

9 February 2010
Westminster Hall Debate: Conflict Prevention

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I am grateful to Mr. Speaker for selecting the debate on conflict prevention.

I am pleased to see in this Chamber my colleagues the hon. Members for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) who, with me, are proud to be co-chairs of our all-party parliamentary group on conflict issues. It is out of the work of that group, which was formed in 2006, and out of the work of lots of other colleagues in this Chamber and elsewhere in the House, that this debate is born.

It is a fact that, not just in this Parliament and this country, but in all democracies, people are realising that unless we become better at conflict prevention we will commit the world to a continuing succession of terrible conflicts that take their toll, and that conflict prevention is a wonderfully useful investment. The money spent on conflict prevention is repaid many times through avoiding the conflicts that might otherwise follow.

Out of the all-party group, the Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention and Human Security was formed in Brussels about a year and a half ago. The United Kingdom launch of that group happened in March last year: the Archbishop of York gave the keynote address and the Foreign Secretary sent a welcome message. It was not accidental that that group met here on the eve of the G20. We recognise and pay tribute to the G7, and later the G8 and the G20-including significant input by our Prime Minister-which have ensured that conflict prevention has been on not just the UK, but the international agenda.

I am encouraged that a significant number of colleagues in the House in many different parties signed early-day motion 81, which I tabled on behalf of our group. I thank colleagues for signing it.

I am happy to see the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office in his seat. His Department takes the lead on delivering these matters across three principal Departments: the Ministry of Defence, the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I know that the Minister will want to be honest with the House and robust in setting out the Government's commitment to this agenda.

I pay tribute to the Government for the work that they have already done. It was clear from the time that they came to office that conflict prevention mattered to the Labour Government. Conflict prevention featured clearly in each of the Labour party's manifestos since 1997. I acknowledge and pay tribute to that fact. I acknowledge also, in the presence of the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) who speaks for the Conservative party, that this year, as shown in the document produced by his party on these issues, his party has understood and has now made it clear that conflict prevention will be an important part of its foreign and defence policy agenda. I pay tribute to those who helped produce that document.

It is not accidental that this debate is happening now. One of our objectives-I am direct about this-is to ensure that when each of our three major parties, and other parties, write their manifestos, conflict prevention is there clearly for all to see. Now is exactly the time for such a debate, when we are seeking to influence the agenda for the next Parliament and the next Government, whatever their composition. I hope that all parties will make it clear that this matter should not divide us when we need to be united and strong in making strong statements.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): As the hon. Gentleman is moving away from his introductory remarks, I warmly congratulate him on bringing this matter before the Chamber. He mentioned at the beginning of his speech the importance of the cost-effectiveness of conflict prevention. Does he agree that cancelling the massively expensive and eventually wasteful Trident project could be a cost-effective, sound step towards a safer world?

Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that question, because it is on everybody's agenda. I can give him a clear answer to that. My party is committed to ensuring that we do not have a like-for-like replacement for Trident. We made that clear some years ago, not just because we believe that we need to find savings in those parts of our Budget that are hugely expensive, relatively, but because if we are seeking the safer world that we all want, multilaterally, we need to take the initiative. We in the United Kingdom-historically one of the world's great military powers-need to be leading, not following. I am conscious that this is the year of the multilateral negotiations on defence. Our position is clear and we will repeat it in the manifesto whenever the general election is called.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I seek clarification from the hon. Gentleman and thank him for his kind words about the role that we have tried to play. In previous debates on this issue in recent times we have been told by his colleagues that the Lib Dems are conducting a review on what they are to do about Trident. The hon. Gentleman has just announced that we are not to have a like-for-like replacement. Will he be clear and say what that means? How does that fit with his colleagues saying, "We haven't made our mind up yet. No decision made. We're in the middle of a review process"?

Simon Hughes: I can do that, although I do not want to be distracted into turning this into a debate about the future of Trident.

Mr. Eric Martlew (in the Chair): Order. That would not be appropriate.

Simon Hughes: Thank you, Mr. Martlew. I shall try to give a short answer and then return to my central focus. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) has been asked by our party leader to conduct a review. I will not pre-empt his announcement. But the party has already made it clear-my right hon. and learned Friend made it clear when he was leader, and I spoke in the debate at our party conference that addressed this issue-that we are not in favour of a like-for-like replacement for Trident. Therefore we do not take the same view as the Government, which announced their position some years ago, long before they needed to, or the Conservative party. The detail of the review will be announced by our party in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik) has joined us. Many colleagues, including him and my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore), have persistently asked oral and written questions of the FCO and DFID on issues to do with conflict prevention. I pay tribute to their interest and to the fact that we have been able today to pull together all that interest in what I think is the first formal debate on conflict prevention for many years.

I have one other objection that I put up front straight away. We have annual debates in the House on each of the services. I hope that we will now have an annual debate on conflict prevention. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] I hope that the Minister reflects on that and commits to it today or asks his colleagues to commit to doing so before the general election. The House would benefit from that and it would be good if the country knew that we took this matter so seriously that debating these things was not an accident of a ballot but something to which we returned regularly.

I want to make two short comments, setting the scene, because a goodly number of hon. Members are present and I do not want to take their time or prevent strong voices from being heard about why this matter is so important and where we need to go next.

When the Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention and Human Security was launched, under the auspices of the EastWest Institute, it produced a simple, persuasive fact sheet with a table showing the number of wars that ended in negotiated settlement, rather than military victory, in the 1990s and since 2000. It will not surprise you, Mr. Martlew, to know that many more wars ended in negotiated settlement than in military victory: 42 in the 90s, compared with 23 by military victory. In this decade so far, at the time this fact sheet was produced, 17 conflicts were ended by negotiated settlement and four by military victory. However, the reality is that 50 per cent. of peace agreements do not hold, often because the peace has been imposed from the top rather than being built up from the bottom.

One of the great successes of recent years has been in Kenya, where it was clear that a bottom-up peace process following the difficulties managed to lock in the peace that had been arrived at with such difficulty. Africa as a whole has learned the lesson of needing to do that. Success in Ghana and its ability to have a peaceful transition to different Governments has been due to its much more developed grass-roots network of engagement in such exercises.

The financial figures are the most telling. The direct average cost of one conflict is \$64 billion. When that figure was published, there were 70 ongoing or potential conflicts worldwide, and that sum translated into \$17.5 trillion in cumulative, direct costs. For every dollar spent on conflict prevention, states spend some \$2,000 on weapons and military budgets. That is a central and telling fact.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Will he reflect-I am sure that his group would-on the situation in central America, where there has been a series of bitter conflicts, some of which are ongoing, with denial of human rights, abuses, and enormous security and military expenditure, except in Costa Rica which abolished its army in 1949, and systematically spent more on education and welfare than any other country in the region? It seems to be a much more stable and friendly place as a result.

