Assad were deposed?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: It is very hard to know. There are so many ethnic minorities in Syria—the Kurds, the Christians, the Shi'a, the Sunnis and numerous other groupings—it is very hard to see how a peace process would work. Suffice it to say that we have a duty to the Syrian people to try to find a peace solution.

We must work doubly hard at the Geneva process with our American allies. We have to decide whether the Assad Government should continue. We have to decide who is invited to that peace process. There are different views on whether the Iranians, the Saudis or the Israelis should be invited. Who else should be invited? Get them all around a table, start talking and see whether we can come up with a peace process. I simply end by saying again that all those centuries ago the good Samaritan did not walk by. He stopped and tried to help. It is imperative that the British Government not only continue to help the refugees in the camps but strain every last sinew to see what we can do to help to produce a successful peace process in Syria.

9.56 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) has done a typically valiant service for the Syrian people today by reminding us all that the focus of our efforts ought to be, ultimately, on them. I will spend a few moments on the action the Prime Minister rightly authorised at the weekend, but I want to use the majority of the few minutes I have to talk about what the future can be.

On the authorisation of strikes, as the Prime Minister knows, many of us have been pushing for this for months and, in some cases, years. It was the right decision. It was courageous. We should all welcome the fact that the RAF seems to have executed them in such a professional way, destroying the target while minimising civilian casualties and wider collateral damage. The action was necessary and worth supporting to reset the red line against chemical weapons use anywhere in the world, but I hope we also can use this opportunity to make a genuine difference for the Syrian people.

I understand and accept what the Government say about wanting to avoid escalation by not seeking to change the balance of the civil war in Syria, but let us be careful in understanding what we potentially mean by that. This is a regime that uses chemical weapons as part of a worked out panoply of violence and war crimes against civilian people. It is worth remembering that the chemical attack last weekend only came about as part of an effort to try to move rebels out of the enclave in Douma.

[John Woodcock]

When they refused to go, the next day a chemical weapon was dropped on them. It was therefore part of a grotesque siege strategy that breaks all international conventions.

The consensus was that Russia, Assad and Iran would have it all their own way in Syria and that nothing could be done. We have shown that that is not the case. When the right targeted action is taken, we can make a difference. While we should not seek to intervene in the outcome by taking sides in the civil war, there is more that we can do with military support to back up the Syrian people. The people of Idlib now face a final, terrible siege, just as many other towns and cities have across Syria. We could say with our allies that we will guarantee humanitarian access to those people. We would not intervene militarily on the side of opposition groups—I accept that is difficult—but we could say that we will guarantee vital aid supplies to stop the grotesque war crime of siege tactics being used against those people. I really hope that the Government will take heart from the way in which they have been successful over chemical weapons and consider taking that forward in the vital weeks ahead.

10 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I join colleagues from across the House in congratulating the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing today's debate. There is limited time available, so I will discuss only briefly some key issues that have been raised.

On the timeliness of action and how the decision was taken, I am clear that we could not have waited. The power of the strikes last week was not really to do with the munitions that were launched or the targets that we set, but to do with the fact that we were acting in concert with the United States and France very soon after such an abhorrent attack in Syria. Although Parliament must now hold the Government to account for the decisions that they have taken, we should be clear on our limitations. We are all relying on open-source information and the things that we have seen on social media. We do not, and cannot, have the luxury of seeing the high resolution, real-time satellite imagery that will have been at the disposal of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, or the other surveillance assets that we have in theatre, or the signals intelligence and human intelligence that she will undoubtedly have had access to in making her analysis of what happened two weekends ago and how we should respond.

In my view, the Prime Minister made entirely the right call. She chose a course of action that was limited in scope and proportionate and that was expertly delivered by our world-beating Royal Air Force. She chose to degrade Assad's chemical weapons capability, to deter its use in future and to demonstrate to Assad and his Russian backers that such behaviour would not be tolerated. She did not seek to facilitate regime change; nor did she furnish either side with a tactical advantage on the ground. In my view, she made exactly the right call, because last week was not the time for more diplomacy, more humanitarian efforts, more inspections or more pressure of other types. Let us be clear that all have their value in the medium and long term, but we know that any of those activities last week would have been stopped by Russia, and we would therefore have been unable to launch any sort of response to the chemical attacks.

Let us be clear: we are responding to war crimes. We are responding to a dictator who gassed children in his own country. We had the capacity to do the right thing, and we did it. I am not a warmonger in advocating such a course of action, nor is the Prime Minister. I was sent by Her Majesty's Government into harm's way in Iraq, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland four times. I know what it is to be sent into those situations and to put my own life on the line. I also know that the Prime Minister has in the past sat down with the families of soldiers who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country, so she, too, knows the gravity of the decisions that she is taking and the cost that it can have for those who serve in our nation's armed forces.

Having been in a situation where I have gone away at the behest of Her Majesty's Government to do what was deemed to be in the UK's national interest and having heard those conflicts being debated in this place, I have found it outrageous today to hear the Prime Minister's motives questioned in the way that they have been. The idea that she took the decisions that she did to give us a boost in the local elections or to suck up to Trump is just an outrageous accusation and it cannot at all be true. My right hon. Friend carries a responsibility that the rest of us do not. We all see the pictures on TV and in the press. We all share the outrage, but only she gets the full intelligence and only she has the power to direct a response. It was brave of her not to delegate that decision to Parliament last week. She did absolutely the right thing for our country and for the people of Syria.

10.4 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for her initiative in securing this important debate.

I share the moral outrage expressed on both sides of the House—Assad and his henchmen are barbarians and the desire to do something to stop them is deeply and keenly felt, as colleagues on both sides have expressed sincerely and passionately—but our guiding principle must surely be that whatever we do must have the best chance of reducing suffering in the region, and I remain to be convinced that the military strikes we have seen are the best way of doing that. Airstrikes against chemical weapons facilities might help us to avoid feeling impotent and irrelevant, yet taking action that risks escalating and creating further loss of life and suffering would only perpetuate the problems we all want to solve. Moreover, in places such as Libya, as in Syria, such action has time and again proved a distraction from the difficult, relentless and all too frequently neglected work of waging peace, which is a lot more difficult than waging war.

In my brief speaking time, I want to challenge those who suggest that those of us who question the military action are somehow in favour of doing nothing. That is not the case. There is a vast amount we could be doing. For example, we should be cracking down on Russia, through further sanctions, and pursuing diplomatic channels too. It is worth noting that US sanctions against Russia are finally beginning to bite. Last week, new US sanctions against seven oligarchs, 17 top officials and 12 companies led to tens of billions of dollars in losses on Russian markets within just a few hours last Monday, and the rouble recently suffered its biggest daily fall in over three years. We now need to double down on these actions,

even if that has an effect on our own economy. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) would probably find it as worrying as I do that I find myself in agreement with him over the issue of energy in the EU. We could be taking more action there to put pressure on Russia, even if it comes at a cost to our own economies.

While moral outrage is all very well, we also need to invest in our own moral authority. Britain urgently needs to get its own house in order if it wants to be a credible, positive influence on the world stage. That means deploying the UK's considerable power and influence in the world to advance the full enjoyment of human rights; scaling back and ending alliances of convenience with repressive, aggressive or corrupt states such as Saudi Arabia, beginning with a ban on arms exports to such states; restoring the UK's diplomatic capabilities, starting with a reversal of the cuts to the FCO budget; championing constructive engagement and multilateral forums; and in the longer term, as others have said, working towards reform of the UN as well. We also need to expend serious and sustained effort to enhance and expand UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding capabilities and to strengthen and fully resource the International Criminal Court and the process of establishing and supporting war crimes tribunals. How can we be serious as a state about peacebuilding if the Government continue to boycott UN attempts to prohibit nuclear weapons, especially at a time when the world faces the renewed threat of nuclear strikes?

Finally, two quick things: I completely agree with everything that the hon. Member for Wirral South and others have said about the importance of taking more refugees, and I have been supporting a war powers Act for many years, but it has to be a free vote. We cannot outsource our responsibility for making that decision to the party Whips. We, as MPs, have to take that moral decision.

10.8 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this debate. A year ago virtually to the day, I was in Lebanon, and one of the purposes of my trip was to look at and learn about the impacts on Lebanon of the hospitality it had shown to refugees from Syria. I met many Syrian refugees, and we spoke to them through an interpreter. We can be very proud of this Government's record in the region in supporting refugees from Syria.

It is clear, however, that we need broader action from other countries. In particular, we must put pressure on Russia to stop what it is doing in Syria. As we all know, that is what will lead to access for humanitarian aid. Moreover, if Russia told Assad to stop using chemical weapons, he would stop using them. They provide him with cover. They provide him with the excuse that enables him to do it.

I deeply regret the vote that took place in the House in 2013. I think that we opened the door by failing to act. I had not been elected then, but had I been, I would have voted for action. I support the Prime Minister's action now, and I also support the idea that the Government must have the flexibility to act in a limited, proportionate and speedy way to deal with what was, in this instance, a very real threat.

Part of the international rules-based order concerns human rights, and the way to enforce that is through the International Criminal Court in the context of war crimes. The problem is that it takes years. We have all seen the cases involving Rwanda and Kosovo, and we know how long it has taken to secure justice in those cases. The fact is that, given this dreadful blight—this barbaric and horrific use of chemical weapons—we cannot afford to wait.

Justice will, I hope, come to all the commanders who have been involved in those decisions in Syria. I hope that very good records are being kept, but we know that, ironically, the Syrian Government are keeping their own records. In the words of Human Rights Watch, there has been

“a bureaucratic effort by the Syrian security apparatus to maintain a photographic record of the thousands who have died...since 2011”.

We have access to some of those records through defectors.

I support what the Prime Minister has done. I urge the House to make the effort to secure the evidence which, in the longer term, will lead to the prosecutions and convictions of Assad and the Russians who were on the ground acting as so-called advisers, who turn a blind eye to these breaches of international law, and who, I would argue, are complicit in encouraging them. That, in the longer term, is where we need to take action. However, I completely support the Prime Minister and the action that she took on Saturday.

10.12 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last night I held a meeting in my constituency. Many experts—academics, as well as people who had worked in Syria—to deal with the humanitarian crisis there in Syria—wanted me to convey to the House their universal condemnation of the heinous crimes that we have all witnessed, and that condemnation has also been expressed throughout the House. This is not just a question of chemical weapons. We must also focus on the conventional weapons that have stolen the lives of so many, injured so many more, and displaced even more again.

I am not talking about an intervention here and there; I am talking about a consistent foreign policy that will address the real crisis that we are seeing in so many failed states in the world. It confuses me that we do not talk about the consistency of the atrocities that we are witnessing in Yemen, in Gaza, in the Rohingya community and in Syria, and about applying the same processes to them. That is why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has called for a war powers Act, which is essential. We need consistency if we are to engage with members of the international community, and we need consistency from them too. We must not only find a mechanism for the future, but assess the instruments that are available to us, as global players. We must ensure that the instruments of the United Nations are working effectively to serve the needs of the universal crises that we are witnessing today.

A couple of other issues were raised at the meeting last night. First, the voices of the Syrian people have not been heard in this debate. It is absolutely crucial that we listen first and foremost to the people either displaced or currently living in Syria; those voices have so much more weight. This is about Syria, not other state actors, and we must turn to it.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

We must also raise the real concerns about the humanitarian efforts. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) was absolutely right to talk about the need for consistency in our approach, and whether somebody is suffering within Syria or is displaced in the region or is elsewhere in camps across Europe, it is vital that the UK steps up to the mark and fulfils its responsibility to so many people who are suffering today.

That means looking at the small number of people we have brought into our country to date and asking whether more can be done. There is a question about the Dubs amendment, and we must ask whether that is enough and whether we can, as a country, go further; I say we can.

We must also look at the way we conduct our foreign policy. I listen carefully to the words spoken in this place. Often I have heard loose language from the Foreign Secretary, or words of provocation. We need to make sure there is good governance over our foreign policy, too.

10.16 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Committing British forces is a grave responsibility; no right-thinking Prime Minister takes any pleasure in doing so, but no responsible Prime Minister should shrink from taking action where basic humanity and the national interest demand that.

On basic humanity, I fear we might as a world collectively have forgotten the peculiar horror of chemical weapons. They are particularly appalling, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) did us a service by invoking the poetry of 100 years ago. No one who heard it can fail to have been struck by some of what he quoted, and I remember as a child being appalled by the description of “white eyes writhing” in the face of a British soldier who had been affected and blood coming “gargling” from “froth-corrupted lungs”. There can be no doubt that President Assad would, if left unchecked, use this means as an easy, cheap and ruthless weapon to mop up any lingering resistance, so this must never be normalised.

The second point is that the credibility of the rules-based order is at stake. Over 190 nations are signatories to the chemical weapons convention, including Russia and Syria. To turn a blind eye is in effect to give a green light.

It is important that the rules-based order is not purely focused on chemical weapons; there are so many other aspects to this. The 1951 refugee convention sets out the rights and responsibilities of nations to grant asylum, and there is the Paris climate accord and the Geneva conventions with the restrictions on the use of mines and cluster munitions. If one pillar of the rules-based order is corroded, the whole structure is weakened, and rogue nations could become a rogue world.

It is also important to make clear the limits of this action that are in place. The UK is not in the business of regime-change. We know from history that large-scale intervention of that nature is very difficult and the middle east presents boundless opportunities to make a bad situation worse. That is not what this was about; it was targeted, limited and proportionate, and focused on protecting civilians and upholding international law. It was manifestly the right thing to do.

10.18 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I start by echoing the disappointment of many of my colleagues that there was not a parliamentary vote on this issue. The Government do not have an overall majority. Given that there were going to be legal questions, that the President of the United States was tweeting about this on Wednesday and that the Prime Minister had clearly come to the conclusion that we were going to act on Thursday, there was time for Parliament to be recalled on Friday. The points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) were powerful, and it is very regrettable that the vote did not happen.

Notwithstanding that, there is no question but that Assad is a murderous tyrant. He is undoubtedly breaking international law and guilty of war crimes. It is important to make the point that stopping someone else committing war crimes does not, in itself, mean that you have acted within the law. The measure that the Government are citing in relation to the alleviation of humanitarian suffering would count equally for the hundreds of thousands of people murdered by Assad using conventional weapons. The Government need to be clear on the legality of what they are saying. However, I entirely share their revulsion at the use of chemical weapons, and I entirely recognise why that is seen as a red line.

During the earlier statement, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said that all the evidence pointed to the attack being chlorine-based, and that the Government seem to be attacking sites at which sarin was produced. That was an important point. The fact that the President of the United States has made a glib response suggesting that this is “mission accomplished” and that it has all been dealt with is a real cause for concern. We will watch with great care to see what happens now, but the idea that we have taken a substantial step and will never see a repeat of this kind of attack is deeply questionable.

The important point has been made tonight that inaction has just as many consequences as action does. However, I do not share the shame of some of my colleagues over the vote in 2013. As the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, if we had taken a decisive step against Assad back in 2013, we would have paved the way for ISIS. It was right for us to have concerns about that vote.

I want to finish by focusing on the United Nations Security Council. I entirely recognise the Prime Minister's concerns about Russia's role in that. Russia is clearly acting as a block on the Security Council. We have not heard, however, whether the Government will make serious efforts to stop Russia being on the Security Council. If we are saying that the United Nations route is broken, what are we actually doing to get the international community to recognise Russia as the pariah state that it is and to stop it being a permanent member of the Security Council, where it is currently able to block any steps that we take? I look forward to hearing what the Prime Minister has to say on that. I am very concerned about the steps, but I also recognise that—

Mr Speaker: Order. Thank you very much. I call Dr Sarah Wollaston.

10.22 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In her powerful opening speech, the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) rightly pointed out that chemical weapons were not the only method of vile killing in Syria. However, there is a reason why their use is such a heinous crime under international law. I would like to address that, and also to make some remarks about those who fail to accept the role of Russia in attacks—not only in Syria, but here on the streets of the UK.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) spoke immensely powerfully about the effect of chlorine gas, and I would like to add some comments about nerve agents—or cholinesterase inhibitors, as those chemicals are known. They are also indiscriminate. They can affect anyone who comes into contact with them—not only the women and children who are their intended victims in Syria, but those who come to their aid. They are particularly dangerous because they persist in the environment and because their victims require intensive care facilities that are simply not available in countries such as Syria.

It is only because of the availability of that intensive care here that the three individuals affected in Britain have survived, but their injuries will be persistent. These are hideous chemicals. They attack both the peripheral and the central nervous system, leaving people's lungs filling up with fluid while paralysing the muscles that would allow them to clear their lungs. They cause painful blurring of vision, terrible abdominal pain, muscle twitching and incontinence of bowels and urine. Nerve agents are a particularly cruel way for people to die, which is why it is absolutely right that the Prime Minister took decisive and timely action on the behalf of this House.

The lesson of 2013—I regret my vote at that time—is that inaction also has consequences. Of course, Iraq hung heavily over the debate then, and we can never know what might have been. As the hon. Member for Wirral South said, we should not constantly be looking in the rear view mirror, but we must learn from the past as we look forward. The lesson from the past is that if we do not act, we will see the increasing use with impunity of these truly hideous weapons of mass destruction. To those who say that this is not our fight, I say that it absolutely is. It is our fight in Salisbury, and it is a grave threat to humanity all around the world. To those who deny Russia's involvement, I say look at the findings that have already been presented to the United Nations. There is incontrovertible evidence of the use of sarin gas and chlorine gas.

