

23 Jul 2002 : Column 829

House of Commons

Tuesday 23 July 2002

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

HSBC Investment Banking Bill [Lords]

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 15 October.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

23 Jul 2002 : Column 840

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Following the killing of children in a targeted attack yesterday, will the Foreign Secretary summon the Israeli ambassador and tell him that he believes that that uncivilised conduct does nothing but harm to a country that many of us hold in real affection and high regard, which we want to see survive as a thriving, prosperous, independent, protected nation, but which is not conducting itself quite as we expect it to at the moment?

Mr. Straw: I am making arrangements for the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), to speak to the ambassador this afternoon. I shall ensure that the hon. Gentleman's views, which I think that the whole House shares, about the unjustified and disproportionate nature of the attack and its consequences are conveyed to the ambassador and, through him, to the Israeli Government.

House of Commons

Tuesday 30 March 2004

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

4th Geneva Convention

1. **Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate)** (Con): What sanctions are available to the UK in response to unlawful killings by an occupying power (a) under the terms of the 4th Geneva Convention and (b) otherwise. [164108]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Jack Straw): There is no specific sanction provided for under the 4th Geneva convention or otherwise but we have repeatedly made our concerns known at national and EU level to the Government of Israel about their policy of so-called targeted killings, which we consider to be unlawful.

Mr. Blunt : Before the killing of Sheikh Yassin and three people in his immediate vicinity, B'Tselem, the Israeli information centre for human rights—the Foreign Office accepts its figures as accurate—recorded that since September 2000, 135 Palestinians have been extra-judicially executed by Israel, and that in the course of those assassinations another 90 Palestinians were killed, including 28 children. The Government have repeatedly made it clear that that policy is illegal. Do they accept that the policy is not only criminal, but self-defeating? How many more murdered people will it take for them to attempt to fulfil their obligations under articles 146 and 147 of the convention? Surely it is incumbent on them to use other sanctions against the Israeli Government to get them to pursue a policy that is lawful, moral and much more likely to reverse the spiral of hatred and violence.

Mr. Straw: Our position on those so-called assassinations—straightforward killings—is the same as the hon. Gentleman's, and it is shared by others on both sides of the House. The killings are unlawful, unjustified and self-defeating, and they damage the case that

Israel makes in the world. The fact that the killings led to the deaths of not only those whom Israel holds responsible for terrorism, but entirely innocent bystanders, including children, simply emphasises the unlawful nature of that approach, and its counter-productive effect. We will continue to make our position clear to the

30 Mar 2004 : Column 1404

Government of Israel in representations, which we continually make both bilaterally and through the European Union.

So far as peace is concerned, the best way to secure a peaceful settlement to that long-standing and terrible conflict is by encouraging and cajoling all parties to return to the pathway set out in the road map. It is the only pathway to peace, and, despite the difficulties, we will continue to do our best to ensure that the parties pursue it.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Unlawful killings are only one aspect of Israel's breach of the 4th Geneva convention: torture is commonplace; residents are sealed off; land is confiscated; and houses are demolished—I saw all that in the Gaza strip. Do the Government have the political will to consider sanctions at some point—all other measures have failed—to try to get Israel to uphold the 4th Geneva convention?

Mr. Straw: We pursue the enforcement of the 4th Geneva convention in a variety of ways, including regular conferences to review progress. I understand my hon. Friend's frustration and anger, but if we weigh the matter in the balance, we must appreciate how the environment in Israel has changed since the end of September 2000 with the instigation of the so-called armed intifada, which has led to the deaths of about 1,000 Israelis in the most terrifying series of terrorist attacks. In addition to the hundreds of Israeli deaths and injuries, the political process has been paralysed. We want Israel to observe its international and domestic obligations, but we also want a tougher and more effective approach from the Palestinian Authority to clamp down on terrorism emanating from within the occupied territories. We also want a more effective and less ambiguous approach from some of Israel's neighbours, which have encouraged terrorism in the past and still do so today.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): We all agree with what the Foreign Secretary has just said, but because there is such widespread disquiet in the House, particularly among those who would count themselves as friends of Israel, after this Question Time, will he inform the Israeli ambassador that last week's actions are deeply deplored by hon. Members on both sides of the House?

Mr. Straw: I would be delighted to do so. The strength of my representations will be all the greater because it is perfectly plain that that view is reflected in every quarter of the House. The hon. Gentleman will know that I issued a strong statement of condemnation on the morning that the news of Sheikh Yassin's killing came through, and that afternoon my noble Friend Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean called the Israeli ambassador into the Foreign Office to receive our formal complaint.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Foreign Secretary accept that the views expressed up to now this morning do not reflect the

30 Mar 2004 : Column 1405

views of all hon. Members? Does he understand that Israel's action in killing Sheikh Yassin was a legitimate response to an extraordinary situation? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the hon. Lady speak.

Mrs. Ellman: Sheikh Yassin was the leader of the terrorist organisation, Hamas, which is dedicated to the destruction of the state of Israel, and which greets every attempt to make peace and reconciliation possible with more killings of civilians, whether they be young people in pizzerias and discos or old people at religious ceremonies sitting round the Passover Seder table. Does my right hon. Friend understand that Hamas is the enemy of peace; and can he give us any news as to whether he will follow the lead of the European Union in banning Hamas and its activities in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Straw: Of course I understand the strength of feeling on the part of my hon. Friend and several other hon. Members, but it is fair to say that there is widespread concern about the killing of Sheikh Yassin. I do not believe that any Member of this House who expresses their concern about such killings has, however, any doubts about the nature of Sheikh Yassin. I was the Home Secretary who first banned the military wing of Hamas and took the lead internationally in doing so—certainly in Europe. On Tuesday last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the freezing of the assets of several leaders of Hamas. We will continue to take all appropriate action against Hamas and its terrorist activities.

However, I say to my hon. Friend, as I say to my friends in the Israeli Government, that in my judgment, which is widely shared, their actions in adopting this policy of so-called targeted killings—among other things, they are not targeted—is not only unlawful, but counter-productive, because it greatly taxes the support of Israel's friends, as well as its opponents.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): While the loss of innocent Palestinian and Israeli life is equally regrettable, is it not absolutely right that at all material times Hamas must take a large share of responsibility for the loss of lives on both sides owing to its consistent opposition to peace, its use of terrorism to undermine peace, and support for peace, in Israel, and its continuing use of terrorist tactics? Is it not now essential that there should be a change in the Hamas leadership or a move away from support for Hamas on the part of Palestinians so that the emphasis can shift back towards negotiation, and a turning away from the violence to which Hamas is so clearly committed?

Mr. Straw: I entirely agree with the first part of the hon. Gentleman's remarks. Those who wish peace want to see Hamas not only dealt with appropriately, but marginalised

politically. One of the sadnesses of what has happened in the past week is that its result has been far from such political marginalisation.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West) (Lab): The overwhelming majority of Members will support everything that my right hon. Friend has said this morning. As he will know, many countries have had

30 Mar 2004 : Column 1406

terrorists who went on to become Prime Ministers. We need to reinvigorate the Americans in order that they can get the peace process back on the rails—that is the answer to Hamas and to targeted killings. What is my right hon. Friend doing actively to encourage that?

Mr. Straw: We are doing everything that we can, including providing appropriate security advice to the Palestinian Authority and a great deal of other support. It should be remembered that after the United States, the United Kingdom is the largest bilateral donor to the Palestinian Authority across the international community. That is sometimes forgotten by those who wish to criticise the position of the British Government.

The organisation that has been the greatest block on progress in respect of the road map has been Hamas, because it was behind the bombing on 19 August, which effectively blew up the progress that had been made on the road map, and it has continued its terrorist outrages.

In our own way, we have faced terrorism, albeit on a much, much lower scale than that which is faced by Israel, and we know about some of the moral and political dilemmas that arise from it. We found that the best approach was to be tough but lawful, and to act in a way that ensured that the terrorist organisations were marginalised. That is the view not least of very many people living in Palestine, in the occupied territories, who have nothing but contempt and hatred for Hamas and who wish to see a peaceful outcome to the current terrible conflict.