Mr. Eric Martlew (in the Chair): Order, Interventions should be short.

Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is right, and he has worked long and hard on Latin American issues, as I have, but to a lesser extent. Costa Rica is one of the few countries where such matters are written into the constitution, and Japan is another. It is a telling consideration when countries understand the benefit of that political position. The frustration of many people about the attempts to obtain equality in the world and some sort of redistribution and justice is that some of the poorest countries spend so much of their finance on defence and military equipment-up to 50 per cent. in some cases.

A country in which I have taken an interest for a long time is Sri Lanka, where a terrible civil war ended only last year and there are still repercussions. It has had a huge military budget, and if there had been equal spending on peace-building and conflict prevention among the communities over the years, the whole country would have benefited and there would not have been the deaths and terrible political legacy.

Latin America and single countries such as Sri Lanka are not the only ones to have had conflicts. I could list the countries where there have been ongoing conflicts and conflict prevention has not prevailed. When I was elected, there was, as now, ongoing tension and conflict in the middle east-it recurs regularly-between Israel, Palestine and surrounding states. Cyprus is still not at peace, so the problem exists on this continent in an EU member state and commonwealth country. There were

terrible tragedies in southern Europe in the former Yugoslavia, and it is partly the international community's failures in places such Srebrenica and Darfur in Africa that have made people realise that we must have different strategies.

In Africa, we did not manage to prevent the terrible civil war in Sierra Leone, but it is obvious that conflict prevention strategies are still needed to ensure that its growing and improving democracy, and that of Liberia next door, are secure in an area where a frequent cause of conflict-the battle over resources-is still alive and well, whether they are mineral resources as in that area, or other resources elsewhere. Nigeria in west Africa is still not stable because of the religious conflict between Muslim and Christian communities. The other day, the Indian Government instigated a welcome reconciliation initiative on Kashmir, where conflict has continued since the end of the second world war and since the UK pulled out of what became India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The world has many conflicts, and I am conscious that in their response the Government have tried to identify the specific regions to which they are committed and in which they will invest. A key document, which may sound technical to people outside the House, is unexcitingly called, "PSA Delivery Agreement 30". Its slightly more exciting subtitle is, "Reduce the impact of conflict through enhanced UK and international efforts". It is a good source document, and it sets out what the Government wanted to pull together across Departments at the end of 2007.

There have of course been problems since then, and the reality is that, as the Minister will know, there was considerable criticism of the 2009 Budget settlement, because it seemed that the conflict prevention budget had been cut considerably. I have alerted the Minister to the sort of factual questions that I hope he will answer today, and I hope that one will be specifically about the budgetary commitments now and the Government's planned budgetary commitments for the years immediately ahead.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, the subject of which I agree with. Given the Government's superlative achievement of what I believe is lasting peace in Northern Ireland, does he believe that we could apply the sort of strategies that he is describing and that the Government successfully applied in Northern Ireland to large conflicts such as Afghanistan? I am on record as saying that we should withdraw militarily from Afghanistan now. Is there any mileage in learning the lessons from Northern Ireland and the documents that the Government have published and applying them to those larger conflicts?

Simon Hughes: There are certainly lessons to be learned. My hon. Friend knows much more than I do about Northern Ireland from his family links and so on, although I have often been there. The peace there did not happen just because Governments in Dublin and London decided that there should be peace. It did not even happen just because the political parties realised the folly of what they were doing. It happened because the communities, led by women in large measure and young people, decided that peace was necessary. The lessons for conflict prevention around the world are that if the grass roots of communities, often women and often in rural areas, are supported in taking initiatives, they can build the structure for peace. Afghanistan is a good example.

I was privileged to chair a conference in this very room at the time of the summit over the road on Afghanistan a couple of weeks ago, and it is absolutely clear that all the international policy and all the troops in the world will not provide a lasting legacy of peace in Afghanistan. The same applies to countries such as Iraq, which are made up of different communities with different traditions in one country with boundaries that were drawn artificially some time ago. There must also be a bottom-up process.

The cross-party Select Committee on Foreign Affairs welcomes steps that the Government have taken—the single conflict prevention pool of funding, the creation of the stabilisation aid fund, the clear alignment between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's new public service agreement target on reducing the impact of conflict and the departmental strategic objective 6 on preventing and resolving conflict and developing indicators that make such things clearer. I am pleased that, since President Obama's arrival at the White House, the United States has understood the importance of such matters. Just the other day in January, the Chief of the General Staff made a welcome contribution down the road at the International Institute for Strategic Studies when he made clear the importance, from the military's perspective, of conflict prevention in this country.

I acknowledge and pay tribute not just to the people who support us in the all-party group, but to the groups in this country and elsewhere who lobby, inform, engage and educate on these issues and who are an important part of the debate and the political process. They include International Alert, Peace Direct, Responding to Conflict, Saferworld, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and organisations that work to ensure that the next generation understands these matters better than the last.

A few weeks ago in the Macmillan Room, we were privileged to have an organisation called Leap Confronting Conflict, which talked to us about its work with young people. The reality is that if we educate the next generation of young people to understand that conflict can be prevented from home and in schools and communities, it is far more likely that politicians, diplomats and civil servants will be able to prevent conflict in the years ahead.

To return to my questions to the Minister, if the Government accept the spending-to-save argument, why have they reduced funding for the prevention of conflict and for peacekeeping? Can we afford not to increase the money spent on reducing conflict, given that the long-term costs of conflict are so high? I hope that the Minister will tell us what is happening to the total of conflict funds year by year and inform us accurately what Government plans should be and what proportion of the budget will be spent on peacekeeping in the future. I hope that the Government will tell us how much they want to spend—and are spending—on what are called long-term or upstream preventive measures, as opposed to military interventions.

I know the commitment of the Secretary of State for International Development, and everybody agrees that conflict often prevents proper development. Is there likely to be any additional support from the Department for International Development or other Departments towards the Government's conflict prevention activities? Do the Government seek to assess the relative costs of direct military intervention in a specific country, so that they can assess what the costs of alternative strategies would be?

If we contemplate intervention in the future—whether in a place such as Sierra Leone, where we were invited in by many people, or somewhere such as Kosovo, which was clearly controversial both in international law and at home—is there a mechanism to assess the benefits and cost of direct intervention against the cost of preventive and peacekeeping measures in advance? Do the Government look clearly at the benefit of investing in local people—this is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire—so that local communities can build the peace, as opposed to bringing in outside agencies? Given the comments of the Chief of the General Staff in January, it would be valuable to know whether the Government think that they have adequate mechanisms in place to measure the effectiveness of our efforts, both unilaterally as the UK and as part of NATO and the European Union, in preventing violent conflict.