Proportionate and limited action has been taken to degrade the storage and production of truly horrific weapons, and I think we will all come to feel that the action that has been taken jointly with our allies will save lives in the future. It was humanitarian action. I fully support the Prime Minister, and I hope that the whole House will at some point have the opportunity to vote to show that this was the right thing to do.

10.27 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful that the House has finally been provided with the opportunity to debate the merits of engaging in further military action in Syria—nearly

72 hours after the UK, US and France carried out air strikes. Whether we send our forces into action overseas is the most important decision that this House can debate. However, instead of that being fully debated here, the first reports that our forces had engaged on foreign soil came through the tweets of President Trump on Saturday morning. That is not good enough.

Let me be clear: no one in the House will think that the use of chemical weapons on innocent civilians should go unpunished. However, the Prime Minister has been unable to say to this House that the weekend's action in Syria will absolutely prevent such acts from happening again. She has been unable to say what the long-term strategy is for ensuring the safety of civilians and bringing an end to the conflict. She has been unable to answer the question, "What is next?"

To be clear, I am not some sort of absolute pacifist. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) made a strong argument for action, stating that if we did not act, the use of chemical weapons, nerve agents and the like would become more widespread. I get that, and it is hard to disagree with that basic premise. If presented with evidence beyond reasonable doubt of an abhorrent act, clear objectives set out as part of a strategy to end the violence and a clear exit strategy with a plan for peace, I would vote for action.

We owe effective planning of any military action not only to the Syrian people, but to our armed forces before we commit them to action. By any measure, we have not had that. Instead, taken with no long term strategy or parliamentary consultation, this action risks escalating the situation in one of the most complex theatres of war ever seen on this planet, and innocent civilians will suffer the most.

We are living through the worst humanitarian crisis since the second world war, with more than 5.6 million Syrians fleeing the country and 6.1 million people having been displaced since the conflict began. The UK Government have shifted their military approach towards Syria, so the UK Government now have a duty to look again at their approach towards helping the refugees who have been displaced as a result of the violence in Syria. I accept that the Government's work to assist refugees in the region has been good, but we must, particularly after our own escalation, do more to support those who have fled to Europe to escape the violence, particularly those children currently residing in European refugee camps. Not to do so would be an abdication.

We all want to see a peaceful resolution to the situation in Syria. The use of chemical weapons on innocent civilians is unforgivable, and those responsible must be held to account. As we seek to find a way forward, we need calm heads and strong leadership—I am not convinced that any leadership team involving President Trump offers either. His tweets leading up to the action were worthy of the school playground. If it were not for the fact that these are the cold war foes, the USA and Russia—with unpredictable, perhaps even unstable, Presidents sizing each other up—it would be funny, were it not so deadly serious.

Finding a peaceful resolution to the atrocities committed in Syria should be a cross-party endeavour that seeks to unite this House and this country. The Prime Minister's pushing ahead without Parliament's approval is a serious mistake, and I urge her not to make the same mistake again.

10.30 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this debate.

I, like many, am horrified by the Assad regime's actions against its own people. It is beyond belief that any regime would use conventional weapons, let alone chemical weapons, against civilians, and I would expect any Government to condemn the regime and take action. The UK has the capability and the world standing to act for those who cannot. The Prime Minister has the heavy burden of judging the security assessments and making decisions to act in defence of the British people or to act on humanitarian grounds.

It therefore disappointed me that the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, chose to describe the action in Syria as "a macho strongman stand-off." I am proud that we have a United Kingdom Prime Minister who can take the difficult ultimate decisions, because to ignore the use of chemical weapons is to encourage their use, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) made clear. If the SNP is waiting for the UN, it is clear that Russia will block it. If it is waiting for absolute proof, how? Again, the Russians and the Assad regime will block it.

This is important because it is now that we should stand shoulder to shoulder and show leadership. The hon. Member for Wirral South spoke passionately about the suffering, and we must stop the atrocities. We must act to defend international law. It is more likely that the Assad regime will take notice if the protection of its Russian overlords is undermined.

The precision of the proportionate response has demonstrated to Assad and his forces that they are not beyond the reach of international action, and I ask hon. Members here and in Holyrood to show leadership and to recognise that we can achieve our humanitarian aid ambitions, as the hon. Lady said, only if we take action. I implore the Prime Minister to take action if intelligence shows it is needed.

To argue for no action is to turn a blind eye to a far-off atrocity. We cannot say, "This is not our country and not our cause." This is chemical weapons, this is a war crime and this is our cause.

10.32 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for securing this debate and for her powerful speech.

Earlier this month on 7 April, in the town of Douma in eastern Ghouta, the absolute horrors of chemical weapons and chemical warfare were laid bare. There were two chemical strikes in one day. At 19.45 more than 500 patients, mostly women and children, arrived at local medical facilities suffering from exposure to a chemical agent. Gassed as they sought shelter, families and loved ones were murdered in the most horrifying circumstances.

The survivors showed signs of respiratory distress, excessive oral foaming, corneal burns and the emission of a chlorine-like odour. None of us in this Chamber could have been unmoved by the distressing pictures of children that were streamed across the world revealing the atrocities unfolding in Syria, but it is important to

note that eastern Ghouta has now been besieged for months. Over the last few months, more than 1,700 civilians have been killed there. The horrors of war, of chemical and conventional weapons, have terrorised the people of eastern Ghouta and the people of Syria.

In February, I raised the perilous situation with the Prime Minister, calling on her to redouble efforts in upholding UN resolutions and seeking a political solution. She pledged to work towards finding a political solution. I accept the position of leadership that the Prime Minister has, and I warmly welcome the way she has conducted herself with the other party leaders, the way she has communicated over the course of the past few days and the briefings we have had from the intelligence agencies, but Scottish National party Members cannot associate ourselves with the attacks that took place last weekend. In our opinion, the actions of the UK Government have weakened the UK's ability to act as a peace broker to bring the warring parties back around the table.

We must see what has happened with the chemical strikes as a wake-up call to all of us, and we must redouble our efforts to make sure the Geneva talks can yield results. We must do this for the benefit of the people of Syria, who the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) talked about. As the images of children being treated for breathing difficulties and the irritation of their eyes were beamed around the world, the US President lost no time in tweeting senseless comments, telling Russia to "get ready" for a missile strike on Syria. I call on the Prime Minister, with her Government, to join me in condemning such reckless and foolish language from the President. UK foreign policy should be set by the Government, with parliamentary approval, and not by the US President or anyone else.

Last Thursday, the SNP cautioned the Prime Minister against taking a decision on airstrikes without a full parliamentary debate and vote. We called for Parliament to be recalled on Saturday and for democracy to be respected. Regrettably, we have not been able to have a debate in Government time, with a meaningful vote on a motion that we can amend. For that reason, and with considerable regret, I must signal to the House that we will seek to divide the House on the motion. We will do that because we do not believe that on the basis of a three-hour debate this evening we have had sufficient time for Members of Parliament to fully reflect and give their opinion on what has happened, and to discuss the way forward. I regret that so many of my SNP colleagues have not had the opportunity to speak on behalf of their constituents.

It is disappointing that Parliament was sidelined in favour of presidential tweets. I hope that the Prime Minister will disassociate herself from the President's most recent tweet, which crudely stated "Mission Accomplished!" Once again, we have seen OPCW investigators disregarded and Parliament bypassed. That is why the SNP has reiterated calls for a war powers Act. *[Interruption.]* I regret that I can hear people saying that that is nonsense, because the Government had the responsibility, as the Father of the House said, to make sure we had a two-day debate. We owe it to the people of this country, as well as to the people of Syria, to make sure that democracy takes place, and that is what we have failed on. We must have a Government who are accountable to Parliament.

I realise that time is short, but I make the point that many countries around the world place constitutional controls on the use of military power. The SNP believes that a triple lock on military deployments, based on the principles that military actions need to be in accordance with the UN charter, and properly agreed by government and by Parliament. I shall sum up by saying that we must all do what we can to bring an end to the crisis in Syria. Efforts must be redoubled to kick-start the Geneva peace talks. The suffering of the Syrian people has gone on for too long. Will the Prime Minister leave no stone unturned in increasing diplomatic efforts to bring all sides together? For the good of the Syrian people, that is our humanitarian responsibility.

10.39 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): This is a Back-Bench-led debate, so I will be brief to give time for the Prime Minister and, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) to respond.

This debate should have taken place before action was taken—we made that clear during proceedings on the statement. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South not just on securing the debate, but on the way in which she opened it. She is absolutely right to call on the Government to redouble their efforts to put the interests of civilians in Syria first. I hope that the whole House shares my respect for her demand and for her commitment to that cause, particularly to the cause of refugees from Syria whose lives have been torn asunder and who see ahead of them a future of waste in refugee camps all around the region, or of trying to get to Europe to try to survive. We need to have them at the forefront of our minds and just think what their memory is going to be, decades down the line, of this era in the early part of this century in which they lived in refugee camps while everybody else in the world was getting on with their lives.

The House has been asked to vote on military action in Syria twice; both times it has been heavily divided. Syria does not suffer from a lack of military action. Multiple actors have committed atrocities—chiefly the Assad Government, but also ISIS and a whole host of different warring groups. In a brief speech that drew on the history of the interventions in Iraq and Syria, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) described the situation in Syria as a choice between “monsters and maniacs”. I would not choose those words myself, but the primary forces in that country are indeed totally unpalatable to all of us in the House. Multiple powers are funding and arming groups on the ground, and they have been there ever since the outset of the terrible Syrian civil war seven years ago. Let us not forget, however, that human rights abuses in Syria did not begin seven years ago; it has been a place with an appalling human rights record for a very long time.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) was correct in his analysis that Russia wants to retain a regional ally that allows it to maintain a naval base in the Mediterranean. There is some equally brutal realpolitik on the part of the US in its wanting to diminish an opponent in the region. That agenda is shared by Saudi Arabia, which has also been funding various jihadi groups. Iran fears the outcome and is intervening. Israel fears a greater Iranian influence in the region, so it is intervening, too. Unfortunately, Turkey has grasped the opportunity to attack Kurdish

communities across the border in Syria. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for the visit he made and his support for the Kurdish people’s right to their own identity. Whatever the final outcome in Syria, I hope that the Kurdish people are respected and get the right to their own self-identity, as they deserve.

We have a grotesque spectacle of what Lord Curzon once described as the “great game” being played out, with the Syrian people treated as expendable by too many sides. I agree with Members who have expressed their will that the Syrian people must be put first. No one pretends that diplomatic efforts are not incredibly difficult, and they are often imperfect, but they have to be an alternative to yet more military action. It is too easy to advocate bombing raids and too easy to be cynical about the potential of diplomatic efforts. We all know that the UN-led Geneva process has stalled and that the talks have collapsed, but we can also remember the limited success that was achieved by John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov, which did indeed lead to the destruction of 600 tonnes of chemical weapons, overseen by the OPCW.

Mr Nigel Evans *rose*—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not giving way as there is not much time.

Everyone knows that the United Nations has to be the central part of bringing about long-term peace in the region. It is the only body capable of securing that peace. Let me be clear: we all deplore the vetoes by Russia that have prevented the process from going ahead. But let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Preserving a rules-based international system through the United Nations is in all our best interests. As the UN Secretary-General António Guterres said:

“There’s an obligation, particularly when dealing with matters of peace and security, to act consistently with the Charter of the United Nations and with international law in general. The UN Charter is very clear on these issues...I urge the Security Council to assume its responsibilities and fill this gap. I will continue to engage with Member States to help achieve this objective.”

Indeed, the Government’s own “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015” identifies

“the erosion of the rules-based international order”

as a particular challenge that is likely to

“drive UK security priorities for the coming decade”,

and one that would make it

“harder to build consensus and tackle global threats.”

There are dangers in arrogating to ourselves the right to take action selectively under the doctrine of humanitarian intervention. For example, there is a crisis in Yemen, and there have been vetoes at the UN Security Council by other parties, and indeed by the UK, to prevent even moderate criticism of the pernicious role played by Saudi Arabia in that conflict. When three agencies call Yemen the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, does that give a green light to other countries to intervene on humanitarian grounds and under a right to protect? I argue that it does not.

In October 2016, the Government floated a draft resolution calling for a permanent ceasefire in that country to allow for immediate humanitarian relief and talks on a political solution, yet, seven months on, that draft resolution has still not been formally presented to

[Jeremy Corbyn]

the Security Council. Ironically, there is a danger that selective interventions can undermine an international legal process.

I pay tribute to many who have spoken in this debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who talked about the refugees and demanded that the British Government make a greater contribution. One should consider the impact on Lebanon and Turkey. Those countries are far poorer than our own, but both are hosting more than a million refugees. The impact on Greece is enormous. Germany, to its credit, has taken a very large number of refugees. We should consider the future of those children growing up in refugee camps. We have a humanitarian obligation to support refugees and children, and to offer a place of refuge to them. I ask this question: have the Government done enough? Have they done enough to support refugees and have they taken enough into this country? I argue that they have not.

The chemical weapons attacks were unbelievably disgusting, illegal and wrong. We all know that, at the end of the day, the only solution in Syria has to be condemnation and the resumption of a political process. The appalling use of chemical weapons has at least drawn the attention of the House to a crisis in which 400,000 have died, 500,000 have been made refugees, and 13 million people are in need of support. I urge the Government to do all that they can to reconvene the Geneva process and to encourage a political process that will eventually bring peace to the people of Syria.

This debate has, for the most part, been conducted with calm and dignity. We have listened with interest to what everyone has said. Let us make the call from this House that we want to see peace in Syria, and that is best brought about by a political process. Let us make our energies available to bring about that process.

10.49 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Let me start by thanking the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for securing the debate—I congratulate her on doing so. I welcomed her powerful contribution, which included her support for the action that we have taken. Nobody can doubt the passion with which she spoke about this subject. She has shown care, concern and compassion for Syrian refugees in many of her contributions in this House.

The persistent and abhorrent use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime cannot go unanswered. It is in our national interest to prevent the further use of these weapons in Syria, and to uphold and defend the global consensus that these weapons should never, ever be used.

Although I recognise that there are some issues on which there have been disagreements this evening, I welcome the widespread revulsion of this House over the use of chemical weapons, whether in Syria, on the streets of the UK, or elsewhere in the world. I welcome, too, the universal admiration and support that has been expressed today for the remarkable men and women in our armed forces. They once again put their lives on the line to serve this country, and their bravery and professionalism was essential to the success of this mission.

I would like to address head-on some of the most critical questions that have been posed about the military action that was taken. First, there was the question of whether we should have just tried harder at diplomacy. Together with our international partners, we have tried time and time again to use diplomatic channels to prevent the Assad regime from using chemical weapons against its people. The chemical weapons convention, UN Security Council resolutions and decisions of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons executive council all require Syria to produce a comprehensive declaration of its chemical weapons programme.

Following the sarin attack in eastern Damascus back in August 2013, the Syrian regime even committed to dismantle its chemical weapons programme, and Russia promised to ensure that Syria did this, overseen by the OPCW. The Leader of the Opposition referred to action that was taken, but more than five years later, the reality is that Syria did not dismantle its chemical weapons programme and the Russian guarantee had no value. Indeed, the director general of the OPCW reported just last month that Syria had not provided credible evidence to account for 22 serious issues. This includes agents present at facilities that have not been declared and types of chemical warfare agent that Syria has not declared at all. Furthermore, the OPCW has recorded more than 390 allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria since its fact-finding mission was established in 2014.

The OPCW-UN joint investigative mechanism has found Syria responsible for using chemical weapons on four occasions between 2014 and 2017, including at Talmenes in April 2014, at Sarmin and Qamenas in March 2015—both involved the regime using chlorine—and at Khan Shaykhun on 4 April last year, when the regime used sarin to kill around 100 people, with a further 500 casualties. Relying on diplomatic action alone has failed to alleviate the humanitarian suffering caused by chemical weapons in each of these cases. It did not prevent the atrocity in Douma on 7 April, and it would not prevent future chemical weapons attacks either.

I remind the House that, as a number of right hon. and hon. Members have said, inaction is not an option—my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) made that very clear. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that inaction would have led to more significant chemical attacks. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who I think we all recall making a passionate speech in this House on the issue of action in Syria in 2015, said that selective silence in the face of brutality is not a principle and is not a policy.

Let me address one of the biggest concerns that I know many people had in advance of the decision to take this military action in Syria: would such action make things worse? I was clear that the answer is no, but only because of the specific and precise nature of the intervention that we have made. This action was not about intervening in a civil war and it was not about regime change. Neither have we begun a long military campaign; the action that we have taken was limited and targeted. It was purely about alleviating further humanitarian suffering in Syria caused by chemical weapons attacks by degrading the Syrian regime's chemical weapons capability and deterring the use of these weapons in Syria and beyond. So this was a limited, targeted and

effective strike with clear boundaries that expressly sought to avoid escalation and did everything possible to prevent civilian casualties.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Did the prospect of a retaliation of a cyber nature from the Government of Russia feature in the Prime Minister's calculation?

