



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 2 November 2023

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 2 November 2023

CONTENTS

Col.

GAZA 1

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
29th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Angus Robertson (Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 2 November 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Gaza

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and a warm welcome to the 29th meeting in 2023 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

Our first agenda item is to take evidence on Gaza, following the First Minister's letter to the Prime Minister, which was copied to me as committee convener. We are joined by Angus Robertson MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Scott Wightman, director of external affairs at the Scottish Government. Thank you for coming at such short notice, cabinet secretary. I invite you to make an opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee on the First Minister's letter calling for an immediate ceasefire on all sides to allow the creation of a humanitarian corridor into and out of Gaza.

I start by reiterating the Scottish Government's condemnation of the appalling attacks that were carried out by Hamas on 7 October. That barbaric attack was the single biggest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust. We must all acknowledge the trauma that that outrage has caused not only for the nation of Israel and Israelis but among Jewish communities in Scotland and around the world. Among the victims was Bernard Cowan, an innocent Scot from Glasgow, and I extend my heartfelt condolences to his family and to the families of all his fellow victims.

Our condemnation is clear: Hamas missile attacks on Israel must stop and Hamas must release immediately and unconditionally all hostages. As we have repeatedly stated, Israel clearly has a right to self-defence, and Hamas and organisations like it cannot be a part of Gaza's future. We must be clear: Hamas is not Gaza, and Gaza is not Hamas. All Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in peace and security.

As President Biden has said, in defending itself and its citizens, Israel must act in a manner that is consistent with international humanitarian law, which prioritises the protection of civilians. The

situation that is now unfolding in Gaza is disastrous. More than 1.4 million people have been displaced. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—UNRWA—reports that more than 670,000 people are in its shelters, which is three times what is supposed to be their maximum capacity. Water, food, fuel and medical supplies are restricted. The trickle of aid through the Rafah crossing is nowhere near enough, and the World Health Organization has warned of an imminent public health catastrophe.

All the while, fatalities continue to mount. In addition to the more than 1,400 Israelis who have been slaughtered by Hamas, more than 8,500 Palestinians have now been killed. The head of UNICEF has said that

“more than 420 children are being killed or injured in Gaza each day”.

A tragedy is unfolding before our eyes. That is why the First Minister has written to political leaders across the United Kingdom to emphasise that we must do everything within our powers to stop it. He has called for all parties to commit to an immediate ceasefire and to allow a humanitarian corridor to be opened so that life-saving supplies can get into Gaza and innocent civilians who want to leave can be given safe passage out. That is consistent with calls by the United Nations secretary general and many other world leaders.

For those Gazans who want to stay, humanitarian aid will be vital, and we have already pledged £500,000 to UNRWA, to support its flash appeal. The First Minister will meet UNRWA later today, and I can confirm to the committee that, this morning, we will announce that we will provide a further £250,000 to support the immediate humanitarian effort.

It is imperative that humanitarian agencies are able to safely deliver aid into Gaza in the quantities that are needed. All parties should work together to that end. For those who want to leave, the First Minister has expressed our support for the creation of a worldwide refugee resettlement scheme.

My colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, has written to the Home Secretary to formally request that the United Kingdom Government use the already established UK resettlement scheme to work with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to establish a route to safety for the most vulnerable Gazans, such as children and families and those with severe health needs, and those with links to residents in Scotland. She has also reiterated that Scotland is ready to play its part in the medical evacuation of injured citizens from Gaza, and Israeli citizens if required, through

activation of the UK medical evacuation scheme. Scottish hospitals stand ready to treat injured civilians where we can.

Finally, all parties recognise the value of having strong and supportive communities and the importance of community cohesion. Although Police Scotland has not reported a rise in hate crime in response to the events in the middle east, we must all remain vigilant. There is no space in Scotland for antisemitism or Islamophobia. We must be alive to discrimination and racism in all its forms, and must ensure that there is one Scotland where people of all faiths and none live in peace and harmony and where everyone has the opportunity to flourish.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. This the second time that the committee has had to respond to a geopolitical crisis, the first being in Ukraine, when we were almost immediately talking about how Scotland would engage in the refugee resettlement scheme. What engagement have you or the First Minister had with the Prime Minister about the two key asks of an immediate ceasefire and the opportunity to support refugees, which the First Minister recently made a commitment to in his conference speech?

Angus Robertson: The First Minister has spoken in person to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and Lord Ahmad, who is Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and United Nations, about those questions. The committee and the country are aware that the First Minister has family who are trapped in Gaza, together with others who have a connection to Scotland, the UK and other countries.