I do not expect the Minister to elaborate in detail on all of those points, but it would be helpful to understand whether the Government see most of this work as multilateral, as opposed to work that they do on their own. In many ways, we are perceived as taking the lead on such matters. It would be

helpful to know what the Government see as a gold standard whereby we can be seen to take the lead not only in those countries where we have a particular interest, but in other countries round the world. Can the Government say with confidence that international mechanisms are in place so that, in this decade just beginning, the assessment is that there is lesser risk of armed conflict globally than ever before?

I will end with a set of issues. As someone who takes a particular interest for my party in matters of energy and climate change, I am clear that the conflicts of the future are likely to be driven by competition and struggles for resources. Threats caused by the climate crisis are likely to increase rather than reduce the risk of conflict. People will struggle over water, for example, and that heightens the chance of conflict—recently, there was a fear in Bangladesh that its water supplies were likely to be cut off by a dam-building project by India upstream.

Last night, I was with our noble Friend Lord Ashdown who was speaking about the fear of conflict driven by shortages of food in some parts of the world. The reality is that energy, water, food and the other ravages of climate change are likely to be the drivers of conflict, particularly in the less-developed and poorer parts of the world.

At the end of the debate, it would be helpful to hear not only that the Minister understands those issues from the point of view of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but that the Government have a coherent strategy. For example, all the information that comes to the Minister's colleagues in the Department of Energy and Climate Change about the risks to, and instability of, global energy supplies could be factored into Government policy, European Union policy and our activities in the United Nations.

My last plea is this: I am a supporter of the United Nations; it has done a fantastic job, but sometimes it does not have the effective ability to intervene where it needs to do so. I return to Sri Lanka—the world was standing by and the UN was powerless to intervene. The right to protect, which has now been accepted in international law, cannot necessarily be invoked when countries need it. When countries are likely to go into that sort of conflict and when they put up barriers and do not allow anybody in, it almost invariably ends up with genocide and a terrible legacy that is a hugely expensive and costly problem to solve for generations to come.

I do not pretend that the world will necessarily be safer in the next 10 years than it has been in any other decade during our lives. The number of conflicts in the world have certainly gone down, but many ongoing conflicts recur and they are not necessarily solved just because peace has come once. I hope that the Government understand that investment by them and by other Governments in effective, bottom-up conflict prevention, regional support systems in the world's continents and the understanding that that must be central to the agenda of the UN, the European Union, other regional organisations and individual Governments is the best way to ensure that the decades ahead have fewer conflicts and far less money spent on defence, armaments and arms exports and that the agenda can be turned to give the world a better chance of a more peaceful future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Eric Martlew (in the Chair): Order. Five hon. Members wish to speak, and I intend to start the winding-up speeches at 12 noon. I hope that hon. Members will bear that in mind.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will try to be as brief as possible, Mr. Martlew. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing this debate. There is a sense of irony in having this debate at this point in time, because we have just lost the 255th soldier in Afghanistan, which matches the loss of life in the Falklands. Furthermore,

the US and the UK are preparing for the largest battle of the Afghan war so far. There is a sense of irony, but if anything, that gives a sense of urgency to the debate about conflict prevention.

It has been interesting to see the movement over the past eight years, and the momentum that has been building in the search for an alternative route to avoid conflicts rather than to pursue them. That has been found across all parties, but it has been driven by the Government and from deep within the heart of the military, as seen in some of the statements that we have had.

I congratulate my colleagues the hon. Members for North Southwark and Bermondsey and for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), who are joint chairs of the all-party group on conflict issues. I apologise that they have had to shoulder the burden of the all-party group for a couple of years, while I have been battling to save the homes of my constituents at Heathrow—that is another debate, which I will not go in to. I would also like to put on record my tribute to Eddy Canfor-Dumas and all his colleagues who have supported us on a voluntary basis to develop the all-party group. They have shouldered the burden of the hard work.

I came to these discussions in 2003 when, as a result of the work done by Diana Basterfield and others, I introduced a ten-minute Bill to promote a ministry for peace. The concept of the ministry for peace was about having an alternative route to that of conflict, in which the paradigm is changed so that expressions such as, "the best form of defence is attack" are seen as wrong. The best form of defence is actually securing peace and preventing conflict.

How do we do that? Well, instead of having ministries of war or defence, we should imbed the search for peace in the heart of the Government by establishing a ministry for peace. It is a simple concept that has been taken up by the Government. I pay tribute to the infrastructure that has been put in place by the Government and to the personal role that the Prime Minister has played in pursuing conflict prevention at the heart of the Government.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey mentioned some of the structures put in place in recent years, but establishing the conflict prevention pool was a major breakthrough, bringing together the Treasury, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID not only to co-ordinate a pool of resources and their work, but to bid competitively for resources to demonstrate how successful they could be in securing peace. That was a real breakthrough.

The stabilisation unit has been developed. That is another joint unit involving the FCO, DFID and the MOD. Within the FCO, there is a unit that deals with conflict issues but specifically considers human rights. That is another agenda issue that has been discussed time and again in Adjournment debates but that the Government have now taken up. DFID has its own conflict, humanitarian and security department, which is tackling humanitarian, conflict and security and justice issues, particularly those underpinning poverty. Mention has been made of PSA 30. At least we have something that gives us a reporting-back mechanism, with some targets on time scales. We know the weaknesses and vagaries of it, but at least we are moving in the right direction.

I was encouraged by the statement from Sir David Richards, the Chief of the General Staff, in January. It is worth putting on the record as a statement of intent from the military. He said:

"We must put much more emphasis on preventing conflict, on ensuring fragile states do not become the Afghanistan of tomorrow. Whilst this is much more than a military role, we must be structured and resourced to play what can often be a key part... We must get this balance right."

We concur with that across the all-party group.

Lembit Öpik: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, at heart, what he is discussing is predicated on the assumption that most of our adversaries are sane and motivated, regardless of how objectionable their methods are, and that as long as we have sane, motivated adversaries, the real challenge is to address their motivations? That is much more effective than simply trying to kill them.

John McDonnell: That is exactly the lesson that we have learned in recent years. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Northern Ireland. The issue is addressing the causes of conflict, rather than just the symptoms.

I pay tribute to the organisations mentioned by the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey that have contributed to our work. I also pay tribute to those in the ministry for peace here and in the Global Alliance for Ministries and Departments of Peace and to Kai Brand-Jacobsen, the inspirational peace worker. People should read his speech from 2006 in Portcullis House on the ministry for peace website, which gives an indication of the pragmatic and practical ways in which we can inspire peace.