The Prime Minister: As I said during my statement, of course, when we were considering taking this action, we considered a whole variety of ways in which reaction might be possible, but as I also said in response to a number of hon. Members, we ensured that we took the action in a way that reduced the risk of escalation taking place. As I have said, the way we did this expressly sought to avoid escalation and did everything possible to prevent civilian casualties. But if the hon. Gentleman is talking about the possibility of Russian cyber-attacks, he does not have to wait for us to take action in Syria for Russia to get involved in cyber-attacks on this country or, indeed, on many other countries.

Together with our allies, we have hit a centre for the research and development of Syria's chemical and biological programme, we have hit a chemical weapons bunker, which contained both a chemical weapons equipment storage facility and an important command post, and we have hit a location of Syrian sarin and precursor production equipment whose destruction would degrade Syria's ability to deliver sarin in the future. Hitting these targets with the force we have used will not have a negative impact on the already complex situation in Syria. What it will do is significantly degrade the Syrian regime's ability and willingness to research, develop and deploy chemical weapons. That is a good thing for the Syrian people and for the security of the wider world.

As we consider our action, we should recognise the role that Russia has played in Syria. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) brought home to the House the reality of Russian activity. We should recognise not only the support being given to the Assad regime by Russia but also Russia's actions in the United Nations. I want to set out what has happened to the recent resolutions that we and our international partners have tried to secure to constrain the chemical weapons use of the Syrian regime.

On 28 February last year, a resolution to impose sanctions on Syria for the use of chemical weapons was vetoed by Russia. On 12 April, a resolution to condemn the reported use of chemical weapons in Syria calling on the regime to co-operate with an investigation was vetoed by Russia. On 24 October, a resolution to renew the mandate of the mission that investigates the use of chemical weapons in Syria was vetoed by Russia. On 16 November, a resolution to renew an international inquiry into who is to blame for chemical weapons attacks in Syria was vetoed by Russia. On 17 November, a resolution to extend the joint investigative mechanism inquiry for one month was vetoed by Russia.

On 10 April this year, a resolution to establish an independent mechanism investigation to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons use in Syria was vetoed by Russia. Russia's behaviour means that relying solely on the United Nations Security Council is tantamount to accepting that no action should be taken in response to these chemical weapons attacks on innocent civilians in Syria. As the hon. Member for Aberavon

(Stephen Kinnock) pointed out, relying on that would mean giving the veto on our foreign policy to Russia, and that is not something that we are willing to accept.

I just want to mention one issue about which the hon. Member for Wirral South spoke particularly passionately, as she has done previously—that of refugees. She welcomed and valued the aid that we have given. I continue to believe that it is important that we are providing this significant amount of support in the region as the second-biggest bilateral donor. We have been able to provide healthcare, educational and other support to hundreds of thousands of children in Syria and the surrounding countries for the same investment that it would take to support 3,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children here in the United Kingdom.

These are not easy decisions to take, but it is right to get a balance of support in the region, which enables us to give more support to more people and more children, and at the same time to bring here those who are particularly vulnerable and in need. The hon. Lady is right: while the military action was focused on degrading chemical weapons, we need that wider effort in terms of resolving the conflict in Syria, dealing with Daesh and continuing to press for action in the Geneva process.

This year, we mark the centenary of the end of the first world war, brought home to us starkly this evening by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). The international community came together at that point to stop the use of chemical weapons. This weekend Britain, France and America sent a clear message to those who seek to rip up the international rulebook: stop, and stop now.

11 pm

Alison McGovern: I want to finish this debate by thanking each and every Member who has contributed. I want to thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has made a special effort to come for the end of the debate; I have always appreciated his friendship in this matter. I want to thank all those Members who wrote to you, Mr Speaker, in support of the debate. What we do in this House, we do best when we do it together. I want to thank the Prime Minister. I may disagree with her on many issues, but today I have admired her fortitude.

Most of all, I want to thank Syrians—Syrians in the UK and Syrians elsewhere in the world who have shared with me their experience and told me what they have been through. It is they and they alone we should listen to most carefully. I want to thank my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, too. He heard my message that we ought to focus on Syrians. The Father of the House described me as elegant if idealistic. That is a badge I am proud to wear. [HON. MEMBERS: "Which one?"] Both.

The Leader of the Opposition describes neither of the primary forces in Syria in very glowing terms. Perhaps it is idealistic to think that the primary forces for Syria are Syrian civilians, but that, I am afraid, is what I think. It is them we ought to listen to. I am glad that the Prime Minister heard what we all have to say. I remain deeply uncertain about her strategy, and I am sure, not taking for granted the views of my colleagues, that the all-party parliamentary group on friends of Syria will want to write to her.

[Alison McGovern]

I will finish where I began, with the words of Jo Cox. She said:

“British policy on Syria has wandered aimlessly, a deadly mix of timidity and confusion. The lack of a coherent response, not just by Britain but by the wider international community, has allowed the situation in Syria to fester”.

It must end.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question put accordingly.

The House divided: Ayes 314, Noes 36.

Division No. 136]

[11.3 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conon
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth

Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger

Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen

Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pngelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom

Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond

Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Stuart Andrew and
 Mike Freer

NOES

Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Lucas, Caroline
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 Newlands, Gavin
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:

Kirsty Blackman and
 David Linden

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the current situation in Syria and the UK Government's approach.

LASER MISUSE (VEHICLES) BILL [LORDS]

Bill to be read a Second time tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: I always make this point but I make it again: if, unaccountably, Members or others are leaving the Chamber or its environs because they do not wish to hear the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) address the House on the important matter that awaits, I trust that they will do so quickly and quietly, so that the rest of us in large numbers can listen with rapt attention to the hon. Gentleman.

Cyber-bullying: Young People's Mental Health

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

11.20 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I am delighted to be able to lead this debate, even at this comparatively late hour, about the effect of cyber-bullying on young people's mental health. This important debate arises out of a cross-party inquiry that I set up in Parliament to look into this issue and which published its report earlier this year. It took evidence from over 1,000 young people and was supported by the excellent charities the Children's Society and YoungMinds, which showed conspicuous dedication, skill and professionalism. Without them, this important work could not have been done. I am very grateful too to colleagues from across the House—Conservative, Labour and Scottish National party colleagues—for their valuable input, as well as to the many witnesses who gave evidence.

Just to provide a bit of context, this all really arises out of my experiences as a constituency MP. I visited schools in Cheltenham, from Bournside to All Saints', and I spoke to parents and agencies such as Teens in Crisis, which has been commissioned by some schools to provide regular support. I became deeply struck—I fancy that other hon. Members in this House have as well—by the apparent increase in child and adolescent mental health problems. To me at any rate, it does not feel so much like a temporary spike, but more like a lasting surge. I want to say a bit about that before turning to the specific issue of cyber-bullying and what our inquiry found.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): As a member of that panel, I want to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend, who has shown such leadership in this area. I also pay tribute to the young people who gave evidence to the panel. That evidence was deeply moving at times and it was a real credit to them given what they have been through.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He should not be modest about his contribution, which was absolutely fantastic and gratefully received.

To say a little more about the context, recent research by the Prince's Trust suggested that young people's wellbeing has declined over the last 12 months and is now at its lowest level since the study was first commissioned in 2009. What is interesting as well is that this is not just a British phenomenon. A recent article by NBC in the United States, citing research from Johns Hopkins University, referred to an acute mental health crisis happening among members of the youngest generation of Americans, with, as the article put it, "critical implications for the country's future."

Similar data is emerging from France and Germany.

Much of the debate in this House has been about a cure—about how we go about fixing the problems after they have emerged. We have debated achieving parity of esteem, funding child and adolescent mental health service beds closer to home, and so on. All that is vitally

important, of course, but equal attention must be paid to prevention. Why is the surge happening in the first place? How can we stop it taking root?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, and I sought his permission beforehand to intervene. With 20% of young people—that is one in five—indicating that their fear of cyber-bullies makes them reluctant to go to school, does he agree that much more must be done to thwart the faceless keyboard warriors who are making the lives of so many young people so very difficult?

Alex Chalk: I do agree. The hon. Gentleman makes the point very powerfully, and in a moment I will develop why I agree with him so wholeheartedly. I found from speaking to young people that the role of social media has become impossible to ignore. It is not the only issue, of course, but it is a recurrent theme. Although there appeared to be a correlation between the rise of social media and the decline in adolescent mental health, I, colleagues and hon. Members wanted to know if there was causation, too. The report provided powerful evidence to suggest that there is.

By way of context, I should make it clear what the inquiry and this debate are not about. The inquiry was not set up to blame all the world's ills on the internet or social media. My view is that social media is broadly a force for good. Equally, the internet as a whole fosters social mobility and opportunity. It spreads ideas and enhances freedom across the world. The inquiry did not seek to address all the concerns posed by social media use either. It deliberately left out the issues of fake news, sexting, sleep deprivation and others. All those are important but have been traversed elsewhere, and dealing with them would have made the report unwieldy and unfocused.

Instead, the report and this debate are about one issue only, cyber-bullying, and that is because the evidence from young people, including those we spoke to in the inquiry, suggested it was the single biggest risk factor in mental ill health associated with social media use. We wanted to drill down on that by taking evidence not just from young people but from experts in brain development, and the evidence from more than 1,000 young people was clear: cyber-bullying can be utterly devastating. It is relentless and inescapable. We heard harrowing evidence from young people taken to the very edge of despair. No one is saying of course that bullying does not exist in the analogue world, but it is this added toxic cyber layer, with its extraordinary capacity to amplify torment, that can prove so destructive.

What is so troubling is that the inquiry also found that children are using social media at a very early age—61% had a social media account at the age of 12 or under—and for a long time too: nearly half use it for more than three hours a day and nearly 10% check their social media feeds between midnight and 6 am, with girls twice as likely as boys to be high-intensity users. A troubling proportion—68%—of young people were affected by cyber-bullying, and the medical evidence showed that its impact could last into adulthood, with what one expert called

"lasting consequences on the adolescent brain".

It seems that this searing experience can be a scarring one too.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his powerful speech tonight. I speak as an MP from Scotland, where this is very topical, the issue of revenge porn online having been highlighted in the *Sunday Herald*. My colleague Councillor Rhiannon Spear, a young female councillor in Glasgow, had a powerful impact this weekend when she talked about boys taking photographs of her naked and posting them on Twitter. Does he agree that the Government need to look more at revenge porn, given how these images are distributed on social media and the impact it has on young people's mental health?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman rightly raises a really important point. It is only recently of course that revenge porn has become a criminal offence, but I dare say there is more that could be done. It is just one aspect of the hinterland of cyber-bullying but an extremely important one to raise.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My hon. Friend is doing us tremendous service by bringing this topic to the House. To what extent is anonymous bullying a factor? We all know from before the age of the internet the devastating effect of poison pen letters, even on a small scale; here one can have anonymised poison pen electronic letters that are accessible worldwide. Is it people who are known to victims mainly or is it people sheltering behind anonymity?

Alex Chalk: That is an extremely good point. In truth, it is both, and not only is it the nature of the bullying but the volume. Social media provides the opportunity, whether through sham accounts, spoof accounts or whatever, to multiply the torment, so my right hon. Friend raises such an important issue.

The most striking thing of all perhaps was that 83% of the young people told our inquiry that they thought the social media companies should do more to tackle this scourge. They felt that the onus was on the victim to act—to block or delete—and that reporting all too often felt like shouting into an empty room. There is a perceived lack of consequences for those who engage in bullying behaviour online in a way that is different from real life. There is some evidence from some platforms of temporary sanctions for cyber-bullies to nudge them back to good behaviour, but they remain the exception.

In fairness, the message is starting to get through. In his new year 2018 message, Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, vowed to “fix Facebook”. One of the priorities he highlighted was “protecting our community from abuse and hate”, and he admitted that enforcement of house policies was failing. I am afraid we concluded that he was right. It is particularly impactful and devastating when the people who are being affected are under the age of 18. They are just children.

While we were grateful for the constructive engagement of social media companies—and it is true to say that the larger companies tended to take the issue more seriously—the unavoidable overall impression was that announcements and measures were largely tokenistic: slow and inadequate. Because there was so little transparency about the number of reports and the nature of the response, it was, in effect, impossible to determine whether the resources allocated bore any relation to the scale of the problem.

The companies essentially continue to mark their own homework. As one witness put it, companies faced with growing alarm about the implications for young people's mental health are “walking backwards slowly”. That is not acceptable, because our evidence showed that those failures have an impact on children and young people, and that the effect is particularly profound, concerning and long-lasting.

It is important to emphasise that tackling cyber-bullying must be a joint endeavour. Parents, guardians and teachers all have a role to play, but it is equally true that when it comes to minors, social media companies bear responsibility as well. It is simply not enough to sign children up and then just let them get on with it. It is important for the companies to be age-appropriate, and to do more to identify under-13s and, when appropriate, gain explicit consent from parents or guardians. They should provide timely, effective and consistent responses to online bullying, and they must become more accountable. What do I mean by that? I mean that they must publish data about their responses to reports of online bullying. Only then—if we know the number of reports, and the nature and timeliness of the responses—will any sensible assessment of the efficacy of those responses be possible.

As for the Government, I think that they ought to do what they reasonably can to improve our understanding of the role of social media in adolescent mental health. We are very much in the scientific foothills of our understanding of these issues, and the firmest possible evidence base will help to tailor the best solutions. I recognise, however, that the Government have gone a long way with the digital charter to increase the tempo, and I urge them to continue that important work.

My final comments are thanks. I thank the young people—more than 1,000 of them—who responded to the inquiry and gave evidence, and without whom the report would have had no currency. It was their evidence that gave its conclusions their heft, and it was their experience that left such a marked impression on all who took part in the inquiry.

11.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for securing this timely debate on the important issue of the effects of cyber-bullying on young people's mental health. He articulated extremely well the challenges that we need to tackle, and I agreed with much of what he had to say about them.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the report that was published recently. As he said, 1,000 young people participated in the inquiry and produced a useful body of evidence from which to draw conclusions. I also thank the Children's Society and YoungMinds for their role in the inquiry. I met representatives of YoungMinds today, and I have regular dialogues with them on the broader issues relating to the mental health of children and young people. They are very important partners for us in this context.

As my hon. Friend recognised, a number of Departments have an interest in this matter. I have often said that silo culture is the enemy of good policy making, and I am pleased to say that the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

all approaching the issue from their own unique perspectives, and attacking it from different angles. We are all committed to tackling the scourge of cyber-bullying, although, as my hon. Friend pointed out, it is an emerging issue that requires careful consideration of the evidence and joint working to enable us to start stemming the flow. He was right to say that we need to draw conclusions in a timely way to ensure that we have the appropriate tactics for prevention.

It is important to recognise that the term “cyber-bullying” is often misleading. We are talking about two separate elements. Bullying is a kind of behaviour that can take many forms, and social and other cyber-media are tools for that bullying. As my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) have said, this has become a particularly acute problem to tackle as those tools can be anonymous. That dehumanises both the bully and the victim, and if we do not get it under control more effectively it will become the epidemic my hon. Friend has warned of.

Turning to what the Government are doing, the Department of Health and Social Care is focusing on improving services for children and young people's mental health. We know that children and young people's mental health services need to improve, and we have a programme of work under way, supported by more than £1.4 billion of additional funding, to achieve just that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham will know, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education recently published a joint Green Paper on children and young people's mental health, which was supported by a further £300 million.

Through that Green Paper, we acknowledged the potential impact of social media and the internet on children and young people's mental health, but, most significantly, we identified that effective mental health care for young people does not have to take place in a clinical setting. That reinforces the importance of getting the right support in schools, which underlines my hon. Friend's priority of preventive measures. That is why we are placing much more support in and around schools, where young people spend so much of their time.

We are also taking action to use the digital world to our advantage, using positive digital interventions for mental health. For example, NHS Digital is producing an apps library that brings together a number of digital tools to help improve health, including mental health and wellbeing, for all ages. Over time, many more tools will be added to the library to support more health needs and drive up quality.

Turning to the online world, where I think my hon. Friend is more interested in holding other agencies to account, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport last year published our internet safety strategy Green Paper. A response to the consultation process will be published imminently, and I am sure my hon. Friend will be first in the queue to read its conclusions. It will include a number of preventive initiatives to tackle cyber-bullying so that all users of all ages feel confident in being online. For example, during the consultation we proposed a voluntary social media code of practice. The intention is for the code to provide guidance to platforms about how they should tackle

abusive behaviour and content and support all users, because adults can be bullied just as much as children on social media platforms.

I personally think the providers can do a great deal more. My hon. Friend referred specifically to Facebook. While Mark Zuckerberg's comments to which he referred are welcome, I think a lot more can be done. Given that reporting to social media companies is low among those who recognise that they have been cyber-bullied, and that children have little confidence in social media companies to resolve cyber-bullying, the internet safety strategy Green Paper also involved consultation on annual online safety transparency reporting by companies. That reporting is intended to both develop better understanding of the extent of bullying behaviours and encourage those who are being bullied to make referrals to those companies. Social media companies must do more to raise awareness and improve the clarity of their reporting mechanisms in relation to cyber-bullying, and we hope that improving transparency reporting will help improve the likelihood of young people reporting these issues in the future.