There has been correspondence with the UK Government, and there has been correspondence between the Scottish Government and the Israeli embassy and with the Palestinian representative office in the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government's positions in relation to the unconditional condemnation of Hamas, the right of Israel to self-defence, the support of international humanitarian law, the call for a ceasefire and the call for the support of international organisations to provide necessary aid to the people of Gaza have all been communicated to all those who I mentioned, and we will continue to do so.

The Convener: I move to questions from committee members.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I want to extend the convener's question on your engagement with representatives of Israel and of Palestine. Have you, or has the Government, had any conversations with ambassadors, consuls general and so on from the respective states?

Angus Robertson: The First Minister wrote to the ambassador of Israel on 11 October and wrote to the Palestinian representative to the UK on 13 October. Channels of communication remain open. Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians have a consulate general in Scotland, but routes of communication with both the Israelis and the Palestinians are open, and I have no doubt that there will be further communication.

Kate Forbes: I will also extend the convener's question about refugees. The organisation Sanctuary Foundation, which is run by Dr Krish Kandiah, was instrumental in helping with the Ukraine resettlement programme, organising 29,000 people to pledge to welcome Ukrainian refugees. It is extremely keen to recognise the First Minister's leading role in welcoming refugees from Gaza and to participate practically in turning that theory into reality. I know that the First Minister is aware of that. Do you have any comments on that?

Angus Robertson: It is absolutely right to say that there are tremendous organisations of the kind that Ms Forbes has just mentioned that have great experience of dealing with refugees who have arrived here, whether from Ukraine, Yemen or Syria. We have a strong track record in Scotland—the Scottish Government, local authorities and the third sector—of helping people to arrive, seek refuge and find a new home here.

It is absolutely right that we have initiated contact with the UK Government to begin the process of thinking—and we hope, in time, talking, too—about how we might be able to help. However, I reflect that the experience of people in Gaza, not just now but historically, is that their movements have been very restricted in times of peace, and that is the case now in times of war. As we saw on our television screens yesterday, we are only now beginning to see people being allowed out of Gaza.

It is right that we think about everything that we can offer. In addition to people seeking refuge, should they be allowed to leave, a great number of people have suffered injury in Gaza, where hospitals are overwhelmed and have been threatened with closure and, in many cases, ordered to evacuate. Therefore, there might also be a role for us and others to offer help and support to people who require medical treatment—from the national health service but also from military medical services, because there is a great strength in that in the UK.

Therefore, it is right for us to think about all those things, and that is why we have initiated contact with the UK Government. We are still waiting to have substantive discussions about what that might amount to, but we are right to make preparations for the situation of people

being able to leave who would seek refuge and have no alternatives with regard to where they were able to go.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I acknowledge your earlier statement and your unequivocal condemnation of the terrorist attacks that were carried out by Hamas. However, I want to ask about the situation in Scotland. I think that it was Monday when the Prime Minister chaired an emergency meeting of COBRA in response to concerns that the conflict might increase the terror threat in the UK. To the extent that you can say, have you had discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs or Police Scotland about any increased terror threat in Scotland?

Angus Robertson: I have not been privy to those conversations, and Mr Cameron will be aware that that is not my direct area of responsibility. He will also appreciate that operational matters for the police and the security services are for Police Scotland and the security services. I have no doubt that they are assiduously assessing the situation and making the necessary decisions.

However, there have been conversations where I and colleagues have a locus—indeed, I think that we all do—with regard to doing everything that we can to support the best community relations possible here. Unfortunately, we have seen that those community relations are being sorely tested in some other parts of Europe and the world.

We must do everything that we can to support Scotland's Jewish community and to work with our Muslim community, especially people of Palestinian descent. It is very important that we do everything that we can to ensure that, although what is happening in the middle east is a tragedy, it does not lead to a worsening of community relations here.

Donald Cameron: On that, it is fair to say—I think that you acknowledged this in your statement—that both Jewish and Muslim communities in Scotland will be feeling particularly vulnerable. If I could ask for a bit more detail, what in particular is the Scottish Government doing to support them?

09:15

Angus Robertson: The first step is to have intense points of contact with both communities. As members will be aware, the First Minister has visited the synagogue in Giffnock and has also been to a number of mosques. Initiatives are being supported via Interfaith Scotland to bring together not just the Jewish and Muslim faith leaders but those of Christian and other denominations. We

are communicating with them intensively to work out what can be done.