I shall give two of the most recent examples of the practical work done by movements elsewhere in the world to secure peace that we and the Government can learn from. In Nairobi in Kenya last week, there was a seminar on building infrastructures for peace, which the UN helped to facilitate. It brought together 14 African countries, which examined a detailed programme of work for establishing structures, methods and resources that would identify potential conflicts and considered not only the problems encouraging those conflicts, particularly the scarcity of resources, which has been mentioned, but the role of development, the impact on the scarcity of resources and the models to be put in place at all levels of Government and civil society to promote peace and prevent conflict. That useful dialogue has occurred in the developing world, which we can learn from, because it deals with civil society structures as much as Government structures.

Costa Rica was mentioned. It is interesting that Costa Rica hosted the Global Alliance for Ministries and Departments of Peace conference. In addition to installing in its own constitution a commitment to peace, it has established a Ministry of Justice and Peace. That is the third Ministry for peace in the world. President Oscar Arias, the Nobel peace prize winner, opened the global alliance conference and announced the establishment of that Department. Again, there are lessons that we can learn from someone who has practical and pragmatic experience of bringing about peace in his own country and promoting it on that continent, and the Government would do well to listen.

This point was made by the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey. We need now a commitment to maintain the momentum in government. Given the complexities of budget structures across Departments, I and others, including peace groups, are unsure of the commitment and resources being applied in government to conflict prevention and of what is planned for the long term. It would be helpful today to have some clarity about that. If my hon. Friend the Minister cannot give us clarity, it would be useful if he attended the all-party group and we could have a more comprehensive discussion about the detail of the planned process in government for the investment of resources and about the Government's new ideas about how they can best be co-ordinated across Departments and then linked with advice from civil society organisations and the organisations that we have mentioned, so that the all-party group could be advised.

May I also put this on the table? I do so unilaterally; I have not consulted the joint chairs of the all-party group. I would like the concept of conflict prevention to be taken out of the knockabout of the general election debate, or at least let us set a base that the parties can compete from to best one another. May I make this offer? I apologise if it is unilateral. I think that the all-party group could play a role in bringing all three political parties together to construct a cross-party manifesto for the general election on conflict prevention. It could, for example, set the principle among all political parties that the main direction of their future international policy would be peace, that structures

would be established in government, linked with civil society, to promote peace and that that would be adequately resourced. If we can facilitate that dialogue and have that principle installed in the manifesto of each party, it will send the message that we are all committed, determined and serious about conflict prevention and that we will not allow future changes of government to undermine that general direction of policy.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon) (Con): I am delighted to follow the other joint chairs of the all-party group. I am attracted to the unilateral offer that has just been put on the table and would happily pick that one up. I also pay tribute to the many groups that support us and do such excellent work. I have very much enjoyed being involved in the group in the past couple of years. That perhaps demonstrates the point that the conflict resolution agenda is not just for Guardian-reading left wingers; it cuts right across the political spectrum, although I certainly do not describe myself as a Telegraph-reading Tory any longer.

I want to make one simple point in a short speech. I believe that the issue of conflict resolution feeds into a wider debate about the role of Britain in the world that we are having because of the forthcoming strategic defence review and because we have a significant problem with debt, which we all know about. That is forcing us to focus on our priorities. Although there are those in that debate who think that we cannot afford to play the international role that we play in global affairs and that we should retrench and become a Norway, a Switzerland or a country of that ilk, I am firmly of the opinion that that would be a huge mistake, both for us and for the world, and that we have a very significant and special role to play in global affairs.

I suggest that that role increasingly should focus, with all the assets that we have, on our being a country that focuses on peace making. That is a role that Britain can uniquely offer the world. Why do I say that? We have the armed forces. That is a significant asset because we know that sometimes the threat of force or even the use of force is essential in bringing about peace. Hon. Members may not all agree with that, but the threat of force is there. We have an incredible heritage in terms of soft power. The diplomatic skills that we have and the democracy that we enjoy in this country are part of the skill set that we can bring to the table. In addition, we sometimes underplay the vast army of non-governmental organisations, large and small, in this country that have significant experience and that focus on many issues, but particularly conflict resolution and prevention. We have so much to bring to the table; let us bring it.

Some might say, "Who are we to go around talking about peace and conflict resolution and prevention?", because of the struggle that we have had in Northern Ireland for the past 30 or 40 years. I say that that is not a negative. We have gained experience from Northern Ireland. I sat in this room some months ago, at a meeting horribly traduced by the Daily Mail, and heard Patrick Magee and the daughter of Sir Anthony Berry, who had been meeting and talking together for years, talking of their reconciliation as individuals. In the end, achieving peace will come down to human beings getting together across divides to resolve issues and differences, as they have done so wonderfully in South Africa as a result of the astonishing leadership of two or three individuals. Our Northern Ireland experience can therefore strengthen our hand, and it gives us useful experience to bring to many tables around the world.

I congratulate the Government on their focus on conflict prevention over their 13 years in office, which are, of course, about to come to a crashing end. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) that it would be great if policy at the Foreign Office, DFID and the MOD could focus increasingly on peace making, conflict resolution and conflict prevention and if this country increasingly acquired a reputation around the world for using its assets to bring to an end some of the conflicts that are causing such misery and poverty.

Many of my constituents will say, "But what's the national interest in doing this?"

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale) (Con): It is huge.

Mr. Streeter: My hon. Friend, who speaks from a sedentary position-I am sure that you will feel like ruling him out of order, Mr. Martlew-is absolutely right. We live in a globalising world, and the genie will never be put back in the bottle, so if we can build peace and prosperity in other nations, our children-if we must look at these things in terms of our national interest-will be able to grow up in a safer and better environment. I therefore suggest to the Minister that the UK's future is firmly one of peace making, and I look forward to his response.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on his speech. He mentioned that regional conflicts could become international conflicts, and that we need to keep a lid on them at the regional level when we can. We tend to talk about places such as Afghanistan and Iraq, which have become the focus of international attention, but the hon. Gentleman listed a few of the many other places across the world that are witnessing conflicts, and I want to say a few words about the eastern Congo. Most people would not think of it as a place of great strategic interest, and when Governments such as ours think about where to place their emphasis and spend their money, it is not always in such places. It has to be said, however, that the UK Government are actually the main donor to every nation bordering the eastern Congo; that is certainly true of Rwanda and Burundi and, indeed, of the Democratic Republic of the Congo itself.

I want to refer to two UN Security Council resolutions in terms of conflict resolution and prevention. The conflict in the eastern Congo is a consequence of the genocide in Rwanda, which took place in 1994. There are many armed groups in the area, and the Congolese Government have little capacity, so we rely very much on the work of the international community. UN Security Council resolution 1857 relies on member states to give the Security Council the names of people and companies involved in trading minerals in the eastern Congo and the wider region, although the process is not always smooth or easy.