As I have said, however, this is not an online-only issue, and the Department for Education is taking action to prevent bullying in general as well as cyber-bullying. All schools are legally required to have a behaviour policy with measures to prevent all forms of bullying. The Government have already put in place a number of powers and a range of support to enable schools to prevent and tackle cyber-bullying. For example, headteachers have the power to regulate pupils' conduct when they are not on school premises. Where bullying outside school is reported to teachers, it must be investigated and acted on. We have also ensured that schools have the power to ban, limit the use of, or search mobile phones in school, and the Government Equalities Office funded the UK Safer Internet Centre to develop cyber-bullying guidance for schools and an online safety toolkit to help schools deliver sessions about cyber-bullying, peer pressure and sexting. I can advise the House that the Department for Education is also providing £1.75 million of funding over two years to support schools in tackling bullying, with cyber-bullying being an integral element of that.

Returning to the role of social media companies, we really believe that they have a central role to play. That is why we set up a joint working group with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to discuss how to make progress in specific areas, particularly that of age verification. My hon. Friend said that many young people are spending a great deal of time online—more than was good for their health—and we want to explore time limits. On the question of age verification, I am clear that the social media companies could do a lot more to protect young people. The reality is that if they can collaborate on developing apps that allow people to harvest data, they can use the intelligence on their platforms to identify young people and communicate with them. We recognise that some companies have existing work in place, and we congratulate them on that, but a lot more can be done. There are significant challenges to overcome, and there remains a need for further action to be taken. We are actively encouraging companies to work with us and to make tangible progress in this area.

We have heard what the Government are doing to tackle these problems as they arise, but we also need to recognise that, without further research, our efforts will not reach the level that we need and that young people deserve. We have heard the statistics already this evening. Social media and the internet are an ever-growing part of children's and young people's lives. As my hon. Friend has said, some individuals are spending an inordinate amount of time online. More than half of 12-year-olds have a social media profile, and those are the people who really need our protection. However, although evidence has shown links between increases in social media use and poorer mental health, it is not clear whether that increased use causes poorer mental health, or whether poorer mental health drives an increase in use of social media. We need to develop more evidence on that.

We should also recognise that there are positive impacts of social media use that can really improve the lives of children and young people suffering with mental health issues. It can build a community that they can access to increase their self-esteem and get social support. In practice, that could mean children collaborating on projects through better online communities—for example, a homework WhatsApp group for people in the same class or a Twitter hashtag for those studying for school or university exams. So let us keep a balance here: there are some positives. Young people also take advantage of being able to access supportive online networks of people with similar health conditions, which could be more difficult in the offline world.

I should also like to welcome the Science and Technology Committee's recently launched inquiry into the effects of social media on young people's health. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be watching that with interest too. I look forward to contributing to the inquiry and to hearing its outcomes, which will add to our evidence in this area. I can also advise the House that, in order to better understand the relationship between social media and the mental health of children and young people, the chief medical officer is leading a systematic review to examine all relevant international research in the area. For the review, existing literature will be searched extensively, which will enable Professor Davies to build a map of research activity, identify the areas for in-depth review and subsequently allow her to examine the areas in detail. This will allow her to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the evidence base, as well as considering the positive and negative impacts of social media.

In conclusion, across Government, we are as clear as my hon. Friend is about the need to take action to tackle and prevent the increase in cyber-bullying, as well as the need to improve the support available to those suffering as a result of it. We are incorporating such action within related work streams across the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It is clear that a cultural shift is needed to ensure that future generations do not accept cyber-bullying as the norm, and that they know when and how to access support and help. We need to make it clear what online behaviour is acceptable and what is not. We have made it clear as a Government that we are prepared to work with social media and technology companies in this area, and, like my hon. Friend, we expect them to take significant further steps. However, the buck stops with them. The ball is in their court and they need to do much more. We will continue to maintain the dialogue on that basis. I thank my hon. Friend again for raising this important issue. I have no doubt that we will come back to the subject again.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With the blessing of the Government Whip here present, may I ask whether any steps have been taken to reinstate the curtain-and-commode system that used to envelop the Chair, so that on occasions like today, when you have sat there continuously from when the House first met until the House adjourns this evening, you might be able to do so in a little more comfort?

Mr Speaker: Well, I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but I am not aware that any such steps are planned. In so far as my personal comfort is a matter of interest or concern to the right hon. Gentleman, which is very touching, and might conceivably be to other colleagues, I can assure him and them that I have not felt other than comfortable, privileged and exhilarated to have been in the Chair for the past nine and a quarter hours.

Question put and agreed to.

11.46 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 16 April 2018

[MR DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

Myanmar: Rohingya Minority

[Relevant Documents: Second Report of the International Development Committee, Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis, HC 504, and the Government Response, HC 919; Third Report of the International Development Committee, Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis – monsoon preparedness in Cox's Bazar, HC 904; Oral evidence taken before the International Development Committee on 20 March 2018, HC 504; First Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 2017–19, Violence in Rakhine State and the UK's response, HC 435, and the Government Response, HC 868.]

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 200224 and 200371, and public petitions P002061, P002064, P002078 and P002104, relating to Myanmar's Rohingya minority.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya from Burma is a tragedy that shames all of us. Their current situation stands as a reproach to the international community, which has proved either unable or unwilling to act as the Burmese Government have violated every international norm of right behaviour. It has tarnished for ever the name of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was once a beacon for those who believe in democracy and human rights. It has led to Bangladesh, which is one of the poorest countries in the world, having to take in a huge number of refugees. Bangladesh accepted more refugees in three weeks than the whole of mainland Europe took from the Mediterranean in a year. That perhaps puts some of our problems into perspective.

Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children have fled their homes, but the roots of the tragedy were there for a long time for anyone who wished to see. For years, violence has been growing in Rakhine state. By 2013, Human Rights Watch was warning of what it called the "ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya. In 2015, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Early Warning Project listed the Rohingya as being at risk of genocide, yet it seems that various Governments of the world continue to give the wrong signal to the Burmese Government and military.

We relied too much on the influence of Aung San Suu Kyi. We indicated through our actions, if not our words, that the plight of the Rohingya and their human rights were not something we were terribly concerned about. To give one example, the UK Government funded the 2014 census in Burma to the tune of £10 million. The then Select Committee on International Development expressed its concerns that the Rohingya would not be allowed to take part.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend also note that, although representations were made to the UK Government and the United Nations about the census, they accepted the requirement

to define Rohingya people as Bengali as part of the census? Our Government failed to take action and withdraw funding from that census.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend brings me on to my next point, which is that the UK Government continued funding even when the Burmese Government were not allowing the Rohingya to be defined as citizens of their own country.

We provided training for the Burmese military in democracy and human rights. Opinions differ on whether that was a good thing, but when I see that 67% of that funding came from the aid budget—money that should go to the poorest people in the poorest countries—it gives me pause. That training continued even as villages were being burned and looted and people were being killed in Rakhine. In fact, it did not cease until September last year. That told the Burmese military and the Burmese Government that we were not that concerned about human rights in their country and that we would do nothing to enforce those rights.

We were not the only ones at fault. In fact, while those villages were being attacked, the head of the Burmese military came to Brussels to give a speech. He toured arms factories in Europe, which again sent the wrong signal. It should have come as no surprise to anyone that, when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked police outposts and killed 12 soldiers in August last year, the reprisals were swift and brutal. The estimate of the number killed varies between 9,000 and more than 13,000, but there can be no true figures because there is no real humanitarian access to the area.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is understandable that there will be a reaction to a terrorist act—no one would condone terrorist attacks, particularly given the effect they have on civilians—but a basic principle of military law is proportionality. Has not the response of the military been grossly disproportionate? Along with the involvement of militias, does that indicate a degree of significant state planning waiting for an incident to provide an opportunity and an excuse?

Helen Jones: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, because the Burmese Government and the Burmese military have been ratcheting up tensions in Rakhine for years, sending more and more troops there. Their response was indeed disproportionate. Some 620,000 people fled their homes, and more are coming every day. There is clear evidence of the use of landmines, rape and the burning of villages. Indeed, we could all see the burned villages on our television screens. Most of those people are now in camps in Bangladesh.

While Bangladesh was very generous in opening its borders, it does not classify the Rohingya as refugees, meaning that they are denied some of their rights under international law, including the right to request resettlement in a third country. As the International Development Committee said in its very moving report, those camps are now at risk from cyclones and the monsoons. The camps are in an area prone to cyclones, but there are no evacuation procedures or shelters. The area around the camps has been deforested for fuel, weakening the ground. The camps are built of very flimsy materials. When the monsoons come, they are likely to overwhelm the sanitation systems in the camps. Sewage will flood

[Helen Jones]

the area, causing a health emergency. As the Committee baldly put it, people will die. That is why it is very important that the Government redouble their effort to convince the international community to give more immediate aid to stop that health disaster.

At the same time, we must be clear with the Government of Bangladesh that these people deserve to be recognised as refugees, for that is what they are. Bangladesh is building a new camp—an island camp, which those who saw it on “Channel 4 News” will agree looks much more like a prison camp—with the help of the Chinese. The fear is that they want to make conditions so appalling that the Rohingya will have no alternative but to return home, whether it is safe or not. It is clear that the Bangladeshi Government’s aim is to ensure that the Rohingya are repatriated. That may be a laudable ambition in the long term, but the Rohingya cannot return while violence continues in Rakhine, while they are not recognised as citizens of their own country and while there is no humanitarian access to monitor their return.

The Bangladeshi Government have signed a memorandum of understanding with the Burmese Government about the return of the Rohingya, but no one knows what it contains. While the British Government have rightly said that any return must be “safe, voluntary and dignified”, we need to persuade the whole international community to stick to that, because frankly the Burmese Government’s record on dealing with returnees is appalling. The Rohingya who were displaced earlier are still in camps that are in reality prison camps, which the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs said display

“a level of human suffering...that I have personally never seen before”.

The Burmese Government are now building a new camp with money diverted, it is said, from World Bank aid. It, too, will be a prison camp. Last week, the Bangladeshi Government signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees about returnees, including the right of humanitarian access, but Burma has not signed up to anything like that and there is no indication that it will change its mind.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, whatever memorandum of understanding the two Governments sign, nothing will happen unless we deal with the root issue and the refugees’ fear?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That will entail the things I have listed: cessation of violence, recognition of citizenship and the right of humanitarian access.

The gender-based violence that has been used by the Burmese military also needs to be dealt with. They use rape as a weapon of war. There have been credible reports of girls as young as five being gang raped; of pregnant women being attacked and the babies cut from them; and of other women seeing their children thrown into a well or into a fire before they too are led away to be gang raped. That is a level of barbarity that the world cannot and must not tolerate. Such barbarity can happen only when other people are seen as less than human. It is not, as Aung San Suu Kyi’s website said, “fake rape”. It is happening. It is a war crime and must be treated as a crime against humanity.

Not only does there seem to be little effort to collect evidence to prosecute those responsible for such crimes, but the health services on offer to the women involved are inadequate. Many of the services are situated in the middle of the camps in public view and are run by men, so women are reluctant to go to them. Few people there speak the women’s language. If we think how difficult it would be to describe a rape even in our own language, it must be much harder to try to describe it to someone who does not speak the same language. The UK rightly funds 13 women’s centres, giving help to more than 10,000 women and girls, but nearly half a million are in need of help, and a greater effort from our partners is needed to meet that need.

There are reports of gender-based violence within the camps and of women and girls being trafficked. It is significant that when Cardinal Bo from Burma and Cardinal D’Rozario from Bangladesh recently came here, they met our anti-slavery commissioner, because they are fully aware of what is going on in the camps. There are also reports of child marriages, sometimes driven by families in such absolute poverty that they can no longer care for their children, and sometimes by a system that gives food aid to family groups rather than to individuals. That piles tragedy upon tragedy for the people involved, and yet we seem to be reluctant to collect evidence of what has happened.

The UK sent two civilians to Bangladesh to advise on how to collect evidence of sexual violence, but where is the rest of the world? Time after time when such things happen, Governments shake their heads and say, “Never again”, but that is not good enough. We said it after Bosnia and after Rwanda. We keep saying it. Neither is it good enough to ask the Burmese military to investigate themselves. They have cleared the army of any crimes, even those we can see on our screens. In the end, the only way to deal with such crimes is to ensure that evidence is collected and that those responsible are brought before a court, because that is the only way to deter people in future.

It seems the world wills the ends but is reluctant to will the means. That is true of crimes against women and girls and also true of the aid given to those in the camps. Only about 34% of the \$434 million required has so far been collected. That means that those in the camps are in conditions much worse than what the world generally recognises as suitable for refugees. They are there in high densities with less than 15 square meters a person. By last December a third of the latrines had failed and 90% of domestic water is contaminated with *E. coli*. There have been campaigns to vaccinate against cholera and measles, for which I am grateful, but diphtheria is now rife in the camps. When the monsoon comes the health crisis will be made worse because people are so closely packed together.

I am proud that this country pledged £47 million at the Geneva pledging conference and then added a further £12 million. People complain about aid, but I am hugely proud of my country when it makes such donations because it recognises common humanity. We must work to ensure that other countries step up. Since the attack in Salisbury we have shown that it is possible to use diplomacy to get our friends and allies to act together. The Government must turn their attention to ensuring that the wealthier countries in the world, those who came to the world humanitarian summit and members

of the UN, step up to the plate to avert a tragedy in the camps. The UN must ensure that its agencies work together to provide services.

John Spellar: Have not the senior UN officials already declared that the actions taken against the Rohingya amount to ethnic cleansing, which is an offence in itself? Should they not act on the decisions they themselves have already made?

Helen Jones: Indeed, they should; my right hon. Friend is right. One of the things this tragedy teaches us, particularly when we are today talking about Syria, is that there are consequences to acting, but also consequences to doing nothing, and we ought to remember that. We now need to put pressure on Burma to accept an independent investigation into what has gone on in Rakhine. That is urgent because there are already reports that the military are bulldozing villages and destroying the evidence. The International Development Committee has suggested that that could be led by the International Commission on Missing Persons, and that is a good idea. I do not mind who does it, but it has to be done.

How do we put the pressure on? First, I hope that the UK Government will say clearly that it is right that the UN refers Burma to the International Criminal Court. I know it is argued that such a motion would be vetoed by Russia and China, but we need to be unequivocal about our position and we need to build support for it. Secondly, although the EU has imposed an arms embargo, there is no world embargo on selling arms to Burma, which is what we need to work for as a matter of urgency. We also need to take action by imposing sanctions on the Burmese military and members of the Burmese Government. Simply freezing their assets will not cut it, I am afraid; they do not have many assets here. However, making sure that firms could not work with firms controlled by the Burmese military would help. We need to do that along with saying that there will be no return for the Rohingya until conditions are safe, and until the recommendations of the Annan advisory commission have been implemented and there is full humanitarian access for the UN and other organisations.

In the longer term, the world needs to learn the lessons of this conflict. It is very easy to say, “Never intervene—never do anything”, but, as I said, there are consequences to doing nothing. If we watch while a particular ethnic group is targeted and violence increases, and we do nothing, we become complicit in that violence.

I end by explaining why we should be concerned about people half a world away: because they are human, as we are. As Cardinal Bo said:

“They are among the most marginalised, dehumanised and persecuted people in the world. They are treated worse than animals. Stripped of their citizenship, rejected by the neighbouring countries, they are rendered stateless. No human being deserves to be treated this way”.

They do not, and if we believe in common humanity, we should continue to do our bit to ensure that those responsible are brought to account, and make every effort to persuade our allies around the world to do the same.

4.51 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North

(Helen Jones) on securing the debate, and on her powerful advocacy, which I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. She went through so many of the important aspects of this terrible situation.

It is a shame that more people are not here today—I know they would have been ordinarily, because every time this subject is raised in Westminster Hall or in the Chamber lots of people want to speak, get involved, share their views and keep the pressure on the Burmese Government. However, we all understand the situation in Syria at the moment. It is absolutely right that that terrible situation is being debated in the Chamber.

The situation faced by the Rohingya has been going on for many years. Kutupalong camp is the biggest camp in Bangladesh. It is now effectively Bangladesh's fourth biggest city, because of how the camps have come together and how many people are there. It has been there for 30 years. My first question when I was elected to this place was about the Rohingya community. At that point, they were being pushed out into the sea and were making terrible boat trips.

In September last year, after the latest escalation, I was one of the first Members to go to the Kutupalong camp. I remember coming back and wanting to share the voices of the people I had met, and tell their stories, because I knew that world events would overtake what is going on in a part of the world that is relatively unknown to the west. I remember thinking at the time that something else was bound to happen in Syria that would take the world's attention away from Burma and the Rohingya community, and indeed that is exactly what we risk letting happen. This is therefore a really opportune, important debate. Despite the fact that few of us are here, I know that the contributions will be well received by those who have been campaigning for so long for those people whose voices we cannot hear—the 680,000 people who are languishing in terrible conditions in Bangladesh, and the few who are left in Burma.

I have spoken in this place about what I saw in September 2017. The Burmese Government have called these people terrorists, but I have spoken at length about the 60-year-old woman I met who was dead behind the eyes after telling me about how her son-in-law had been stabbed and dragged away. Her 12-year-old grandson had been beheaded in front of her. Others had their genitals chopped off and their villages burned. People had gun wounds in the backs of their legs. People were describing how helicopters had been chasing them, and firing just behind them to push them across the border.