As I have raised with my colleagues, I am mindful that various faith communities' high and holy days are approaching in the weeks and months ahead. We must ensure that our communities are able to celebrate important days in their religious calendars without any fear or concern. We must therefore ensure that we talk to them as much as we can do—as a Government, but also as parliamentarians and community leaders in our own right. I look to all committee members, and all colleagues across the parties in the Scottish Parliament, to play a role in that. Notwithstanding the severity of the situation, and the challenges that we know people face, we must remain focused on doing everything that we can to maintain the best community relations that we can achieve. Sadly, current international examples illustrate such relations being tested very sorely.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): As well as being as vigilant as ever for any rising incidence of antisemitism or anti-Islamic sentiment, we should acknowledge the fact that, by and large, people in Scotland have not gone down that route. We should be quick to condemn, but we should also praise.

Even from a distance, though, to see the Hamas attack in which more than 1,000 people were killed in the first week of October, and then to see that more than 8,000 people in Gaza were killed, was horrifying. I recall, in particular, the incident about which it was reported that although one Hamas commander was killed so were 400 ordinary people and many others, including children, are still lying under rubble. My concern now is Hezbollah's threat to start attacking tomorrow if there is not a ceasefire—I think that it tried to lay down those terms overnight. I do not know the extent to which the Scottish Government will have any information or a view on that. With the largest American naval fleet since the second world war being stationed in the middle east, the real worry is that situation will become a genuinely geopolitical conflagration that goes off in different directions. Does the Scottish Government have any line of sight on the thinking around that or what is being done to prevent it from happening?

Angus Robertson: You are absolutely correct that the international community is concerned about the potential for widening an already appalling situation, and you are right to point to the risks of escalation in Lebanon and Israel. The feeling is that, every day, the shooting between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defense Forces is ratcheting up. Yesterday, the Yemeni armed forces launched missiles in the direction of Israel, and other organisations in and around Israel will be close to the Iranian Government. International

Governments—not least that of the United States of America, which is able to exercise significant diplomatic and military presence—are focused on ensuring that the conflict does not escalate more widely. The Scottish Government does not have a direct locus in that: foreign affairs, defence and security are matters for the United Kingdom Government.

Our position would be to support UK diplomatic efforts and those of the international community to do everything to ensure that there is not a widening of the conflict. I do not need to tell this committee, nor anybody watching the proceedings, that the situation in Gaza, the west bank and Israel has been long and troubled and previous wars have involved neighbouring countries. The risks are in plain sight.

We would support anything that can be done to help avoid an escalation and we encourage those with a locus and an ability to do so to emphasise restraint on all parties. We would welcome that.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, cabinet secretary. My thoughts go out to all those people affected by the loss of innocent civilian life in Israel and Palestine, and to all those with loved ones in the region, including the First Minister. Our thoughts and support are with him.

On the number of families in Scotland affected by the current conflict, what dialogue has the Scottish Government had with the British Government to estimate, as far as is possible in a very difficult and challenging situation, how many UK nationals from Scotland are currently in Israel and Gaza? I appreciate that the situation is very difficult, but what assessment can be made of their welfare? What more can be done to get a better understanding of the situation that is affecting UK nationals from Scotland who are in the region?

Angus Robertson: I thank Mr Bibby for his introductory words.

Those questions were raised by the First Minister in his discussion with the Prime Minister. At that stage, the UK Government and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office were not clear how many Scots residents were among UK passport holders in Gaza. The UK Government has an idea of the total number of UK passport holders in Gaza, but, because we do not record residency as a matter of course, there is not a definitive answer to that question.

On the UK effort on the ground, I think that I am right in saying that UK nationals, if they have been identified by the FCDO, are being updated. That is complicated by the fact that, as has been widely reported, telecommunications have been subject to interruption. Up until now, because the Rafah border crossing has not been open, people had been informed that they were unable to leave.

Since yesterday, lists have begun to be posted to highlight which nationals are able to leave on a day-to-day basis, so I have no doubt that the FCDO teams on the ground are involved in trying to inform people about how and when they will be able to depart. All that is, of course, complicated by the fact that, although the Israeli military focus is largely on northern Gaza, there are still air strikes and artillery rounds landing in southern Gaza, which makes the journey to Rafah dangerous.