It is often said, although I am never absolutely clear how much truth there is in this, that UK privacy laws make it harder for the UK Government to provide the names of individuals whom they believe might be trading in minerals in the Congo in a bad way. That can simply mean that money is changing hands in a non-transparent way, but we all know what happens when that is the case: the money will invariably fund armed groups. Perhaps the Minister will comment, therefore, on how prepared the UK Government are to provide the names of people and companies operating in the UK, because one or two companies have been mentioned in international and UN documents. Britain is far from the worst offender, but in the case of at least one of the companies involved, we might not be ensuring the free flow to the UN of information that will allow it to take action.

The other UN Security Council resolution is 1906, which essentially relates to having a better focus on international efforts to resolve and prevent conflict in the eastern Congo. The United Nations mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is the largest UN contingent in the world, with about 20,000 peacekeepers, will reach the end of its current mandate on 31 May. MONUC does its very best to keep a lid on things, but its capacity will always be pretty limited, and many hon. Members who have been to the DRC will have observed that for themselves. The capacity of the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is, if I can put it this way, enormously limited; often, they are an offender themselves.

The Congolese Government's remit does not really extend to protecting their citizens in the eastern Congo, so the international effort is all the more important. There are, of course, many other demands on the UN's resources, and each time resolution 1906 comes up for negotiation, there is talk of MONUC's being downsized so that the peacekeepers can be used in other important fields of

conflict; indeed, we might hear more about those later. However, I hope that the Minister will assure us that when the new mandate comes up for negotiation-Alan Doss, who is a UK citizen, runs MONUC and is seized of all this-we keep the same focus on co-ordinating the international effort. I also hope that he can assure us that we will do much more than we have in the past, once the mandate has been negotiated. Of course, we must recognise that there is demand in other parts of the world, but the mandate is extremely important, and I hope that the Government will place it as high as they can up their list of priorities.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale) (Con): I want to bring a quite different dimension to the debate by referring to my involvement in work with the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly that touches on this important subject. For me and my colleagues, the focus is not so much conflict prevention as conflict resolution, as my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) said. In our experience, the failure to resolve Europe's frozen conflicts is the real cause for concern, certainly in terms of the European geographical dimension.

Last year, the Parliamentary Assembly adopted a report that I had produced under the title of "Europe's forgotten people". It is about the 2.8 million people-yes, it is that many-who are internally displaced within Europe's borders, mostly in the Balkans and the south Caucasus. I had the privilege of going to Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan to talk to people about the vexed problem of the still frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. On behalf of the European Security and Defence Assembly-the old Western European Union Assembly-I have also looked at the security issues in the Balkans, where the failure to resolve frozen conflicts is so important.

Some of the people I met in Armenia still live in appalling conditions, and the situation in Azerbaijan is even worse. However, when I went to Baku to visit new housing developments built by the Azeri Government, I talked to 14 and 15-year-old schoolboys and girls in the street outside their school, and these children, who were born in Baku, not Nagorno-Karabakh, said, "We will go back to Nagorno-Karabakh and fight with our bare hands to get back the country that belongs to us." The failure to resolve such conflicts and frozen problems creates a breeding ground for resentment. As a result, there is real tension in the region, and I am sure that the Minister will refer to it.

I have also had the opportunity to talk to Turkish Ministers about the situation, and there is real hope that reopening the Turkey-Armenia border will help to improve things. Again, however, it is difficult to find a political solution, because a lot of people in Turkey say that they will have to say no to such a development until problems such as that in Cyprus are resolved. However, I do not have time to develop that point further.

The Assembly has looked in great detail at the consequences of the Georgia-Russia conflict, and the conclusion that we quickly reached was that the international community had ignored the warning signs-they were there, but they were not followed. The problems in the region were not resolved, and the consequences have been utterly tragic, with ethnic cleansing, property destroyed and tens of thousands of people left homeless. Two districts of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia-de facto independent states-are completely in limbo, with no protection from the international community. We should deplore that; it is not good enough.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes), whom I congratulate on securing the debate, referred to Africa. Our work suggests that there are about 31 or 32 countries in Africa that are directly or indirectly affected by conflict, yet we wonder why people want to leave there and come to Europe. That is the push factor that is driving the problem of immigration. I have said that before, and written reports about it, and it is a great joy to have the opportunity, once in a while, to talk about it in Westminster.

Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the importance of migration. Not only does conflict cause migration, but migration in turn causes conflict in the places to which people move.

Mr. Greenway: Absolutely. I wish that there were more time to deal with that, but perhaps we can discuss the issue again on another occasion.

I want to talk about four solutions. First, hon. Members might not know that two weeks ago I was appointed chairman of the Migration Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, after four years of carrying out such work. I am supposed to be leaving Parliament at the election, but I shall get this year, so that is okay-it is so important. We have just agreed a report in the Assembly about the restoration of property rights. It is critical that redress is given to people. That does not necessarily mean saying, "We will give you this flat or house a thousand miles from where you came from." What about redress for the property that was taken? International action on that is critical.

Secondly, more work is needed on the resolution of frozen conflicts. No one has mentioned the European Union, but it is the critical driver. That is also true in relations with Russia. The matter cannot be resolved without the two sides together. The European Union's policy on neighbourhood and development can provide the support that is needed for the countries that are affected.

Thirdly, the enlargement of the European Union is also vital. In the Balkans, all opinion shows that support for European Union membership relies on the benefits of security as well as on economic prosperity. The security issue cannot be overstated. The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey mentioned Kosovo. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a problem, and even in Croatia, which is about to join, there are still difficulties. Turkey must be made a member of the European Union as quickly as possible, as Europe can never solve the problems in the middle east without Turkey. If we have Turkey, there is a chance. I know that the issue is a vexed one-the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) frowns-but I have studied the question and held seminars on it, and I believe that that is to be encouraged.

Finally, more attention should be given to the issue of water, resources, energy and food. To go back to the question about that posed by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon in his speech, and my answer that the national interest involved is huge, I made a speech about that to my constituency association about a year ago. One lady asked, "What's it got to do with us?" There was a map on the wall that had been put there by Members of the European Parliament, and I said, "Look at that map on the wall. Show me where the energy is and where it has to come from to get to you." There is the answer.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to play tail gunner and to try to sweep up some of the points that have been made-[Interruption.] Sorry about that unintentional pun.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing the debate. The all-party group on conflict issues is an excellent one, and I shall mention a couple of others. I chair the all-party group on Sudan, which knows a little about conflict, and I also want to mention the all-party group on women, peace and security, which also plays an invaluable part in the work on this issue. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on the work he has done for the Ministry for Peace. When he is not present, I end up chairing most of its meetings, and Diana Basterfield has briefed me on some of what I need to say.

To put matters in context, it is pleasing that the idea of peace institutes and peace studies is no longer seen as marginal, but mainstream. There are now more than 800 peace research institutes in the world, and about 1,500 researchers and 400 academic peace studies departments, so this is not

going against the grain any more but with it. Of course, we have much to learn, and there is much to lose if we do not get things right.

There is an irony about timing, given Afghanistan and Iraq. I and other hon. Members get lectured when we travel around the world. We are told, "You are all right when you talk about the conflicts that you accept, but our conflicts are seen to be of a different order, and we are told to get our act together." I hope that we shall not renew the Trident programme, but we are talking about the comprehensive test ban treaty at the same time as considering that. In other parts of the world, that strikes a note of irony, and people look at us open-mouthed and wide-eyed when we cannot see the connections that they make. We must do more to get our house in order.

Among the issues that have not yet come up in the debate, the role of women cannot be overestimated. I am pleased to have been an officer of the all-party group on women, peace and security, which is known in the trade as the 1325 group, after the UN resolution. We can criticise the Ministry of Defence, but it has been very good about recognising the importance of training our troops in such issues as how to deal with women in a conflict zone, including recognising sad instances of rape, abuse and mistreatment. That has a lot to do with cultural awareness-raising, and we have embraced that approach.

As for Sudan, I congratulate the Government on our being in there for the long term. This is a key year in the history of Sudan. The forthcoming elections are of course debatable and dubious, but they must nevertheless take place if we are to get to the referendum on the potential secession of the south in 2011. I am optimistic that we can get through the process, but it will be devilishly difficult. A point that has not come up yet is the crucial role of British diplomats in Sudan. They are part of the troika with the US and Norway, and they are shuttling about—that is not good for the climate, but nevertheless vital—keeping the talking going and trying to deal with conflict resolution, if not prevention.

[Mr. David Amess in the Chair]

To give the situation context, and to show how difficult the task is, the comprehensive peace agreement, which is continually questioned and under threat, has not prevented the events in Darfur, which represent, in my view, the first climate change war. It was all to do with nomads coming in and trying to settle where the pastoralists were, and then, as always, the north went in with two boots and to some extent the south reacted. There is always the problem with the east, where there is the potential for conflict easily to spin off from events elsewhere in the country.

What have we learned? We have learned that to bring peace to a country means being in it for the long term. There are no quick fixes; it is necessary to be there reinforcing the peace strategies. We must recognise that the problems are local as well as national. Often civil society capacity building must happen at an incredibly local level. We like to think that peace is breaking out in the south of Sudan at the moment, but there is a huge number of conflicts there, all to do with the usual things such as animal rustling and people falling out over who has taken whose bride. That can easily trigger a much bigger conflict unless we get in there and do the business. Resources have been mentioned, and water is crucial.

We must get hold of the small arms trade, which is a legacy left by the west. The arms might not be coming from the west any more but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Mr. Joyce) said, the problem is being fuelled by all sorts of most unhelpful interventions. There is a need to bear down on those and eventually stop them. Of course, we must have views about how Governments fuel the conflicts, using small arms to repress their populations in their own way. We must keep reinforcing how important it is to stop those trades.

I wish to make two final points. First, our country has, of course, moved forward by signing up to the International Criminal Court sanctions. That makes an awful lot of difference in Sudan because it has an indicted president. It is not easy-some find it quite difficult-to determine how to take that forward, but as we have signed up to the ICC sanctions, we must recognise their importance. Secondly, development must always go alongside conflict prevention, because without development, people will never have the time or space for us.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing this debate. The time spent by the House debating conflict prevention pales in comparison with the time that we spend discussing conflicts that have not been prevented. Perhaps that balance needs to be adjusted. I wholeheartedly support the idea put forward by my hon. Friend that there should be an annual debate on the subject rather than relying on the random nature of the ballot to secure debates in Westminster Hall.

It was excellent for the quality of debate that so many contributed, including the co-chairmen of the all-party parliamentary group on conflict issues and those involved in other groups that deal with specific parts of the world. Also welcome, of course, is the great consensus that exists across the Chamber on the question of conflict prevention. I particularly liked the idea expressed by the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) that the matter should be removed from the political knockabout in the run-up to the general election. The all-party group would have done a great piece of work if it could get all parties to agree on some key priorities after the election, whatever the result may be, so that we have a long-term strategy and continuity.

It almost goes without saying that conflict prevention is essential. It has a clear and obvious humanitarian objective. Another factor that came out clearly in today's debate was the economic imperative, which is important given that we are in a recession. I was staggered by some of the figures; \$64 billion is the average cost of each conflict, and when multiplied it gives a total of \$175 trillion. The figures are mind-boggling. Indeed, for every dollar spent on conflict prevention, \$2,000 is spent on military defence. Saving money in future by spending more on conflict prevention would seem to be wise.

I want to touch on a few key elements of conflict prevention as it affects foreign policy. They include the support given to other states, particularly to fragile states; the peace-building process and how it relates to preventing future conflict; the role of women in conflict prevention; and the future strategic threats that were mentioned by various Members, particularly climate change and access to resources.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) was right to say that we often ignore the warning signs that there is about to be a massive problem in another corner of the world, and that if we take action it is not taken swiftly enough. The responsibility to protect was supposed to make things a little easier, but the world still sits back far too often when conflicts arise.

I have listed the various parts of the world mentioned today where conflict is likely or could occur, and it is a long list. There are all the countries in the middle east, and Yemen has come very much to our attention. There are the ongoing problems in Cyprus and the Balkans. There is the Caucasus; and there are a range of issues in Africa, south America and Asia. Such a list brings home the scale of the problem.

Resourcing is important. My hon. Friend asked a good range of questions, and I look forward to the Minister's response. There is genuine concern about the cuts that have been made to the United Kingdom's civilian contribution to peacekeeping, and about the recent scaling back of this year's Foreign and Commonwealth Office budget-for example, for counter-terrorism in Pakistan-as a result of the change in the exchange rate.

The FCO is facing budgetary difficulties because of the Treasury ruling that when the exchange rate changes the FCO has to find the funds from within its budget. That difficulty, of course, is caused by the strength of the pound. It will be interesting to hear the Minister's response on such matters. It seems sensible to spend in order to prevent future conflict and future expense on that front. Even in a recession, we should not make such cuts. It would be a false economy.

Peacebuilding is usually seen as an aspect of bringing conflict to an end. However, getting it right is essential to prevent conflict from starting up again. We have seen intervention in far too many places, with sticking-plaster solutions, where once the resources are removed the conflict revives because the underlying issues have not been resolved.

One cannot overestimate the importance of taking a proactive stance on building peace rather than taking the UN's traditional peacekeeping role. It is about involving not only regional partners in the country or area in question but stakeholders within communities. In that way, a peace can be built that reflects the needs of local people—not, dare I say it, an idea from many thousands of miles away of how it should be done. The UN recognised that when it set up the peacebuilding commission in 2005. With fellow MPs, I was fortunate to meet representatives of the commission on a visit to the UN sponsored by the FCO in 2008. We look forward to the UN review of the commission's work so that we can learn what is successful.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the role of women, particularly in communities. It is most important when building structures for peace. Last year, the UN passed Security Council resolution 1889, which reaffirmed the principles laid out almost a decade ago in Security Council resolution 1325. Among other things, it recognised the important role that women need to play in conflict prevention. Despite making up more than half of the world's population, women are often absent from negotiating tables and decision-making circles.

I recommend Gender Action for Peace and Security, a network of NGOs. It recently produced a short parliamentarian's guide to women, peace and security, which is most instructive. One statistic sticks out for me. Over the past 25 years, only one in 40 peace agreement signatories have been women. That shows their lack of involvement at that crucial stage, which I believe has an impact on whether conflicts recur. The UK is one of only 14 countries with a national action plan for implementing Security Council resolution 1325. I am glad about that. The plan is under review, and it will be released next month.

It is important that we take matters forward. In October, someone from the FCO told the all-party group on women, peace and security that the Department was finding it difficult to involve women in senior positions in conflict prevention resolution, including in the UK. I would welcome it if the Minister were to update us on progress on that front.

Finally, I touch on the question of climate change—again, something mentioned by various Members. We need to look ahead to the likely drivers of future conflicts. They will include access to energy, to water and to land that can be used for crop production. The changes likely to happen to all aspects as a result of climate change make it a priority to consider them in connection with conflict prevention.

The Oxford Research Group report "Sustainable Security for the 21st Century" states:

"This has long-term security implications for all countries which are far more serious, lasting and destructive than those of international terrorism."

That puts the scale of the threat in stark terms. It should go hand in glove with the Government's policies on assisting with adaptation to climate change and preventing further dangerous climate change through mitigation. I hope that the FCO is working closely with the Department of Energy and

Climate Change on those issues; I know that climate change is another of the Department's strategic priorities.

In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss such important issues. I welcome the constructive spirit of the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing this debate, and welcome the "tripartisan" approach that he took in his opening remarks. My party supports the idea of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development, the Ministry of Defence and other Government Departments working closely together to plan conflict prevention activity in the national interests of the United Kingdom. However, we need to go further and institutionalise such practice by creating a national security council at which common strategies can be agreed to which all Departments are firmly signed up.

However, it is difficult to define where conflict prevention starts and ends. It is inherently difficult to measure, partly because we are dealing, in most cases, with policies that aim at change over the long term-going beyond any one budgetary or electoral cycle-and partly because we can never be confident about what would have happened had we not taken particular action in another part of the world.

It is important to remind ourselves that if conflict prevention is to be effective, it has to rely on other aspects of the Foreign Office's work being of high quality. Public diplomacy is one obvious example. Work through public diplomacy, including the work of the BBC World Service and the British Council, seems to be essential if we are to make contact not just with Governments and bureaucracies, but with wider civil societies. Moreover, we should not neglect that old mainstay of the FCO, the nurturing of diplomatic relationships over many years.

I know that the Minister has recently returned from a visit to Yemen. There is agreement across the House that any successful work to prevent the conflict in that country from getting worse will depend on not what this country does but the extent to which effective action within the region, particularly by the Gulf Co-operation Council countries, can be co-ordinated. If we are to persuade our old friends in the Gulf that that should be a priority and that they should work with us to stabilise the situation in Yemen, we need to be able to act on the basis of friendships that have been nurtured over many years. We cannot expect to snap our fingers and see an instant response.

I could use the same argument in respect of other parts of the world. Just to avoid any misunderstanding, I have recently been to Tokyo as a guest of the Japanese Government, and it became very clear to me that Japan's influence in many of the Asian countries where there is conflict, and its ability to exercise economic influence and to be a major provider of development assistance is something to which we should have great regard in our diplomatic policy, but that means we must spend time, energy and effort on nurturing and improving our relationship with Japan.

I want to put three points to the Minister, to which I hope he will find time to respond. First, for effective conflict prevention we often have to work through international organisations. It is also clear from what the Foreign Office itself has published in its annual reports that those international organisations do not always deliver in the way that we might hope. For example, the United Nations is obviously a key institution, but the Foreign Office annual report for 2007-08 stated that too often UN peacekeeping missions are not adequately planned. The report cited the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur as an example of that. Do the Government think that there has been some improvement in the UN's performance in that regard or do they think that we still have difficulties there?

Secondly, in addressing some of the challenges of conflict prevention around the world, have the Government considered trying to make greater use of the Commonwealth as an institution? The Commonwealth has an advantage in that it has a very diverse membership across continents and that its countries, while all committed to ideas of democracy, of human rights and of the rule of law, have many different ethnicities and religious traditions. As such, it seems to me that it has a part to play.

Simon Hughes: I strongly associate myself with what the hon. Gentleman says. May I remind him of what the Queen said after the last Commonwealth conference about the relevance of the Commonwealth to the climate change agenda? Will he join me in making a request to Government-I have made it before and sometimes they have responded-to hold an annual debate on the Commonwealth in the main Chamber, which we have not had in the last year or so?

Mr. Lidington: That would be a very good way of enabling the House not only to assess the Commonwealth as an institution but to review relationships between the United Kingdom and individual Commonwealth countries.

May I say a few words about regional bodies, because again they will be of great importance in conflict prevention work? In particular, I want to ask the Minister about Africa. Turning again to the FCO annual report for 2007-08, the Foreign Office says that in that year it invested

"£1.5 million from the Africa Conflict Prevention Pool in building the conflict prevention and peacekeeping capacity of the African Union."

Yet on page 154 of the same report it said that progress on the African Union Standby Force

"remains limited by weak capacity at the AU and in African regions."

The capacity of the African Union is clearly of great importance given the points that the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) made about the situation in the Sudan and the tensions that may well arise around the forthcoming referendum on the possible secession of the south. It would be helpful if the Minister could give us an update on the Government's assessment of the capacity of the African Union.

Finally, I want to ask the Minister about the budget. In his written statement on 25 March 2009, the Foreign Secretary announced an increase in the budget for preventing and resolving conflict. However, he qualified that announcement by saying that in part it was driven by the declining value of the pound and the necessity to add to the budget in sterling terms to ensure that it continued to buy the same value in programmes. Of that budget of £627 million, £456 million was said to be ring-fenced for assisted peacekeeping, leaving £171 million to fund all discretionary peacekeeping, conflict prevention and stabilisation work.