The hon. Member for Warrington North mentioned landmines. We saw videos of the landmines that had been planted, and we could track exactly where they were, because in the video that was shown to us we could see where we were standing. A lady had had her leg blown off just four days before. This is really gruesome stuff and one of the toughest things I have had to see, listen to and speak about. These people have suffered in ways that I, frankly, cannot imagine, but I must press on, as we all must, to share these stories.

As the hon. Lady said, in Kutupalong camp the people have found the one part of Bangladesh that has some hills. Bangladesh is a low-lying country, but because of its forestland the camp is on sloping ground. It has all been deforested. Effectively, a population the size of Liverpool is on an area 5 km by 5 km. The trees that

[Paul Scully]

were there have all been taken away; the land is just a series of mudbanks. When I was there, we spent an hour and a half walking through the camp, but we did not get anywhere near the end of it. We could not see the end, the camp is that big.

The rainy season is nearly upon us again, so we have gone full cycle. When I was in the camp recently with the International Development Committee, things had improved. There is now a registration camp with proper UN canvas tents where people can settle in, register, tell their story, be documented and get the vaccinations that they need. However, they then move over to the bigger camp, where there is still plastic sheeting, bamboo sheets and such things. The risk is of further landslides that will take their homes away from them.

Roads had also been built. Bricks had been broken up and hardcore laid. What had taken me 20 or 30 minutes to walk through now took me only five minutes, because the roads had improved that much. However, again, the person who was in charge of building the roads told us at length that when the rain comes it will all be washed away. All the work that has happened over the last six months is at risk of being undone by just one or two monsoons. That is before we even get to the cyclones. If the cyclones come, there will be severe devastation. Save the Children reckons that about 120,000 to 200,000 people will be affected. Many lives will be lost, and it is not a matter of if lives will be lost, but of when and how many. Unfortunately, this is now about mitigation, not elimination.

I am full of admiration for the Bangladeshi Government for what they have taken on. This is a country of 180 million people. During the Bangladeshi war of independence, just 47 years ago, so many of them were in refugee camps. It was Bangladeshi independence day just a few weeks ago. I could see how raw the emotion was for them as they told the story of their war of independence and the suffering that they went through. It is no surprise that they are so welcoming and so open to people going through the same process.

We need to work with the Bangladeshi Government to do more. The area that the Rohingya are in at the moment is far too small. We need to work out how we can encourage the Bangladeshi Government to disperse people. As the hon. Member for Warrington North said, if the Rohingya were treated as refugees they would have a right to stay and would be able to disperse through the country. The Bangladeshi Government are not too keen on that, because they expect to come to an agreement with the Rohingya people, and for them to move back to their homeland.

Originally, that is what many of the Rohingya I met wanted to do. However, the second time I went, I got a sense that there was a hardening of opinion among the people in the camps. Previously, they were really hoping that the world was coming to their aid, and that we might be able to reach a solution. As long as it was safe, they would go back to Myanmar and build a new life for themselves. I got that sense from the people I spoke to the second time around of a hardening of opinion, and, unfortunately, they do not see a light at the end of the tunnel.

The Burmese Government have started to change and make some moves under public pressure, but that is clearly nowhere near enough and they are failing to

tackle the underlying issues. The Rohingya need surety; they must have the sense that they can stay. When they get back to Myanmar, they need freedom of movement, access to work and the ability to make a livelihood. Bear in mind that their villages and homes have all been destroyed, and I dare say that there has also been some land grabbing—other people have moved in and taken the best of what was theirs. The personal safety of the Rohingya must absolutely be guaranteed, but I get the sense that they feel it is drifting further away. To get all those things, they need a pathway to citizenship.

When I first went to Burma in February 2016, I went through the country, including states other than Rakhine, talking about religious freedom and ethnic conflict. Many of the people I met had been in prison—it was a self-selecting audience, I suppose—and it seemed that there was a flat rate of 14 years for political sentencing. The shortest sentence I came across was seven years, and the only reason that woman—an amazing lady called Wai Wai Nu—had been in prison for seven years was that she was only 29. She is a Rohingya, and her father had been a Member of Parliament in Burma.

Imagine that—we are all Members of Parliament in this place, but within just a few years, that man was not only not a Member of Parliament, but was not able to stand for election. He cannot even vote or secure the basic rights to health and education for his family. His whole family was put in prison. What a change in a country in which we had—and I hope still have, although this is in the far distance at the moment—such high hopes. I have talked many times in this place about my Burmese heritage. My father was born there, so I am half-Burmese, and it absolutely breaks my heart to see what is going on in that wonderful country.

Will the Minister talk about his sense of what the Burmese Government are doing, even if it is in name only, to open up the visits that are allowed at the moment? In a recent speech, the new President, U Win Myint, talked about the rule of law and ethnic conflict, but he did not get anywhere near getting to grips with this situation.

I know this is a controversial issue; I talk about it here and in many other places. The week before last, I was lecturing at the Britain-Burma Society, an institution made up of expat Burmese—the Burmese diaspora here—including a lot of experts and academics. The issue is controversial with the Burmese diaspora here, never mind the people who are living to the parochial, closed news cycle in Burma, which transmits the hate speech of Wirathu, the nationalist Buddhist monk who heads Ma Ba Tha—a particularly pernicious group of Buddhists, which started a popular uprising.

People in Burma are largely behind pushing the Rohingya out, and as far as they are concerned, the Rohingya are not Burmese; they are Bangladeshis or Bengalis. People use disparaging names, calling them Bengalis and refusing to accept the fact that the Rohingya are a discrete community. I do not believe for a minute that they appreciate, know about or accept our description of the violence, mutilations, rapes and killings or the burning of villages that we report on. They say it is just western propaganda, but it is well documented. The Minister has been to Cox's Bazar and spoken to people, and I have seen and smelled the smoke of the burning villages.

Rushanara Ali: Is the hon. Gentleman also concerned about how social media has been used for years, but especially last year? A recent report in *The Guardian*,

based on analysis by Raymond Serrato, showed that the level of incitement to violence and hate on platforms such as Facebook is unprecedented.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that our Government need to take a broader international approach to how we monitor the activities of social media platforms, both in the UK and elsewhere, to prevent extremist groups from promoting acts of genocide and violence?

Paul Scully: I totally agree with the hon. Lady about the use of social media, which whips things up so quickly. I will leave it to the Minister to comment on what more the Government can do about the wider issue she raises. I am fortunate that I do not get anywhere near the level of abuse that other Members get on social media—especially female MPs—but I do get it every now and again from Burmese nationalists, and from Sri Lankans when I talk about Sri Lankan human rights. It is interesting that we get it from the other side of the world. As the hon. Lady says, the speed with which these things flow on social media is incredible, so it is difficult to tackle them.

I talked earlier about what the Burmese Government are doing. Also, seven Burmese soldiers were found guilty of murdering 10 Rohingya and got 10 years' hard labour, but that is an imperfect approach. The two Reuters journalists who discovered the massacre that relates to the sentence have themselves been arrested. They have been in custody for four months so far and they face a full trial, which carries a maximum sentence of 14 years. How can it be that while the Burmese Government are carrying out show trials and putting a few people in prison—we are all desperate for them to open up transparency—two people who are just doing their job incredibly well and bravely are held up to the Burmese people as enemies of the state? That cannot be right. Effectively, the crime of those 10 soldiers was not murdering people; it was getting caught.

One of the petitions talks about the need to have hard-hitting financial sanctions. I must declare an interest: I am trade envoy to Burma. I think we need targeted sanctions. We must look at the military, because the commander-in-chief could stop this tomorrow if he so decided—if he called off the dogs and appreciated that the Rohingya are human beings with a right to stay in the place they have called home for decades, if not hundreds of years. We must target our sanctions carefully on the military and military-owned organisations, but an overall sanctions regime targeted on Burma would risk impoverishing people in other parts of the country, such as Kachin state and northern Shan state, where there is the risk of ethnic conflict opening up again. There have recently been air strikes in those states, so other people are suffering. None the less, the international community must come down as a whole on the escalation in violence in Rakhine state.

I am also trade envoy to Thailand and Brunei. I can go to those countries to further economic interests, and we can talk about what we can sell and buy, but there is no way we can do that in Burma at the moment. We need to talk about economic development, which is one of the pathways to showing Burma what it means to be a true part of the international community. Let us not have that country yet again close in on itself and go back to being reliant on China for its economy. In 2016, when I spoke to members of the Government and to civil society, they knew that relying on the Chinese

economy was a very short-term view: it is soft loans, it is all about the money and there is no lasting interest in the country. Britain and other countries tend to have a lasting legacy: knowledge transfer and the building of secondary industries, which create jobs and prosperity. Hopefully, such moves can help the country—it is about the carrot, not the stick.

Rushanara Ali: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that our Government need to be very clear about who we trade with? By all means, our businesses can trade, but they need to trade in an environment that respects human rights and is ethical, and they must not do business with the military. The military has huge interests in companies in that country. Does he agree that the Minister should look at whether there is such trade going on with our businesses in Burma and that, where there is, we need to take action to make sure that we are not complicit? For too long, our Government have bent over backwards, been willing to relinquish sanctions and did not use our leverage when we had those sanctions back in 2012. We need to make sure that that does not happen again.

Paul Scully: I could not agree with the hon. Lady more about the need to target properly and to make sure that those businesses are not trading with military-owned companies. That is the big difference between economic development and trade. A Burmese trade delegation came here—funnily enough, on the day that I returned from Bangladesh. I went to see them and I said to them, “This is what I have just seen.” The people in this country who might want to invest over in Burma know only two things about Burma: Aung San Suu Kyi and Rohingya Muslims. That is all they ever hear about in the press. There is no diaspora of any size over here that will champion Burmese interests, to tell them the other side of the story. Burmese businesspeople and Burmese Ministers—be they the Minister for commerce, construction or whatever—all have a vested interest in human rights in the rebuilding of their country, way before we even get to the point of asking, “Are you human yourself? Are you complicit in the suffering of 680,000 people who have been driven across the border into Bangladesh?” There are lots of practical reasons—it comes back to the carrot and the stick.

We need to take a holistic view of Burma, looking at each ethnic state and its economic development. We need to call upon the international community to do everything it can and make sure that the Burmese Government are continually put under pressure. I get the idea that they are starting to realise who will be held responsible when the rainy season starts and we start getting reports of deaths. Now is the time for us to redouble our efforts and make sure that they are doing something about it.

5.13 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for opening the debate and for comprehensively summarising the issues faced by the Rohingya people and what our Government need to do. I thank the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on democracy in Burma, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for his contribution. We have been working closely together to make sure

[*Rushanara Ali*]

that our Government provide support in the refugee crisis and to make representations at international level for more concerted action.

The Minister started his brief within days of the attacks that led to the displacement of more than 600,000 people. I am grateful to him for his time and effort in making sure that our Government's response is stepped up. No disrespect to his predecessors, but since he has been in post, he has taken much more time in the House to report to and work with us, and to continue to highlight the plight of the Rohingya people who have been displaced internally and into Bangladesh.

As the co-chair of the all-party group, for years I have been aware of the systematic mistreatment and discrimination that the Rohingya people have endured for decades. One of the first things I came across when I was elected in 2010 was a representation from a campaign group in my constituency highlighting the persecution of the Rohingya population in Rakhine state. Many campaigning organisations, from Burma Campaign to Human Rights Watch, Refugees International, Oxfam and others have campaigned for years to highlight the treatment of the Rohingya population and of other minorities in Myanmar, ahead of the transition towards democracy. In the rush to the transition towards democracy that we all wanted, they warned our Government and the international community not to remove all sanctions outright and end up with little leverage over what we all knew would be a Government in which the Burmese military still had a dominant hand. Sadly, that warning went unheeded.

As campaigners across the House working together, we found that our Government and other Governments took too long to take the issue seriously and to make representations to prevent what happened both in 2013 and last year. In total, 1 million people have been displaced and have sought refuge in Bangladesh. It is not that our Government and other Governments could not see what was coming, but that they were too slow to see the warning signs and to listen to organisations working on the ground, trying to ensure that the warnings were taken seriously.

It is deeply saddening that it takes genocide and the ethnic cleansing of the scale that we have seen before our Government step up to the plate and take an international leadership role. Although I am grateful, like my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North, that our Government have given international aid to help those who have been displaced internally and into Bangladesh, we need to do much more. We need to make sure that this crisis is not forgotten in the context of the refugee crises faced by millions of people around the world, not least the Syrian crisis—there are more than a million people in Lebanon, more than a million people in Turkey and also in Jordan, which I have visited.

The international community is under huge pressure. Historically, our Government have had a proud record of leading the way and making sure that we support the efforts of countries that have to host refugees. Bangladesh is an emerging economy with some of the highest poverty levels in the world, which requires support from our aid project, and has to host a million refugees. That is of an unimaginable scale that our country would struggle to cope with—Europe struggled to cope with it—yet countries such as Bangladesh, Lebanon, Turkey or Jordan have to.

It is right that we continue to support our aid budget. If we do not resist the temptation to succumb to certain wings of the British media that are trying to undermine our aid efforts, our capacity to help those countries to cope with the refugee crises would be even more limited.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):

I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady on the aid budget. It is important that we recognise that not all projects we give aid to will necessarily provide full value, whatever that may or may not mean. There is inevitably risk involved in any aid package. Aid is not a business, but we need to recognise that aspects of the business world apply to it. In other words, politicians sometimes need to take risks. I have no problem standing here or in the main Chamber and saying that we will take risks and that some aid money will not derive the benefits we hoped for at the outset. That should not dissuade us from doing the right thing.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful for the Minister's intervention. I hope that other Ministers, particularly in the Department for International Development, are absolutely confident and resolute in defending the aid budget, because it saves lives. Our contributions have saved millions of lives, lifted millions of people out of poverty and helped post-conflict societies to grow into thriving economies.

Afzal Khan: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but I find it troubling that developing countries carry more than 80% of the burden of the world's refugees. Does she agree that, never mind what we are doing, we should think about what more we can do?

Rushanara Ali: Of course—I will come to that and the role our Government can continue to play. Although our Government have made generous contributions, we need other countries to do the same. In total, around \$1 billion is required to support just the 1 million affected people in Bangladesh. We cannot expect a developing country to cope with that huge cost. There needs to be international support, and I hope Britain continues to play an international leadership role to ensure that that happens.

Others spoke about the important role that the people and the Government of Bangladesh have played in hosting close to 1 million people who have been forced out of Myanmar into Bangladesh in appalling circumstances. More than 600,000 were displaced last September, and hundreds of thousands were displaced following previous attacks led by the Burmese military. I echo the point that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam made about the response of the Bangladeshi population. I am of Bangladeshi heritage. I am acutely aware that the Bangladeshi public's reaction has been positive because they have direct experience of seeking refuge in India during the 1971 war of independence. Many have experience of being internally displaced. Many of my constituents, and people across the country in other Members' constituencies, also raise money to help, because that connection is well felt. However, this is not a sustainable situation for an emerging economy that itself has a high level of poverty, which is why it is so important that we step up and take urgent humanitarian action.

As Members have pointed out, the monsoon season is imminent. Leaving aside the refugee crisis, Bangladesh often faces huge floods, during which half and sometimes two thirds of the country is underwater. It copes relatively well, but it is not able to cope with 1 million refugees who are not in decent accommodation. Its systems are not geared up to cope. The international community therefore must work hard to ensure that the Government of Bangladesh is open to help from international non-governmental organisations as well as domestic ones to scale up support, which is urgently required, and that in return Bangladesh gets the humanitarian assistance and funding that it requires. The situation is urgent. Lives will be lost—there will be a double catastrophe—if we do not act quickly to ensure that the Government of Bangladesh, with the support of international partners, are prepared for the monsoon season.

This week we host the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Although Burma is not a member of the Commonwealth, Bangladesh is, and other countries in the region have a vested interest in solving this crisis and ensuring that the situation does not get worse. I therefore hope the Minister can explain what representations our Government will make and what they will do to facilitate discussion not just with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh but with other Commonwealth Governments that can help to achieve a more positive result than the one we have now.

Paul Scully: The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting is important, but does the hon. Lady agree that members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—Burma's direct neighbours—could also play a key role in trying to unlock the situation?

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more. I hope the Minister will tell us what discussions he has had—and what discussions the Foreign Secretary has had, if he has had any—and the outcomes of those discussions. I hope the Minister will also explain what practical outcomes he and fellow Ministers have got from the European Council. He reported back to the all-party group, but some of the things that were reported were disappointing. I hope that he has persevered since that discussion, and that he has something more positive to tell us, particularly in relation to the arms embargo.

Although we have an EU arms embargo, our Government have not pushed for an international UN-mandated embargo. Will the Minister explain why not, and what he will do to try to get an international agreement? A number of countries—China, Russia, India, Ukraine and, until the end of last year, Israel—continue to sell arms to the Burmese Government, and there are reports that they did so even during the period of the attacks that displaced so many people. I hope the Minister recognises the urgent need to prevent the sale of arms, given that the military does not respect human rights despite Burma's transition, albeit imperfect, to democracy. The international community continues to allow arms to be sold.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights described what is happening to the Rohingya people as a military campaign in which

“you cannot rule out the possibility that acts of genocide have been committed”.

The UN team stated:

“Brutal attacks against Rohingya...have been well-organised, coordinated and systematic”.

It added that the violence by the Burmese military has been perpetrated

“with the intent of not only driving the population out of Myanmar but preventing them from returning to their homes”.

A February 2017 report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights detailed the serious human rights violations committed by Burma's security forces, including mass gang rape, killings, including of babies and young children, and brutal beatings and disappearances. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said:

“The devastating cruelty to which these Rohingya children have been subjected is unbearable—what kind of hatred could make a man stab a baby crying out for his mother's milk. And for the mother to witness this murder while she is being gang-raped by the very security forces who should be protecting her”.

We must arrest and prosecute not just those who perpetrated that horrific violence but those who gave the orders.

It is encouraging that Fatou Bensouda, the International Criminal Court prosecutor, has asked for a ruling on whether the mass deportations constitute a crime against humanity. The International Criminal Court should rule in favour of an investigation and begin proceedings. I call on the UK Government to do all they can for that to happen.

I hope the Minister addresses the recent development of the forced exclusion—deportation—of the Rohingya population into Bangladesh. As I stated earlier, we must ensure that the Burmese military Government are put under significant pressure, with both sanctions on the military and targeted economic sanctions on their interests as well as a UN-mandated arms embargo.

I hope the Minister heeds the warnings of over 100 parliamentarians who wrote to the Foreign Secretary calling on the UK Government to make a referral to the International Criminal Court. I recognise what he said on the act of making a referral, as other countries have done—because Burma is not a signatory, it needs to self-refer—but given the UK's position and historical and unique responsibility to Myanmar as a former colonial power, we have a leadership role to play and we should hold the Burmese military to account for committing crimes against humanity, and certainly for committing ethnic cleansing and genocide, according to the United Nations.

I appeal to the Minister to continue the effort to ensure that the Burmese military are held to account and that the International Criminal Court referral takes place in whichever way is possible. Frankly, it is not good enough to revert to saying, “It is not possible for these reasons.” I want to know how he will make it possible. When the Burmese military are put under pressure—to ensure that action was taken, we put them under pressure through that correspondence with our Foreign Secretary, the Government and other Governments on the referral, and they had negative publicity—they finally feel the heat and start to pay attention.

I hope the Government start to take action on those grounds to hold the Burmese military to account. Otherwise, once again, the international community, including our Government, will have allowed them to get away with ethnic cleansing and genocide, and that is not acceptable.

5.33 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington

[Afzal Khan]

North (Helen Jones) on opening this debate and her excellent contribution. The ongoing situation of the Rohingya is devastating, to say the least. For almost all of my life I have been hearing about Rohingya refugees. When I was a child in Pakistan in the '60s, I heard about tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees coming to Karachi. When I served in the European Parliament, again there was the same situation, and resolutions were passed in that Parliament. Now, as I serve here as a Member of Parliament, again we see horrific suffering. The scale of the violence is unprecedented. It has rightly been said that it is genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Sadly, the world's response has not matched the gravity of the situation. The Burmese Government must cease human rights violations and forced displacement of the Rohingya. If they do not, the Foreign Affairs Committee's December report sets out sensible proposals for the British Government to scale up their actions.

The UK has a historical relationship with Burma, and we owe it to them to step up and lead on this. The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting gets under way in London today, so will the Minister provide urgent assurances that the British Government will step up their efforts to galvanise international support for a robust regime of sanctions on the Burmese? We rightly applaud financial aid for refugee camps in Bangladesh, but that will bring little comfort as refugees face the prospect of monsoon floods endangering encampments and worsening camp conditions.

The Government have supported a UN advisory committee investigating atrocities committed against the Rohingya, but they have not supported referring the Rohingya crisis to the International Criminal Court. They insisted that

"there is no consensus in support of an ICC referral within the UN Security Council"

but that should not prevent them from leading the charge to build and secure a consensus. They can start by building momentum among UN Assembly members at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting this week.

5.36 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I apologise for joining the debate late; I have been in the Chamber for the statement on Syria. However, I wanted to contribute—as you will know, Mr Hanson, I presented one of the petitions here for debate on behalf of my constituents. I must tell the House that there is strong feeling in my constituency about the plight of the Rohingya Muslims and that my constituents, across all communities and all faiths, have been keen to present their concerns. They will be appreciative of the decision to hold this debate.

I want to make a few points of particular concern on behalf of my constituents. First, I support my hon. Friends in urging the Government to do all they can to bring these matters to the attention of the International Criminal Court and international mechanisms for judgment and justice. It is not enough to say that because Burma will not wish to do that and is not a signatory, we cannot find a mechanism to ensure that those who perpetrate such appalling war crimes are held to account.

Secondly, the situation that obtains in the camps is of considerable concern. My constituents are aware of the appalling conditions that the refugees are living in and

of the violence—in particular, the threat of sexual violence—and trafficking taking place in the camps. The horror for those refugees of being forced to flee their land has been compounded by the vulnerability and atrocities they experience there.

While the Government of Bangladesh are to be commended for welcoming and accommodating people fleeing the abhorrent atrocities in Myanmar, they must do more to facilitate international aid agencies to come into the camps to offer support to those there. It is also not right that we should leave the Bangladesh Government in a position where they now seek either to repatriate or to place elsewhere some of those refugees in conditions that would be no more humane or safe for them. We as an international community have a particular obligation to provide support to the Bangladesh Government properly to look after those refugees in Bangladesh on the understanding that it is not in any way possible for them to be repatriated to Myanmar in the circumstances that obtain now and that, as far as we can see, will do so for a long period to come.

My hon. Friends have talked of the appalling atrocities that have been suffered: the massacre—genocide, as many seek to characterise it—experienced by the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. As has been mentioned, they are appalled and outraged by the treatment of babies and children who have been tortured and murdered, and the horror as parents have been forced to stand by and watch the slaughter of their children. They call on Parliament, at the very least, to continue to bear witness and speak out to condemn such atrocities and to ensure that, in an appalling, complicated world where we are dealing with more and more challenging conflicts, the one we are considering is not forgotten and lost. There is a fear that that is what may happen.

I apologise for arriving late to the debate and for being able to make only a brief speech on behalf of my constituents, who, I know, regard the situation as extremely distressing and appalling, and who have strong fellow feeling for the Rohingya Muslims; but I am grateful for the opportunity to bring their concerns before the House.

5.40 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as ever, Mr Hanson. I begin by thanking those who initiated and signed the petitions that have brought this hugely important issue to Parliament today, and thanking the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her eloquent and informative speech. From what I have heard today, all of us in this Chamber feel very moved, and we are passionate about continuing to campaign on the plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar and, now, in Bangladesh.

As I stand here, nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees have fled across the border from Myanmar into Bangladesh, and 700,000 of them have done so since August—in a period of only eight months. Those people have arrived with virtually nothing, and they have fled unspeakable levels of violence. They continue to arrive. What they have witnessed is truly horrific. We have already heard about Government soldiers stabbing babies and throwing them into fires in the middle of villages, and gang-raping girls. We have heard about infants being beaten to death with spades, and about soldiers burning entire families to death in their homes and rounding up dozens of unarmed male villagers and summarily executing them. We have also heard that those fortunate enough to flee

the villages face landmines at the border, as they seek to get away from what they have experienced and to reach Bangladesh.

The UN branded the Burmese Government's actions "textbook" ethnic cleansing, but that was polite, to say the least. Many of us, in the Chamber and outside it, are beginning to see it clearly as genocide. Five hundred people a week are still fleeing and making the journey to Bangladesh. Almost eight months on from the start of the Rohingya crisis, Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military—the commander in chief—has still paid no price for overseeing the atrocities that are taking place.

If we look at the history, there is growing evidence that the Burmese army did not simply respond, as it claimed, to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's attacks in August 2017, but that it had been preparing for a brutal and disproportionate assault on the Rohingya during the months beforehand—for example, by mobilising and arming local Buddhist vigilante groups. That comes as no surprise to many, because for decades successive regimes and Governments in Burma have pursued a twin-track policy of impoverishment and human rights violations to attempt to wipe out the Rohingya community from Arakan state. Stripped of their Burmese citizenship in 1982 and subjected to shockingly discriminatory laws and practices, the minority Muslim Rohingya community in Burma has been described by the United Nations as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Under the Government of President Thein Sein from 2011 to 2016, human rights violations against the Rohingya sharply escalated, as he attempted to use Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim prejudice in the country to win public support.

The current Government of Burma, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, continue to implement laws and policies that discriminate against the Rohingya and are designed to drive them out of the country, including starvation, harassment, and intimidation. Aung San Suu Kyi has repeatedly failed to condemn the violence against the Rohingya Muslims. In fact she can barely bring the word "Rohingya" to her lips. I welcome the news that the military has taken some action against some for their role in the massacre. Seven soldiers have, as we heard earlier, been sentenced to

"10 years in prison with hard labour in a remote area"

for participating in a massacre of 10 Rohingya Muslim men. However, journalists are being prosecuted for investigating actions with longer sentences. Two Reuters journalists investigating the massacre were arrested in December and are behind bars awaiting trial. In January there were also clashes between the security forces and Buddhist Rakhine protesters opposed to improving Rohingya rights. Allegations of human rights abuses continue and the situation in Rakhine state remains highly volatile. To date, the Burmese authorities have refused to co-operate with UN human rights officials trying to conduct investigations, refusing them permission to enter the country.

In Bangladesh, the crisis is on an enormous scale. The speed and number of refugee arrivals—the fastest refugee displacement since Rwanda—would test the capacity of any nation. Bangladesh has shown generosity in opening its borders to the Rohingya and its response to the crisis should be commended. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees warned that conditions in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state

"are not in place to enable safe and sustainable returns"

of refugees, and many Rohingya refugees worry that if they are repatriated from Bangladesh, they will be held in the camps with no rights or citizenship, and under constant threat of renewed military attack. In the camps the misery continues—not directly from the Burmese military but from malnutrition, cholera and other diseases.

The need for collective action is made even more acute by the impending monsoon season, without which the situation has the potential to spiral out of control. When I say it is impending, I mean in the next few weeks. I and some colleagues from the International Development Committee visited Cox's Bazar six weeks ago and saw the conditions in which Rohingya refugees live. Despite the best efforts of NGOs and the Government of Bangladesh, refugees still live in makeshift shelters built only of bamboo and tarpaulins. Many of the shelters are precariously positioned on land carved into sandy, deforested hillsides. Basic services including clean water, sanitation and healthcare remain inadequate.

As outlined in the Committee's latest report, before the monsoon season the conditions were dangerous. Now they provide the ingredients for a potential catastrophe. Rain will produce mudslides and flooding in the camps in Cox's Bazar. An estimated 100,000 people are at risk—more than the total population of my constituency—and those people need to be relocated to safer ground. Efforts are under way to move some people to higher ground, but currently they are inadequate. Basic services are also at risk. A third of health facilities and nutrition centres could be lost, which will increase outbreaks of disease, and particularly water-borne diseases: cholera, typhoid, malaria and gastroenteritis, to name a few. It will put the lives of the 60,000 women reported to be pregnant, and their babies, at risk. We must ensure that emergency action is taken to prevent a further humanitarian disaster during the monsoon season, otherwise many people will die.

The UK has been and continues to be a leading figure in the response in Bangladesh, having given £59 million to the global response. All of us in this Chamber welcome that, but money alone will not solve the immediate crisis. The UK should urge the Government of Burma to allow unhindered access to all parts of Rakhine state, as well as Kachin and Shan states, for international humanitarian aid, human rights monitors and media, and to co-operate fully with the fact-finding mission established by the Human Rights Council, allowing its investigators unrestricted access to all areas in the country.

It is imperative that the UK Government exercise every means available to stop the persecution of Rohingya by the Myanmar military and Government. The decisions by the United Kingdom to suspend training programmes for the military, and by the EU to suspend visits by senior military personnel from Burma to Europe, are welcome. The UK should now put pressure on the UN Security Council to explore all avenues to bring the perpetrators of heinous crimes under international law to justice, and to seek a resolution imposing a global arms embargo on the Burmese army, with targeted sanctions against Senior General Min Aung Hlaing—particularly a global arms embargo. Carefully targeted sanctions against the military will send a powerful message.

The UK Government must act alongside the wider international community and continue to call on the Government of Myanmar to stop the violence immediately and to take robust action against hate speech, discrimination

[Chris Law]

and incitement. There must be a clear message to all stakeholders—civil society, ethnic nationalities, religious communities and the military—to come together, put aside past hatreds, seek political dialogue, recognise and defend the basic human rights and dignity of all, and seek genuine peace with justice.

5.48 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I commend the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who clearly set out the issues—the history and the main matters that need to be addressed. She reminded us all of the terrible situation faced by the Rohingya and the great urgency of the need to tackle it, both the immediate humanitarian crisis and the underlying political issues. It is significant that we have six petitions from the public that have triggered today's debate, showing that the British people are extremely concerned about the fate of the Rohingya and that they will not be forgotten.

Colleagues have said that the monsoon is coming. My understanding is that the United Nations and non-governmental organisations last month issued a new call for a larger aid programme of \$951 million. I would be grateful if the Minister reported on how that appeal is going and how much of that money has been raised.

Many of us are concerned about the proposal to put some of the refugees on the island of Bhashan Char. Will the Minister also give an update on that and tell us what representations he has made to the Bangladeshis about it? Of course, we all appreciate that the Bangladeshis are in an extremely difficult situation. Bangladesh is a very poor country, in receipt of aid itself, and it has had an overwhelming number of refugees to deal with, but the international community must look at whether this is the best way to deal with the immediate crisis.

Paul Scully: When we talk about the island, we should call it what it is. It is actually a sandbank—something that did not exist just a few years ago. It is quite extraordinary that it is being considered, but I take the hon. Lady's point.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman is extremely well informed and makes a useful contribution to the debate and our understanding of this matter. I am grateful to him for that intervention.

Hon. Members have spoken about gender-based violence and the rape and abuse of women and children. It is clear that that is part of the Myanmar military's strategy. Its strategy has been to kill the men from the villages and then rape the women and children. That is not some soldiers who are out of control; it is clearly a thought-through approach to terrorise the Rohingya people. We have debated that over the last eight months and we have repeatedly asked Ministers how many of our experts in dealing with sexual violence and trauma have been sent to Cox's Bazar. I think I have asked the Minister about it four times now. He wrote me a long, very informative letter on 27 March, but he still has not told us how many of our experts have been sent to support the victims.

When the then Foreign Secretary, William Hague, announced that Foreign Office initiative, everyone was extremely pleased that we would have the capacity to

deal with that kind of violence as crises arose. We have 70 people who can do that work, but the latest number the Minister gave us was that two people are there. I would like to have from the Minister today an update on that number.

Mark Field: If I may, I will give the number now, not least because the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) also pointed it out. We have now deployed four members of the UK Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative response team of experts directly to Cox's Bazar, most recently the additional two members in March who are delivering training in evidence-gathering for local partners on the ground. I appreciate that, compared to the large number of 70, not all of whom are specialist experts in the field, that seems like a small number. We are trying to get some more training on the ground with other NGOs and the like. At the moment, we regard this as a reasonable level; obviously, we would like to be able to deploy more and we will deploy as many as we feel is appropriate in this particular case. One of the issues at stake, which the hon. Lady raised earlier, is trying to get as much testimony as possible to hold people to account.

Helen Goodman: I am sorry, but I do not think it is acceptable to send four people. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North pointed out that 13 women's centres have been set out and that the British effort can help 10,000 people. We have that resource for a purpose; let us now deploy it in significant numbers, because it will make a significant difference not just in helping people to cope with this trauma, but in bringing to justice those who perpetrated the crimes and those who ordered them. It is central to that. My hon. Friend said that we should learn the lessons, but we will not get people in other wars to learn the lessons unless, on previous occasions, those responsible have been brought to book. We can bring them to book only by putting in the resource to secure the testimony. I could not urge the Minister more strongly than I do now to increase that resource.

Kate Green: One of the lessons of previous conflicts is the very long-tail implications for people's mental health. The trauma does not end with the crisis, but sits with them for decades afterwards. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be useful to know whether our Government can help to train partners on the ground to provide that long-term mental health and psychotherapeutic support as well?

Helen Goodman: I think that is what the Government are doing, but given that we have the resource, we should deploy it on a much greater scale.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) spoke about the CHOGM conference this week. CHOGM is an opportunity for Ministers to do two things: encourage our Commonwealth partners to put money toward the \$951 million and build support for stronger action in the UN. I would like to know what is going to happen at CHOGM this week to strengthen that process.

Last week, the shadow Foreign Secretary and I went to New York and had some meetings at the UN. We saw the person on the Myanmar desk, and I understood from her that the UN Security Council itself intends a visit to the region. That should be useful, because it

should be an opportunity to build, among a wider group of nations, some sense of the enormity and seriousness of the crisis and the reasons we want it to go up the UN agenda. The UN secretariat also explained to us that the UN is trying to appoint a special envoy.

One block to progress has been the fact that the Chinese have regarded this as an internal matter in Myanmar, not an international crisis. That seems somewhat incredible to me, when almost 1 million people have been forced over the border into Bangladesh. I hope the British Government are challenging the Chinese at both ministerial and official level on that interpretation of what is going on. It is not really a credible posture.

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

Another opportunity for multilateral action is represented by the European Union. My understanding is that, while we are having this debate, there is a meeting of European Union Foreign Ministers in Brussels. I do not know which of the Minister's colleagues is in Brussels, but it would be interesting to know whether this matter is on the agenda and what progress he anticipates in strengthening the will to take action among European colleagues. Of course, Europe has imposed sanctions, but we need the support of our European colleagues in the United Nations to raise this to a new level.

Turning to what else we can do multilaterally with our colleagues, we have debated the use of sanctions. My hon. Friend the Member for Tower Hamlets—

Rushanara Ali: Bethnal Green and Bow.

Helen Goodman: I beg my hon. Friend's pardon. How could I make that mistake?

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) has been pressing the case for stronger sanctions for some time. There are three elements to this, which I hope the Foreign Office will carry forward. The first is the Magnitsky sanctions, which are sanctions on individuals for gross human rights abuses. We debated them before Easter when considering the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. When we began considering that Bill, the Government's position was that they did not want to go down the Magnitsky route. After consideration in Committee, I had fruitful discussions with the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Europe and the Americas, and the Prime Minister later said that Magnitsky-style sanctions will be implemented through the Bill. The Americans already have such sanctions available, which has enabled them to sanction Maung Maung Soe, who is one of the people in Myanmar responsible for those gross human rights abuses.

In fact, the Criminal Finances Act 2017 already gives us the power to impose sanctions on individuals for gross human rights abuses, by freezing their assets and preventing them from putting money through London. Ministers could do that, and I really do not know why they have not been doing it for some of the people we have heard about. Min Aung Hlaing is another candidate for these financial sanctions.

If we had the sanctions available that we want to have in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, we could put travel bans on those people as well. I do not know why, having agreed between those on the two Front Benches to implement the sanction powers, Ministers did not come back and get consideration on Report done before Easter. We could have done it. We are ready

to do it. We are ready to help the Government. We want to crack on with this, but we still do not know when we will consider the Bill on Report. Those measures would be an important additional tool in our box.

The second element, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, is extending the financial sanctions to that part of the economy controlled by the military. That has been the Opposition's position for some time now, and Ministers should look at it. The third is extending the arms embargo from Europe to the rest of the world.

Ministers might say that they could not get such a resolution through the UN Security Council. I do not know whether that is true, but in the past week we have seen Ministers supporting other draft Security Council resolutions that had a much lower chance of getting through than that resolution would have, so I cannot see that the risk of it not working is a good reason not to support it. Britain is the penholder on Myanmar, and as soon as the UN Security Council permanent representatives come back would be an opportune moment for the British Government to give a new push to this piece of work and to get something more to happen. I urge the Minister to do that.

One thing the petitioners want is to stop the genocide. We all understand that we do not want to validate the exodus of the Rohingya; we want their safe, dignified and voluntary return to Rakhine state. That means UN oversight, but it also means, as other hon. Members have said, the implementation of the recommendations on citizenship that were put forward in the Annan commission report. That must be the basis for the long-term settlement.

Finally, I will talk about the International Criminal Court and what might happen there. The ICC is important in bringing these people to book, but also important in deterring future such crimes in other places and in other conflicts. I understand that Myanmar has not signed up to the ICC, but I note that, last Monday, ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda asked the Court's judges to rule on whether the ICC could exercise jurisdiction over the alleged deportation of the Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

This is essentially an attempt to assert jurisdiction over deportation, which is one of the well-documented crimes, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) pointed out. It is based on the ICC's ability to assert jurisdiction if the "conduct in question" for a deportation was committed in the territory of a member state. It looks as if the ICC is beefing up its approach. I would like to hear the Minister's interpretation of what is going on there and also how he is going to support that important measure.

6.6 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for introducing the debate. I pay tribute to her industry and—at times, I am sure—patience as Chair of the Petitions Committee.

The debate was inspired by six public and e-petitions that attracted some hundreds of thousands of signatures, and that demonstrate the British public's heartfelt concern for the desperate plight of the Rohingya. Hon. Members will reflect that the overall lack of contributions—quantity rather than quality—does not reflect the strength of

[Mark Field]

feeling of the House. Everyone will realise that the debate on Syria that is going on has unfortunately resulted in a clash. I very much hope that those hundreds of thousands of British citizens who signed these petitions will not believe in any disparaging way that there are not strong feelings.

Some motion and energy has taken place, and I am happy that I will spend much of my speech reporting the progress we have made. I will be honest: any progress that we make diplomatically and politically is not enough, which is a great frustration. I very much agree with the kind words from the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) about my involvement. This takes up a considerable amount of my time, not just in the House but wherever I go abroad. I will come to that in a moment or two.

Only last month, I saw for myself the intensity of the domestic concern—I ought to make an apology while I am here, because that happened in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow. I met representatives from a network of British Rohingya communities and the British Bangladeshi community at an exhibition of photographs from the refugee camps held in Spitalfields. Some of those present had family in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and were able to pass on day-to-day details. Others had been brought up here in the UK as refugees from previous waves of Rohingya flight over the decades. They were understandably very close to despair.

What was hopeful was the sense of a network of people together. The network is promoted in part by the Home Office to try to ensure that there is a constructive approach towards their work—not just their campaigning, but their work within that community. We do not want an approach that could in any way lead to the militancy that many have been very concerned about ever since this crisis reached a new point on 25 August last year. I reassured them on that night and I reassure Parliament again today that the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development will not ever forget their plight.

I shall set out what action we have taken so far in response to the crisis, on which many contributions have been made today, and what we plan to do. Understandably, many of the petitions have called first and foremost for an end to the violence. Needless to say, we would like that too. In so far as there has been a reduction in violence in recent weeks and months, I fear that it is only because there are fewer people in Burma to whom violence can be meted out. As I have said, we keep a very close eye on the sexual violence taking place across the Bangladeshi border.

I share the sense of horror felt by many hon. Members at the accounts from survivors of what they have experienced at the hands of the Burmese military in Rakhine state. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) pointed out, that unspeakable violence includes rape and savage assault. It is appalling, and all hon. Members call for it to end. I wish we could do more than just express words, but words sometimes matter. One pledge I will make to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) is that I will do all I can to try to discover in my Department whether there is any way in which more

resource can usefully be implemented by the sexual violence team. One of the most important aspects of our work is training other people on the ground—non-governmental organisations—because of my Department's expertise. I understand that on paper it looks as though the resource for specialists in this field does not seem anything like enough to take account of the day-to-day problems that continue to occur in Cox's Bazar, albeit that it has doubled in the last month or so. The hon. Lady's words and those of the hon. Member for Warrington North have not fallen on deaf ears: I will do all I can in the Foreign Office to try to find out more about exactly what is happening and whether we can, as a matter of urgency, put some more resource in place.

It is obvious that while the violence continues, there can be no hope of reassuring the Rohingya that they would be able to return safely, voluntarily and with dignity. As I said in my statement to the House last month, the violence that broke out in August 2017 was only the latest episode in a long-running cycle of persecution suffered by the Rohingya in Rakhine. As the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) pointed out, in many ways it existed even pre-1982. The truth is that, from the moment the Burmese state came into being, the Rohingya were regarded at best as second-class citizens or non-citizens, as the case may be. The 1982 issue only brought into sharper focus the way in which that sense of statelessness was underpinned.

We have urged the civilian Government of Burma to take action to stop the situation deteriorating since they took office two years ago, and we will continue to do so. The UN estimates that since last August more than 680,000 people have fled from Rakhine into Bangladesh. Our Government have repeatedly condemned the violence, as have this Parliament and the British people. We shall and must continue to work tirelessly with our international partners to seek a lasting solution to this terrible situation.

Last September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs convened in New York a meeting of Foreign Ministers, calling on the Burmese authorities to end the violence. In November, the UK proposed and secured a UN Security Council presidential statement on Burma, which called on the Burmese authorities urgently to stop the violence, to create the necessary conditions for refugee returns and to hold to account those responsible for acts of violence.

I continue actively to address this crisis with counterparts across Asia. Last week, I was in Malaysia and Japan. A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, pointed out that there is potentially a role for ASEAN. He knows, and hon. Members will understand, the tensions and conflicts within ASEAN. It rightly does not like to wash its laundry in public. On the one hand, Malaysia has been one of the strongest supporters, and Brunei has worked well and perhaps more quietly behind the scenes with some of the aid it passes into the area. On the other hand, there are countries such as Thailand, which is fundamentally a Buddhist state.

One of the broadest concerns I have about the region is the sense in which so much is becoming atomised. Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka are predominantly Buddhist nations, and concerns have been raised by some about Hindu nationalism in parts of India and elsewhere. There is a dangerous sense—dare I say it?—that that will lead to a backlash from predominantly Muslim

nations in the area. It is a very dangerous state of affairs. I will say a little more about social media in the concluding part of my speech.

Tomorrow, the Foreign Secretary will co-chair a meeting on the Rohingya crisis with fellow Commonwealth Foreign Ministers. We will urgently explore how to support Bangladesh and how to ensure that Burma responds to international concerns. I have had to deputise for the Foreign Secretary—he is the relevant Minister but was in Brussels and had to rush back and go straight into the main Chamber—in a number of meetings at CHOGM, including a very fruitful meeting with my counterpart the Foreign Minister of Brunei. We talked at length and in constructive terms about the progress being made behind the scenes. Unfortunately, as a result, I did not have a chance to speak to David Miliband, the president of the International Rescue Committee, who had wanted to speak with me. He has a letter in the *Evening Standard* today, setting out what I suspect he wanted to talk to me about. He rightly says that there is an opportunity at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting

“to mobilise much needed support for the Rohingya crisis. Economic and cultural ties between Commonwealth countries should be the basis for increased international solidarity with Bangladesh”.

As we know, it is currently hosting almost 1 million Rohingya in various ways. David Miliband has a plan afoot. I hope to speak to him later in the week and will pass on the comments made in this debate. There will be continued meetings. I make this pledge: I will do all I can at every meeting with any Foreign Ministers from that region and ASEAN to make the case that the international community needs to hold together.

To be frank, one difficulty is that too few of the Rohingya are entrepreneurial enough to have a similar situation to the one that applied to Syrian refugees in Jordan, where businesses that were already up and running and had existing supply chains were able to keep going. I do not despair. There is more we can do to develop economic connections.

The Foreign Secretary will discuss the crisis at Sunday's G7 Foreign Ministers meeting, which I expect will send a strong and united message to the Burmese authorities. At the end of this month, the UK will be co-leading the visit of the UN Security Council to Burma and Bangladesh, which has been referred to. We are confident that the very act of visiting the camps in Bangladesh and seeing the situation in Rakhine will further strengthen council members' resolve to find a solution to the crisis. I have not been able to get out to the frontline in Bangladesh, although a number of other Ministers have, but going to Rakhine was a salutary lesson. Some camps had been up and running for five or six years, and what struck me was the thought that the conditions there are as good as it gets for any Rohingya who return anytime soon. Things were barely acceptable. It was a guarded camp. The education and health situation was dire. It opened one's eyes to the magnitude of the problem.

I hope that the visit from the leading lights in the UN Security Council will prompt the Burmese authorities to accelerate the implementation of the presidential statement's call for urgent action. There are not too many European nations other than ourselves and France. I believe that the Dutch, at the moment, are a member of the Security Council, but there are a number of—

Helen Goodman: So are the Swedes.

Mark Field: Sorry; the hon. Lady is absolutely right. The Swedes have actually been some of the most active members. I barely seem to go anywhere without bumping into Margot Wallström, and she always laments the fact that she has only one other Minister in her Department rather than the array we have in the Foreign Office.

A number of the e-petitions refer to the violence as genocide. The UK Government have recognised that there has been ethnic cleansing and that what has occurred may amount to genocide, or at least crimes against humanity. I have to say to the House again that genocide has a legal definition that can be declared only by a court of law, not by politicians or Governments.

I will go into some detail. As Burma is not a party to the Rome statute, the ICC would be able to consider a case of genocide only if Burma were to refer itself to the ICC, or if the UN Security Council refers Burma to the ICC. I am not suggesting for a minute that we will not go down the path that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland has suggested, but I am afraid that the reality is that our calculation is that a Security Council resolution application would certainly be vetoed by China and perhaps by Russia. The UK and its EU partners will continue to call upon Burma to refer itself to the ICC, but so far it has not.

I can report today, however, that there has been some movement on accountability, as was referred to earlier. I recognise the frustrations of a number of hon. Members.

Afzal Khan: I am trying to understand what the Minister is saying. Why does he think Burma will agree to this referral?

Mark Field: We do not expect Burma to agree. I am just trying to go through the process. Bangladesh has ratified the Rome statute and, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said, that could be the trigger for the ICC prosecutor asking the court to rule on whether it would therefore have jurisdiction over the forced displacement of Rohingya into Bangladesh which, if proven, would constitute crimes against humanity. We await the International Criminal Court's ruling with keen interest and are very supportive of that move. Ultimately, it is a legal matter until we know. The UK stands ready actively to support the ICC should it decide that it has that jurisdiction.

Last week, the Burmese military announced the conviction of seven of its soldiers, who were sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. I do not regard that as a show trial. That is an important lesson, not necessarily just in this theatre but elsewhere. I will come on to the plight of the journalists in a moment. We know that the Burmese military have not had a particularly good record of prosecuting and convicting their own soldiers, so I believe that that is a sign, albeit small, that the international pressure for accountability is having some effect.

We have been clear with the Burmese authorities that they must do much more. The international community needs to see a full, independent and transparent investigation into all the human rights violations in Rakhine. The UK will play its part in trying to amass that evidence, but ultimately it will be more powerful if it has UN and international community support. In the meantime, we will continue to support those efforts to collect and collate evidence that may be useful in any future prosecution.

[Mark Field]

I have continued to press at umpteen meetings across the region for the immediate release of the two Burmese Reuters journalists facing trial for investigation into the Inn Din massacre. We will also try to make the case to our counterparts elsewhere that they should raise pressure internationally and whenever they have any dealings with Burma.

Ultimately, we want the Rohingya to return to their homes in the voluntary, safe and dignified manner to which I have referred. The Foreign Secretary raised that issue strongly with the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, when he visited Burma in February. He subsequently wrote a personal note to set out what needed to happen for the international community to sit up and listen. He called on Burma to allow the involvement of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in this important process.

I can report further progress since then. The Burmese Government have proposed a memorandum of understanding to agree how the UNHCR will be involved. The UNHCR is preparing its response. If and when that is finalised, the UK will push for transparency of the full form of that agreement. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow was rightly concerned that we would like to see exactly what the memorandum of understanding contains. More importantly, we would like to see the swift implementation of any practical agreement once it has been finalised.

Rushanara Ali: Can the Minister explain how the UNHCR's oversight of any form of so-called safe and voluntary repatriation will prevent the kind of treatment that he has witnessed in Rakhine state in the internally displaced persons' camps? He and others have mentioned that the Burmese Government are trying to construct new camps. How can he believe that the people in those camps will be treated any differently from the people who have been internally displaced over recent years, who are living in appalling conditions?

Mark Field: I accept those deep concerns. Again, many people from the UN will watch this. This has been an episode, over recent years—from 2012, and indeed before that, when large numbers of Rohingya were being put into camps—that the world did not know very much about. I hope that the conditions will be made apparent and therefore the UNHCR will be in a position, if a memorandum of understanding is agreed, to insist at the outset on much higher standards for the individuals concerned. If we can keep a lot of this work under the auspices of the UN and other non-governmental organisations, as opposed to it simply being for the Burmese authorities—the Burmese military—to control any future returnees, we can push for much higher standards. However, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow makes a valid point. It is not enough for there to be a memorandum, and for the memorandum to be agreed. It is important that this is properly policed for many years to come.

We will be examining in detail how we can support the longer-term change in Burma that the Rohingya and other persecuted minorities so desperately need. The hon. Member for Dundee West rightly pointed out that although the Rohingya are, by a long way, the

largest and most long-standing of the persecuted minorities, other groups have equally fallen foul of the Burmese military and their existence has been perilous.

I am overseeing a review of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's conflict, stability and security fund for Burma. We are preparing to launch new pilot projects this year to help to catalyse the democratic transition and strengthen the laws and protections that the Rohingya and other minorities in Burma so urgently require. That work is in progress, as I am sure the House understands. We will, no doubt, speak more about it in future statements.

The issue of sanctions was raised in several of the e-petitions. To date, we have not advocated sanctions on particular sectors or entities in the Burmese economy and its financial system. It can be difficult to predict or control the effect of financial sanctions on other parts of the economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam made some wise points. There is a danger that the targeting of companies and sectors will lead to a greater isolation of the Burmese economy. Doing so would strengthen the relative power of the military and, potentially, of its one reliable world neighbour, China. I think that would be counterproductive, in the circumstances. Although I understand the concerns that have been expressed, the notion rests uneasy with me. I know that in his trade role, my hon. Friend has focused more attention on Thailand and Brunei than on Burma. I cannot imagine that many existing international companies in Burma see it as a market that they wish to exploit to any greater extent at the moment. We will continue to work in that regard.

Rushanara Ali: Has the Foreign Office done any work to find out how many British businesses operate in Myanmar and which ones have a direct relationship with the military and military interests? We need to know the answer to that question.

Mark Field: I understand that. I do not think that a huge amount of work has been done on that yet. We have been looking at the targeting of military figures and at sanctions in that regard. I should perhaps report that EU sanctions are under way, and we hope that they will be adopted within the next couple of months. The UK has led that work. In so far as it is a relatively straightforward process, I undertake that we will try to glean some more detail along the lines of what the hon. Lady has said. That will be a valuable next step, and I suspect that we can make some practical difference, working with our EU partners. As a number of people have mentioned, it is probably going to be difficult. Although in an ideal world we would like a global sanctions regime, we will need to do that at an EU level first and then make the moral and ethical case.