I give a commitment to the committee to share any further update as soon as there is one. We will take the question away and ask for an update, given that there has been a change of circumstance, with people beginning to be able to leave, so that we can best inform you about the FCDO's take on the process of helping people to get out, how people are being informed about that and how they can be informed if there continues to be breaks in communications. We will make sure that committee members are provided with that update as soon as we get it from the FCDO.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I return to the issue of escalation. The First Minister's letter of last week rightly focused on the situation in Gaza, but we are also aware from an increasing number of news reports of the illegal displacement of Palestinians in the west bank, and there could be an unfolding humanitarian crisis there in time. What is your assessment of that? How does that impact on the Scottish Government's response, whether through a forthcoming resettlement scheme or other humanitarian efforts? Are you factoring in the potential for a crisis that goes much beyond what we are seeing in Gaza at the moment?

Angus Robertson: Mr Ruskell is absolutely right to say that we should not lose sight of the very testing and difficult circumstances in the west bank, which is occupied Palestinian territory. That does not just concern the displacement of Palestinians; it has involved the deaths of Palestinians in recent days. The circumstances for people there are extremely difficult.

The Scottish Government's position remains as it has always been: the west bank and the Gaza strip form the basis of Palestinian territories that we believe should be part of a two-state solution—a solution that can help to provide both security for the people of Israel and independence and security for the people of Palestine. We will use whatever influence we can.

This is perhaps an opportunity to underline the points that Mr Ruskell and I have made. We should not lose sight of the fact that, notwithstanding the very understandable focus on Gaza, the challenges for people in the west bank continue to be substantive. The Israeli authorities,

as the occupying power, have a responsibility to ensure the life, liberty and security of Palestinian people in the west bank, not just of Israeli citizens. We will definitely continue to monitor that.

Mark Ruskell: A number of communities across Scotland have formal civic links with communities in Palestine. I have noted that Dundee is twinned with Nablus and that Glasgow is twinned with Bethlehem, while Stirling has had an informal twinning with a refugee community in Jerusalem. To what extent can those informal and more civic links be used to address the humanitarian crisis that could unfold?

Angus Robertson: The situation in Gaza is obviously very different from that in the west bank, in that there is a war currently going on in Gaza and the ability to get any supplies into Gaza is extremely restricted. That is one of the things that have caused real distress to the United Nations and its agencies. It is still only a very small proportion of humanitarian supplies—such as food and the oil supplies that are required to maintain generators for hospitals and other public services—that are getting in. That is only a tiny percentage of that which UNRWA calculates is required.

Mr Ruskell has named a number of towns, cities and communities in the west bank, which are in a different situation: they are not in the same war situation as Gaza at the present time. I am sure that communities in Scotland that have links there will be thinking a lot about what they can do, in exactly the same way that the Scottish Government has been thinking about what we can do to help people in distress. That is why we have been supportive of the United Nations, which has the organisation on the ground and which is best able to calculate how best to provide support. I encourage local authorities that have links with communities to avail themselves of the likes of UNRWA, the United Nations agency with responsibility for supporting Palestinians in the near east, as a primary point of contact. Many other organisations also have an established track record of working in the west bank and, in the past, in Gaza.

09:30

Mark Ruskell: I have a final question. I think that it was Ivan McKee who, in 2021, restated Government guidance at that time in relation to public procurement. That followed on from a report from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which identified about 100 companies with activities relating to illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine, and the implications of that for seeking peace. Can you confirm the current status of that guidance?

Angus Robertson: I am not aware that there has been any change in the guidance, but if it would be helpful to Mr Ruskell, I will ensure that I forward on to him—through you, convener—the current status of that. As I have just said, however, I am not aware of there having been any change in that guidance.

Mark Ruskell: Thank you.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Cabinet secretary, I, like others, recognise the volatility of the situation in which we currently find ourselves and the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding day by day. I pay tribute to the United Nations and to the aid agencies that are trying to unravel that and provide as much support as they can.

The UK Government announced an increase in aid to help, and that has been confirmed. It would be useful to find out what the Scottish and UK Governments are doing to try to increase aid in order to provide support during the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding in the region.

Angus Robertson: As I confirmed in my opening statement, in addition to our already-announced commitment of £0.5 million of support for the people of Gaza through UNRWA, the amount of money has been raised, and the total now stands at £750,000.

The United Kingdom Government has also announced humanitarian aid support, and members of the public who want to be supportive need to know that a range of organisations, not least UNRWA, can be supported. UNRWA has launched a flash appeal, but in addition there is the likes of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which is very involved on the ground and is also seeking to raise funds to deal with the scale of the crisis. It is a good opportunity to underline what the Scottish Government, the UK Government and members of the public are able to do.