We know from various press reports and leaked documents over the past few months that the Foreign Office is having to look very hard at its budget in the light of exchange rate movements. We know that the FCO was trampled on by the Treasury when the risk deriving from exchange rate movements was transferred from the Treasury to the FCO a couple of years ago. We also know that the permanent secretary at the FCO has written to heads of mission and FCO directors to ask them to draw up contingency plans for possible significant further cuts during this calendar year. So I would like the Minister to tell us whether the conflict prevention programmes that the Government have planned for are likely to be reined back or cut significantly as a result of those undoubtedly severe financial pressures.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing the debate, on his very thoughtful contribution, and on his long-standing work on conflict issues. I also want to pay tribute to the all-party group on conflict issues for quite rightly raising the profile of conflict issues in Parliament.

I am certainly willing to take the idea of an annual debate on conflict prevention to relevant colleagues and ask them to give it serious consideration. I shall also say at the outset that I do not think that I will have enough time to do justice to all the contributions that have been made to the debate. Therefore, I want to offer to attend a meeting of the all-party group on conflict issues so that we have the opportunity for a more in-depth and serious discussion. However, I will do my best to try to answer some of the questions that have been put.

I do not think that hon. Members will be surprised to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who made a thoughtful contribution to the debate, has not been delegated responsibility for writing our party's manifesto for the forthcoming election. However, if he wants to appoint me to the position of "Minister for Peace", I think that that would be a really exciting opportunity.

I want to make the serious point that the all-party and consensual nature of the debate has been very healthy and positive. However, there was one discordant note. I say to the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) that any party that is unable to get above 40 per cent. of the vote at this stage of the electoral cycle should not be so sure of assuming power at any general election.

I will move on to the issues that have been raised in the debate. I want to deal with why conflict prevention matters and how we are responding to conflict issues, as well as trying to respond to some of the points that have been made.

Why does conflict prevention matter so much? Every day, the terrible effects of armed conflict are felt by ordinary people around the world. Although human beings who are killed, wounded or have to flee for their lives might be the most visible and emotive consequences of conflict, the effects of conflict go far wider and deeper. Conflicts devastate economies, promote instability, impede development, promote illegal migration, contravene human rights and frequently fuel terrorism. Conflict prevention is therefore of direct relevance to our national interest.

As well as the moral imperative of reducing the suffering caused by conflict, concerted action to prevent and resolve conflict is essential to allow the benefits of economic prosperity to spread, to allow democracy and good governance to take root and flourish, and to allow the rule of law to be established and promoted.

Conflict prevention is at the heart of what we regard as an integrated cross-government approach. Joint policy making and programmes have enabled us to strengthen our civilian capabilities, including on the ground, and we are working with international partners and organisations to deliver earlier and more effective international responses to crises and conflicts.

In a difficult and challenging fiscal environment, we have had no option but to prioritise activities. We have preserved funding for a range of conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peace-building activities, but it is right to focus our efforts where the risk and impact of conflict is greatest and where our activities add most value.

Defence and military spending supports defence diplomacy and security co-operation, which make a significant contribution to conflict prevention and peace-building. Whitehall Departments are identifying options for further investment in those activities.

Following the Prime Minister's announcement in March 2008 that we would create a pool of 1,000 trained UK civilians who would be readily deployable overseas, we are today-very appropriately-launching the new civilian stabilisation group at the Royal Geographical Society. We will continue to deploy the right people to the right place at the right time to help to rebuild countries recovering from conflict.

There are a number of ways in which we seek to prevent conflict. We do so through the conflict pool, which several hon. Members mentioned, and through working with international institutions such as the United Nations, which the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) asked about. In response to his question, we think that the UN is getting better, but there is a long, long way to go. Regarding the Commonwealth, which he also mentioned, we work alongside Commonwealth countries when it is appropriate to do so. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman when he says that we should consider whether there is more that can be done regarding the Commonwealth. I also agree entirely that, with regard to conflict in Africa, the long-term sustainable peace that we seek in Africa depends on building institutions within that continent, so strengthening the capacity of the African Union in the future will be crucially important.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), during his very thoughtful and well-informed speech, raised the issue of improved or early warning, which is another important issue-arguably the most important issue-in conflict prevention. We need to intervene as early as we can and we require the capacity to make such assessments. There is also a responsibility to protect, to build capacity and to ensure that we, as the United Kingdom, have adequate capability in the area of conflict prevention, so there is a range of ways in which we seek to respond to this challenging agenda.

I now want to turn specifically to the points that have been made by hon. Members during the debate. First, the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey raised a number of issues related to resources. I will try to address some of them, but if I do not address them all, I will write to him.

It is true that we set aside increased resources for conflict activity in 2009-10, which is a significant symbol of how much importance we attach to this issue. However, it is also true that we are faced with competing demands. We do not have the resources to fund everything that we would like to fund. A projected rise in the UK's assessed contributions-they are obligatory contributions-to international peacekeeping missions means that we must rigorously prioritise our discretionary budgets. We have an international legal obligation to pay our bills for international peacekeeping. Unfortunately, that means that there is sometimes less money available to pay for other important activity. As for 2010-11, we are continuing to assess the amount of resources that we will have available, and I assure hon. Members that we will make an announcement to Parliament in due course on that specific issue.

Several hon. Members raised the link between conflict and development. A very important step forward in the 2009 cross-government White Paper "Building our Common Future", which was led by the Department for International Development, is that it recognises the importance of peace-building and state-building in countries affected by conflict and instability. I think that the tangible important change in that White Paper is that it commits to spending at least 50 per cent. of new bilateral country spending in those states that are identified as "fragile". That is a very important recognition of where we increasingly need to shift our resources to.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey also raised the issue of effectiveness, asking how effective our efforts in preventing violent conflict are and how we measure their effectiveness. It is not easy to measure their effectiveness. As several hon. Members have said, conflict prevention is a long-term and major challenge-there are no quick fixes. However, we review progress against delivery on public service agreement 30 targets on a six-monthly basis, using both statistical data and

qualitative reporting from posts. We therefore attempt to assess impact and effectiveness, and I can provide hon. Members with further information on that issue in writing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Mr. Joyce) will know that I have visited eastern Congo on two occasions. He is absolutely right about the importance of MONUC and ensuring that we get its mandate renewed. However, it is also important that we ensure that MONUC, working with FRDC and others, is as effective as it needs to be.

I think that it was my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) who made the point that in situations such as that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the role of development is very important. There has to be a peace dividend alongside security solutions, and where there has been conflict for a long time, people have to see economic and social progress as quickly as possible, after moving in with a civilian response. That is absolutely crucial.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), raised the issue of women in conflict prevention. I have two things to say about that. First, in those countries that come out of conflict, it is often women who play the most important role. They do not sign the peace treaties, but it is often women, both in local communities and at a national level, who are the biggest and most powerful advocates for peace. However, it is also women who are often the greatest victims of the dreadful violence that occurs in places such as eastern Congo, so the role of women must be central, not an add-on or marginal issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud also raised the important issue of our diplomats and the tremendous contribution that they make. In short, we need to bring together security with governance and development, if we are to tackle these issues effectively.