At the heart of the question of sanctions is the fact that we want to avoid inadvertently making the lives of ordinary Burmese people ever more difficult. They have a terrible enough time as it is. That is not to suggest that we will rule out sanctions. Far from it—we have been, and will continue to be, proactive in advocating sanctions that restrict the finances and freedom of movement of senior military commanders who were directly involved in atrocities in Rakhine last August and September. We have secured agreement on that from all other EU member states, and we expect full implementation in the next month or two.

We should remember that this crisis is, above all, a human catastrophe. I commend the generosity of the Government and people of Bangladesh in providing refuge for so many people who are in desperate need, as several Members mentioned. The UK is, and will remain, a leading donor to the humanitarian effort in Bangladesh. We have already discussed the £59 million that has been committed, including the £5 million of match funding for public donations—individuals making small donations at a personal level—to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal.

As virtually every Member in this Chamber has made clear, the monsoon and cyclone season is almost upon us. We are doing everything we can practically do to support Bangladesh's efforts to improve its disaster preparedness and to protect the refugees. Last month, my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and for International Development wrote to Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, to reiterate the UK's offer to help, and to call on her, as a matter of urgency, to prioritise the release of more land for refugees.

The UK alone is supplying reinforced shelter and sandbags for 158,000 people, safe water for a quarter of a million people and 5,000 toilets. Obviously, one hopes that other members of the international community are contributing as well. We continue to have an active dialogue with the Bangladeshi authorities to ensure that aid can get through during the rainy season. We have already made efforts to improve drainage, maintain access to roads and reinforce embankments and walkways. I recognise the deep concern that a severe monsoon season will potentially make this catastrophe far worse. We continue to work with a range of UN and other agencies to make site improvements to the refugee camps in preparation for the heavy rainfall that we all anticipate.

We also actively engage in vaccination campaigns against cholera, measles and diphtheria, and UK aid is training healthcare workers to vaccinate as many children as possible before the rainy season. As everyone knows, if there is going to be an inoculation programme, it needs to be a full one. It is pointless to do it for 20% or 30%, because the problem becomes fairly acute.

I want to touch on two points made by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is considering the UK's response on humanitarian funding. We will remain the leading single donor to the relief effort. There has not been a clamour for another pledging conference—I wish I could give the hon. Lady more reason why—like the one in Geneva in November that I attended on behalf of the Government. That large pledging conference got us through, more or less, to this time. From my conversations with my right hon. Friend, I know that she recognises that the UK stands ready to donate a considerably larger sum in the coming year than we already have done.

On Bhasan Char, we have made it clear to Bangladesh that any alternative accommodation of refugees has to be safe. We share many of the concerns that have been raised. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam rightly pointed out, it was a sandbank. It also has all the makings of an Alcatraz-type situation—an imprisonment camp on an island that is quite a way away from the mainland. The other issue is that it does not have the necessary capacity—we are talking about a

capacity of only around 200,000—so it does not solve any of the major problems. We share a lot of those concerns, as do many in the international community. It is by no means just the UK; others are deeply concerned.

I appreciate that I am spending a long time speaking, and I know that Members want to go off and do other things. We could talk a lot about social media, which is worthy of a major debate. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow asked whether we would take the issue up with Facebook and others. I am sure that there is ongoing debate, and that it is not restricted to the way in which social media is abused to whip up passions. That by no means exclusively relates to Burma, Bangladesh and the Rohingya. On one level, like a lot of us here, I am very wary of having legislation. I am not saying that there are not aspects where one should legislate, but one would hope that the global internet service providers would have a sense of responsibility. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady shakes her head; I have also been fairly sceptical, and I have written a number of things about the issue. I do not think the appearance of Facebook's chief executive in front of the US Congress last week gave us a lot of succour, although I wonder whether attitudes are beginning to change to a degree.

The single most worrying thing is how atomised everything is. If one felt that individuals were engaging with social media across the board to get a balanced view, that would be one thing, but the actual situation is the worst of all worlds. Young people, in particular, are getting very active on social media, but they are reading only one set of websites to get one totally partisan view. However, I think we should tread very carefully when it comes to legislating to try to prevent that.

Rushanara Ali: To put things into context, the Rwandan genocide was, in part, instigated by propaganda that was spread through the use of radio. It is important to recognise that although social media can play an incredibly important and positive role across societies, the negatives need to be understood and addressed, because social media is much more powerful. Often people are breaking the law, whether in our country or other countries. It is about enforcing the law online, as well as looking at what needs to be done pre-emptively to prevent very powerful media from being misused to create unrest in societies and leading to the atomisation of which the Minister speaks. That is why it is important that he speaks to his counterpart in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about how we can ensure that social media is used properly and appropriately for benefit, rather than harm.

Mark Field: I understand that. In a way, the issue is worthy of a much broader debate. We will need collectively, as a Parliament, to debate the issues and look at whether we need legislation or global protocols. I am also very aware that it is easy for us to criticise fake news, but when our Russian counterparts or President Trump do so, people are derisive. One person's fake news is another person's valuable contribution to public debate. I am not trying to trivialise the issue; it is much more important than we can recognise in this debate. Even in a developing country such as Burma, the malicious use of social media has made a massive difference. Social media has accentuated not only the problem, but a lot of the terrible divisions that have been laid bare within Burmese society.

[Mark Field]

To conclude, the petitions that we are debating have demonstrated the depth and strength of the British people's feelings about the plight of the Rohingya. I hope that the debate and my response provide some reassurance to the petitioners that their MPs, their Parliament and this Government feel equally strongly about these matters. We are doing all we can to keep refugees safe in the camps, but in the longer term—I do not dismiss the humanitarian aspect—the important thing is to keep up the pressure on the Burmese authorities to hold the perpetrators to account and to enable a safe and dignified return of the Rohingya to their home. I cannot deny that the progress we have made is much, much slower than any of us would like, but the British public and the Burmese authorities should be in no doubt about our determination to stay the course.

6.39 pm

Helen Jones: In many ways, this debate has been difficult to listen to—the atrocities committed against the Rohingya people are so appalling—but we need to confront them. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken, particularly the hon. Member for Sutton

and Cheam (Paul Scully), who has a wide knowledge, and his co-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali).

I hope the Minister has heard clearly what has been said. I am grateful for his personal interest and for his work so far, but hon. Members have been clear that they want stronger action against the Burmese military and Government. We want a referral to the International Criminal Court and we need an arms embargo on Burma.

Those things will be difficult to negotiate and to achieve, but the Minister has gone part way along that road. After listening to the debate, I hope he will take on board the almost unanimous view of hon. Members and go further. In doing so, he will have our support and, I am sure, the support of all those who signed the petitions to show how deeply they feel about what is happening to the Rohingya people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 200224 and 200371, and public petitions P002061, P002064, P002078 and P002104, relating to Myanmar's Rohingya minority.

6.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 16 April 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I hereby give notice of the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's intention to seek an advance from the contingencies fund in the amount of £4,626,000 for FY 2018-19 to provide financial cover to the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR).

This cash advance is sought to enable the ONR to undertake project activities planned for FY 2018-19 (i.e. from April 2018 onwards) to ensure the UK can have a domestic nuclear safeguards regime that meets international nuclear safeguards standards in place from day one of exit.

ONR has already made progress towards delivering this regime with financial support provided from the previous contingencies fund advance, notice of which was given on 2 February, and which covered the period up to the end of March 2018.

The Government's commitment to establish a new domestic safeguards regime was announced on September 2017 and forms a vital part of this Department's EU exit preparations for the UK's nuclear industry.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £4,626,000 for this new service will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £4,626,000 will be met via repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund.

The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent on the Nuclear Safeguards Bill and the Supply and Appropriation Bill.

[HCWS617]

DEFENCE

Mechanised Infantry Vehicle

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I am pleased to inform the House that on 31 March the British Army took a major step forward in securing a potential deal to get a fleet of new armoured vehicles by re-joining the Boxer programme, which could support at least 1,000 British jobs. The UK will re-join the programme and explore options to equip the Army with the state-of-the-art 8x8 troop carriers (mechanised infantry vehicles) to modernise its vehicle fleet. The UK played a major role in the design, development and testing of Boxer, and would reassume the rights it had as an original project partner, thus allowing the option for the vehicle to be built and exported from the UK. The intention would be for at least 60% of the manufacturing to be within British industry, sustaining and developing UK industrial capabilities, facilities and skills.

A capable mechanised infantry vehicle is integral to the Army's new strike brigades. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) conducted a comprehensive market analysis of mechanised infantry vehicles in-service, entering service and in development. The analysis was guided by the British Army's requirements and how best to deliver them. The Boxer is the stand-out performer across a wide range of requirements including protected mobility, capacity, flexibility, utility and agility, and is a worthy choice for the British Army, who deserve the very best equipment. With the ability to rapidly adapt to suit our soldiers' needs and perform across multiple climates and terrains, the Boxer would provide the British Army with a credible medium capability, enabling commanders to provide an appropriate level of response to emerging threats.

The MOD is now taking forward negotiations with the organisation for Joint Armament Co-operation (OCCAR) and Artec to look at options to purchase the vehicles. Any deal will be subject to commercial negotiation and assessment in 2019 and the aim is to have the first vehicles in service with the Army in 2023.

[HCWS619]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 16 April 2018

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 16 April. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Luxembourg.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, Russia, Iran, Syria, western Balkans and the European neighbourhood instrument.

Foreign Affairs Council

Russia

Ministers will have a substantive discussion of the EU's five principles on Russia to follow up on the robust conversation at the March European Council on the challenges Russia poses, particularly in light of the Salisbury incident. The five principles are full implementation of Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues; and support for people-to-people contacts.

Western Balkans

Ministers will discuss the political situation in the western Balkans ahead of the EU28-Western Balkans summit in Sofia. We can expect the discussions to focus on the EU-facilitated dialogue on Kosovo/Serbia as well as the risks of instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, if there is no agreement on electoral reform ahead of October's elections.

Iran

Ministers will discuss shared concerns around Iran's destabilising regional activity and the EU's role in responding to this.

Syria

Ministers will discuss recent developments in Syria.

European Neighbourhood Instrument

Ministers will discuss the European neighbourhood instrument (ENI) and the next Multi-annual financial framework (MFF). The UK will have leave the EU before the MFF comes into effect and does not therefore expect to have a strong say in decisions but will note the importance of dedicated funding for the European neighbourhood in the next MFF.

Council Conclusions

The FAC is expected to adopt conclusions on Syria, South Sudan, malicious cyber-activities and chemical disarmament and non-proliferation.

[HCWS618]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In my update on building safety on 15 March 2018, I informed the House that a glazed fire door from Grenfell Tower manufactured by Manse Masterdor, around five years ago, and marketed to resist fire for at least 30 minutes failed testing after approximately 15 minutes.

The Government immediately sought advice from the independent expert panel on the test findings to see whether any action was required as a result. The panel consulted representatives from the Metropolitan Police, the Government's chief scientific advisers and the National Fire Chiefs Council. Following that, the Expert Panel advised that there was no change to the fire safety advice that the public should follow, and further investigations into doors from Manse Masterdor and others should be undertaken.

As I outlined in the statement on 15 March, we have taken forward further investigations. These investigations are focusing on fire doors manufactured by Manse Masterdor. This company is no longer trading and is not associated with organisations of a similar name.

We are engaging with the industry, and have also established a technical group of experts who are able to provide us with specialist advice on fire doors.

We have secured capacity to test fire doors at accredited test houses and testing is ongoing.

We are working closely with devolved Administrations and are engaging with local authorities who are supporting us in our investigation.

We continue to consult the expert panel as these investigations progress. I committed to updating the House before the end of April and can confirm that at the present time, the Expert Panel's advice remains unchanged.

As a result of my Department's investigations to date, the Expert Panel has advised me that further testing is required, which will take time. I intend to update the House further as and when the expert panel provides further advice, or no later than the end of May.

I want to reassure hon. Members that my Department is doing all it can as quickly as possible to properly investigate these issues and to make sure that where needed appropriate action will be taken.

As part of our wider effort to ensure that people are safe now and in the future I commissioned an independent review, led by Dame Judith Hackitt to look at the regulatory framework around construction, maintenance and on-going management of buildings in relation to fire safety. The Government welcomed an interim report, published in December 2017, and has already taken action to implement some of its recommendations, including by recently publishing a consultation on the use of desktop studies to assess the fire performance of construction products. A final report is expected in the late spring and the Government stand ready to consider and respond to this report. Public safety is paramount and I will continue to keep the House updated on progress.

[HCWS620]

Petition

Monday 16 April 2018

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

NatWest bank closures

The petition of residents of Penistone and Stocksbridge,

Declares that the proposed closure by the NatWest Bank of its local branches in the town of Penistone and Stocksbridge should be reconsidered by the bank; further that the closure of these branches will leave both towns without bank services; further that the bank claims electronic banking will still allow customers to access services; further that the petitioners believe for many customers that this will not be possible and further that petitioners maintain that the closure of these branches could have a detrimental effect on many small business in the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to recommend that the NatWest bank reconsiders the closure of these two branches.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Angela Smith, *Official Report*, Tuesday 6 February 2018; Vol.635, c.1463.]

[P002105]

Petitions in the same terms, objecting to the closure of bank branches were presented by the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen, (Royston Smith) [P002110]; the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) [P002111]; the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) [P002118]; the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) [P002125], [P002131]; the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) [P002121]; the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) [P002126], [P002129]; the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) [P002127], [P002130] and the rt. hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) [P002128].

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thank all Members of Parliament who have recently submitted petitions on bank branch closures on behalf of their constituents.

The Government are sorry to hear about residents' disappointment at the closure of their local bank branches.

All banking service providers will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategies. Decisions on opening and closing branches and agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis, without intervention from Government.

Where closures are being carried out by RBS group, the Government are clear that their stake in RBS Group is managed at arm's length by UK Financial Investments (UKFI). UKFI are wholly owned by the Government

and are responsible for managing the Government's stake in the assets acquired during the financial crisis. UKFI are not responsible, however, for managing the assets themselves. RBS retains its own board, which is responsible for strategic and management decisions and decisions relating to branch closures are solely within the remit of the bank.

However, the Government do believe that banks should act in the best interests of their customers and is committed to increasing competition to deliver better financial products and services for all bank customers. The Government continue to engage actively with the banking industry and consumer groups on these issues on an ongoing basis.

In May 2017, the major high street banks signed up to the Access to Banking Standard, committing to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services. The Standard commits banks to ensure customers are well informed about branch closures, the bank's reasons for closure and options for continued access to banking services. These options should include specialist assistance for customers who need more help. The operation of the Standard is monitored and enforced by the independent Lending Standards Board, ensuring that banks are held accountable for the way they treat their customers when a branch closes.

In addition, in January 2017, the Post Office announced that it had reached an agreement with the banks that will allow more banking customers to access a wider range of services at the Post Office than ever before. The new arrangement allows individual and small business customers to withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at more than 11,600 Post Office branches in the UK. While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office's extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible. The Post Office estimates that 99% of personal and 95% of business customers will be able to carry out their day to day banking at a Post Office as a result of the new agreement.

Both initiatives have the Government's full support, and banks are aware that the Government expect their involvement to be genuine and unqualified.

Should constituents decide to switch banks, the Government have made it easier to do so than ever before using the Current Account Switch Service (CASS). The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. This means that customers are more able than ever to hold their banks to account by voting with their feet, and that banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones. More information about CASS is available at: www.currentaccountswitch.co.uk.

The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can it determine firms' commercial strategies in response to those changes. However, the Government will continue to take positive action to maintain access to vital banking services and ensure banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 16 April 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	1	HOME DEPARTMENT—continued	
Biometric Residence Permits	14	Online Radicalisation	15
Cannabis Oil Prescription: Epilepsy	12	Police and Fire Service Collaboration	1
Domestic Violence	3	Police and Law Enforcement: Recruitment	18
EU Nationals: Citizenship Applications	10	Policing of Gangs	7
Human Trafficking: 45-Day Recovery and		Prostitution	19
Reflection Period	9	Topical Questions	20
Modern Slavery	4	Vulnerable Syrian Families	16
National Crime Agency	12		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 16 April 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	2WS
STRATEGY	1WS	Foreign Affairs Council: 16 April 2018	2WS
Energy Policy	1WS		
DEFENCE	1WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL	
Mechanised Infantry Vehicle	1WS	GOVERNMENT	3WS
		Building Safety Update	3WS

PETITION

Monday 16 April 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	1P
NatWest Bank Closures	1P

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CONTENTS

Monday 16 April 2018

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for the Home Department

Windrush Children (Immigration Status) [Col. 27]
Answer to urgent question—(Amber Rudd)

Syria [Col. 39]
Statement—(Prime Minister)

Business of the House [Col. 93]
Statement—(Andrea Leadsom)

Military Action Overseas: Parliamentary Approval [Col. 101]
Application for emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24

Syria [Col. 103]
Application for emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24
Emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24

Cyber-bullying: Young People's Mental Health [Col. 155]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Myanmar: Rohingya Minority [Col. 1WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