One of the hopes in the days ahead—I know that there is a lot of diplomatic effort behind the scenes to try to make this possible—is that supplies will be able to get in. It is not simply a question of being able to open the Rafah crossing. Given the level of destruction in Gaza, it is extremely difficult to get supplies to different parts of Gaza, so it is a very complicated situation.

Alexander Stewart: As you identify, there are well-co-ordinated emergency response appeal mechanisms. It is good to highlight that they are there to provide support. Many individuals and organisations—and, as we have heard, areas in Scotland that are twinned with affected areas—want to provide support, so people can tap into that resource and try to support them as much as they can.

However, as with all these things, there are also some individuals and organisations that could be problematic, and advice needs to be given as to how that can be managed. There is an element of that, and it needs to be captured to ensure that we do not end up supporting those organisations, even without meaning to, by ways and means that could be misconstrued in some ways. It would be useful to know whether the Scottish Government provides advice, or whether there is a template, to ensure that there is no such potential.

Angus Robertson: I think that we can rest on the fact that the likes of the United Nations and the IFRC have impeccable track records and the strongest infrastructure on the ground. I have no doubt that there are other organisations that are extremely capable—for example, Islamic Relief is an organisation that is very active in Scotland, and there will no doubt be other faith-based charities and others that are very well established and are unimpeachable.

As long as people support those well-known and well-trusted organisations, I think that there is little reason to worry. Nothing has been raised with me that gives me concern, but should there be, I will make sure that the committee is updated.

The Convener: Ms Forbes, did you want to come back in?

Kate Forbes: If anything is true of this particular situation, it is that it is phenomenally complex. I think that all of us have been hugely devastated by the scenes that have unfolded; the thought that there are still Israeli children in captivity in Gaza right now—given concerns about their welfare, their care and their separation from their family—is just horrendous. Equally, I saw a video yesterday—we will all have been consumed by watching this—of a mother in Gaza gently rocking a baby covered in a white sheet.

If anything is to emerge from the current horror, it is the resolution of hostilities once and for all. Parallels have been drawn with other, fairly recent historical situations in which hostilities have been concluded and there is now peace. Of course, that requires states and Governments to be very careful not to inflame the current hostilities, and to make intelligent and strategic calls for action, both during the current war and beyond.

In the light of that, we can recognise that, as a devolved Government, we still have a power of intervention, as the people of Scotland look to us for leadership and to navigate the challenges. That leads us to a question.

In making statements or calls for action, what expertise can the Scottish Government call on, and what intelligence can it draw on? Are there people situated in Scotland who are experts in this field, and who can inform the calls from the

Scottish Government, and therefore the First Minister and the cabinet secretaries, for particular interventions or actions?

Angus Robertson: There is a lot in Ms Forbes's questions. First, on her observations about parents and children, the situation is heartbreaking, as is the feeling of powerlessness. I think that we have to ask ourselves how many children have to die before it stops, because it cannot go on forever. At some point, all conflicts—to my knowledge—come to an end, no matter how appalling or complex.

We might think back to situations such as those in South Africa or Northern Ireland in which resolution was thought to be impossible or unimaginable, or very far off. Indeed, I think back to efforts in the 1990s regarding the middle east. Again, that was thought to be unimaginable at the time. The international community needs to look at itself in the mirror and ask whether enough has been done between then and now. I think that we all have to be self-critical—self-evidently, not enough has been done. The current situation is an unresolved conflict, and there is more that we can do.

What can a small country of 5 million people in northern Europe do in such a circumstance? First, one should be conscious that one has agency. We might think of some of the most testing conflicts in which there have been peace processes—I am thinking, for example, of the role of Norway or of Finland, where we recently saw the passing of President Martti Ahtisaari, who played a big role in peace processes. We might think of the roles that were played in countries such as Sri Lanka, and see that these northern European nations—indeed, including our own—have been host to meetings that have sought to further peace processes, such as the talks in St Andrews in relation to Northern Ireland.

I have some experience myself in that area, having hosted the first ever peace talks outside the former Soviet Union involving Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. I think that it is true to say that Scotland can offer something, even if it is just a place for people to meet in private or in other circumstances.

The member asked about people and about capability. We need to be conscious that we have people with very significant experience in this area—not least Mark Muller, whom many members will know because of his role in Beyond Borders Scotland, which works out of Traquair house in the Borders, and his involvement with UN conflict resolution. We have very deep and capable academic expertise in the relevant area. Recently, the Scottish Council on Global Affairs, which involves internationally well-respected

academics in the field of international relations in peace and security, was founded.

A wide sector of organisations wish to be supportive and helpful. That can only work if the people who are involved in a particular conflict realise that the time has come for peace. Prime Minister Netanyahu does not think that; he thinks that now is “a time for war”—that is how he put it, quoting the Bible. We can wish and call for peace and ceasefires; however, unfortunately, if those calls are ignored, the killing, the dying and the loss of children to lots of parents will continue. Those people deserve better.

Donald Cameron: I think that I am right in saying that the First Minister said in his statement to Parliament that the Scottish Government stands ready to welcome refugees from the region. Does the cabinet secretary have any further detail on what preparations are being made here? Secondly, what lessons have been learned from the experience over the past few years of the Ukrainian situation—the parliamentary scrutiny of which the committee was heavily involved in—that could be applied to any refugees who arrive in Scotland from the region?

Angus Robertson: The offer of help and support for potential refugees from the conflict was outlined in a detailed letter from Shirley-Anne Somerville to the Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, with a view to initiating such conversations—to get officials from the Scottish Government and the Home Office, and others, into discussions to begin the process of considering how one might manage and best do such a thing.

Mr Cameron is absolutely right. There is a context, in as much as we have experience in all that, which is a good thing. However, every situation that involves the arrival of refugees is, by its very nature, different. One of the big differences between this conflict and the conflict in Ukraine is that, in Ukraine, people who were living in non-occupied territories had a way out. That is not the case for people in Gaza—they are not able to leave. Nobody, therefore, anticipates any sudden and dramatic movement of people. In fact, over the years and decades, Governments in the region have been clear that they do not want the displacement of Palestinians outside the west bank and the Gaza strip. We are therefore right to say to colleagues in UK Government departments that we wish to begin those technical discussions. I hope that that offer will be taken up and that those discussions can take place, because they should take place.

09:45

In the immediate period, given the scale of casualties and the inability of the health system in

Gaza to deal with them, it has to be a priority for everybody to try to help and support, in the first instance, the Egyptian authorities and health system to treat the most seriously injured casualties who cannot be treated in Gaza. The Egyptians have set up an emergency medical facility very close to the Rafah border crossing to treat injured people close to where they are, but there may be very serious cases where advanced medical intervention could be better provided by other countries, which might include our own. In addition to any preparations for helping refugees, we should be alive to that, because we have an excellent health service with considerable experience. We should do our best to help people who are in need of medical support, as well as those who seek refuge.

The Convener: The Parliament’s support for the people of Gaza is long standing. Back in 2009, when tensions were high yet again, the Government provided £400,000 to Libya and Gaza for water security. I understand that the £750,000 is going through UNRWA, and the Government has committed that money.

In our long-standing relationship with Malawi, there are great civic links with organisations within the community. The Scottish Government has very strong links with aid agencies working in Malawi, because of the principle of giving the money directly to the aid agencies on the ground. Does the Government have such a network for Gaza? Have your officials been reaching out or have any agencies and civic organisations sought support in Scotland?

Angus Robertson: I would have to discuss the detail of which organisations we have had and continue to have links with beyond the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which is the principal agency for the international community.

We all appreciate that, because of the extreme nature of the circumstance and the extreme distress in which people in Gaza find themselves, it is primarily UNRWA, the UN agency, that has the capability. We should put on the record that UNRWA is also having to pay an incredibly high price for its efforts on the ground. I think that I am right in saying that, since the beginning of the recent conflict, more than 70 members of UNRWA staff have died trying to maintain the places of safety that they have and to get supplies to the warehouses to be distributed. That is why our principal focus is on UNRWA, which has launched a flash appeal.

However, we will keep under constant review our relationship with other charities and third sector organisations, in particular those with which we have an established relationship. We will try to ensure that taxpayers’ money is spent as well as it can possibly be spent in such circumstances. I am

sure that people will welcome the fact that we and others are doing what we can to support the UN and other agencies to do what they can on the ground to help people who do not have food or drinking water, who often do not have shelter and many of whom now do not have hope. We need to do everything that we possibly can and we intend to continue doing so.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I am sure that the whole committee will wish for a peaceful resolution, the release of hostages and a ceasefire as quickly as possible. Thank you for your attendance.

09:49

Meeting continued in private until 10:19.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba