

## **Jammu and Kashmir**

**27<sup>th</sup> February 2019**

**12:47:00**

### **Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)**

(Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security and humanitarian situation in Kashmir, in the light of the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan.

### **The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field)**

I understand that the Prime Minister referred to this during Prime Minister's Question Time. The UK is deeply concerned about rising tensions between India and Pakistan. Understandably, there has been huge interest in this rapidly developing situation. The House will understand that it would not be appropriate for me to comment in detail on reportage at this time, as the situation evolves.

We understand that on 14 February, at least 40 paramilitary Indian police officers were killed in a suicide attack in India-administered Kashmir. The Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility for that attack. India-Pakistan tensions, which were already at a high level, rose significantly following the attack, and both countries publicly exchanged heated rhetoric. On Tuesday 26 February, Indian and Pakistani news reported that Indian jets had crossed the line of control between India-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. There have been reports of further ceasefire violations across the line of control overnight, and the situation remains unclear but fast developing.

The Foreign Secretary spoke to his Indian and Pakistani counterparts on Monday to discuss the situation, and we are in regular contact with both countries at senior levels to encourage restraint and to avoid escalating tensions further. We are monitoring developments closely and considering the implications for British nationals. I will be speaking to both the Indian and Pakistani high commissioners this afternoon and will continue to press for the importance of restraint. We urge both sides to engage in dialogue and find diplomatic solutions to ensure regional stability. We are working closely with international partners, including through the United Nations Security Council, to de-escalate tensions.

India and Pakistan are both long-standing and important friends of the United Kingdom. We have many and significant links to both countries through sizeable diaspora communities. As a consequence, we enjoy strong bilateral relations with both nations. The UK Government's position on Kashmir remains that it is and must be for India and Pakistan to find a lasting

political resolution to this situation, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe, intervene or interfere with a solution or to act as mediator.

I know that the House has previously raised concerns about the humanitarian and human rights situation in both India-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. We continue to monitor the situation, and we encourage all states to ensure that their domestic standards are in line with international standards.

### **Debbie Abrahams**

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I am grateful to the Minister for his response, but this has been an ongoing situation since independence in 1947, and successive Governments have failed, in dealing with the issues associated with Kashmir, to help facilitate peace alongside our international allies.

As the Minister has said, he is aware of the recent aerial attacks from India and then from Pakistan, following on from the militant attack in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir and the death of the 40 Indian troops. This is a proscribed group in Pakistan. I understand that it is said to be apparently based there, but as I say, it has been proscribed by Pakistan. I am grateful to the Minister for reporting on the action he has already taken and the dialogue he has already had with counterparts in the high commissions for both India and Pakistan, and I would be grateful if he reported back once he has had meetings on this, because it is a very fast-moving situation.

The Minister mentioned the UN Security Council. What specific action has been decided on there? India has said that airstrikes in Balakot in north-western Pakistan yesterday were in response to the militants' attack and killed a large number of militants, but Pakistan has said there were no casualties. Will the Minister clarify these reports? Today, Pakistan claims to have shot down two Indian jets when they entered Pakistani airspace, and the Indian news agency Asian News International has reported that a Pakistani jet has also been shot down on the Pakistan side of the line of control. Again, if the Minister could expand on some of this information, that would be very helpful.

In the light of the escalation in military action, will the Foreign Secretary be altering his travel advice to UK citizens? The Minister knows there is large Kashmiri diaspora in the UK, many of whom have families still based there, and their safety is a real concern for them. As I say, the escalating tensions have had a profound effect on our communities. What assurance can he give them that the UK Government are doing all they cannot just to de-escalate tensions now, but to work towards a sustainable peace in the region?

Both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers. This is not just an issue for the region; it is an issue for the whole world. As the chair of the all-party group on Kashmir, I have repeatedly reiterated our commitment to supporting a process of peace and reconciliation in the region, but the UK

Government need to step up and help to facilitate this, alongside our international partners. We have a vital role to play, as I say, not just in de-escalation, but in terms of a sustainable peace, and I urge the Minister to do all that he can to do this.

### **Mark Field**

I thank the hon. Lady for her calm and wise words. May I say that I appreciate she has a busy day today already, with huge amounts going on near her own constituency following the large-scale fires? We are very grateful for her work, and we all recognise as Members of Parliament that we are sometimes torn between important international issues that are close to our hearts and dealing with those that may seem very parochial. None the less, I am very grateful for her words—her words of calm.

On the UN specifically, the hon. Lady is right that this is a UN issue of some urgency, simply because obviously both Pakistan and India are nuclear nations. It is therefore all the more important that we try to tone or dial down some of the rhetoric and, dare I say it, some of the actions we have seen in recent days. I think there are many friends of India and of Pakistan—and of Kashmir—not just here in the UK but across the world who are doing their best to try to calm this down.

The hon. Lady will I hope appreciate, in relation to the clarification she has requested on some of the reports—she made reference to reports of Indian planes having been shot down over the last 24 hours—that I do not want, and I hope she will understand why, to be drawn into comment on this because it is a fluid situation and many of these reports are unconfirmed. I therefore think that the most important thing, as I say, is to try to produce a slightly calmer approach.

On the issue of travel advice that the hon. Lady requested, we are very closely monitoring the situation, and we shall keep our travel advice under constant review and update it regularly—not just in Kashmir, but obviously in other countries. I should say to the hon. Lady that, as it happens, I am going to be in the region on a long-prearranged trip—provided we get out of this place, anyway, with Brexit votes later on. I am hoping to go to India tomorrow morning for three days. This is obviously a fast-moving issue, and I will speak not just with our high commissioner out in New Delhi, but obviously with counterparts both there and in Mumbai.

### **Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)**

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this urgent question about this very tense situation, and I thank the Minister for his solid answers thus far. Clearly, the escalating tension emanates from the terrorist suicide attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed on 14 February. This group is based in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and in Pakistan, so clearly the answer to this is that Pakistan has to take action to dismantle the terrorist

camps and organise so that the terrorists are brought to justice. Will my right hon. Friend tell the Pakistani high commission to own up to its responsibilities and make sure that the terrorists face justice?

**Mark Field**

I have a lot of respect for my hon. Friend, who takes a great interest in these issues. However, I think he is making some categorical statements that are not entirely supportable at this point. As I say, I think it is important for all of us as Members of Parliament with significant diasporas—I know that there is a predominantly Indian diaspora in his own Harrow East constituency—to try to calm feelings and to de-escalate some of the concerns, not least as this is a fast-moving situation.

It is fair to say, however, that Jaish-e-Mohammed has claimed responsibility for the 14 February attack. The UK will continue to support a listing of that organisation and indeed of its leader, Masood Azhar, under UN Security Council resolution 1267. The organisation itself has been listed by the UN since 2001, and Masood Azhar is the head of that organisation. However, I think it is very premature to start making categorical statements about any involvement by Pakistan in this issue. We will obviously keep this under review, and as I say, I will endeavour to speak with both the Indian and Pakistani high commissioners this afternoon to ask them for any updates on the situation.

**Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)**

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing it, and my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who I know also sought an urgent question today.

At the outset, let me make it quite clear that we condemn the despicable terror attack carried out in Pulwama on 14 February, and I believe that we speak on behalf of the whole House when we do so. India has been absolutely right to take action against the terrorist group responsible and to urge Pakistan to follow suit. It is also high time that China lifted its veto so that the UN can designate the head of JeM as a global terrorist.

Will the Minister join me in urging the Indian authorities, at national and regional level, to protect those innocent civilians of Kashmiri origin who have faced reprisals across India following the Pulwama attack? On the airstrikes and dogfights of the last two days, will the Minister of State join me in calling for immediate talks between India and Pakistan to de-escalate that crisis, but also in urging them to put an immediate stop to any military activity that risks escalating it further? We have heard both sides claim that their actions have simply been designed to send a message, but it is all too easy in those situations for messages to be misinterpreted and for grave and fatal mistakes to be made.

Finally, will the Minister of State join me in asking both India and Pakistan to think first and foremost of the innocent people of Kashmir, who are literally caught in the middle of this crossfire and have been so for 70 years? Their human rights have been serially abused, their humanitarian needs have been neglected, and their own wishes about their own future have been treated as unimportant. No one in India, Pakistan or this country wants yet another generation of Kashmiri children growing up facing the same cycle of instability, violence and fear that has afflicted their parents and grandparents for decades. Only peaceful dialogue can break that cycle. All parties must commit to engaging in that dialogue.

### **Mark Field**

The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that we want a broad-based dialogue, and that the whole House condemned the original attack that took place on 14 February. I have to say that the concern about China's veto is unfortunately not isolated to issues around Kashmir. There are other areas, not least in relation to the Rohingya population from Burma, on which, as she knows, the prospect of a veto and of a lack of co-operation does not make life easy within the UN Security Council. There are other organisations, such as the European Union and the UN Human Rights Council, through which we will try to utilise as much muscle as we can, again in collaboration in with other countries, to try to bring about the peaceable progress to which she refers.

The right hon. Lady also raised the humanitarian situation. We recognise that there are and have been long-standing human rights concerns in both Indian-administered and Pakistani-administered Kashmir. We believe that any allegation of human rights abuses is of great concern and has to be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently. I reassure the House, as I did the Members here who were at the meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on 23 January, that we will continue to raise issues relating to Kashmir, including human rights, at all opportunities with the Governments of both India and Pakistan.

I reiterate the right hon. Lady's words. It is important for us, given the importance of the diaspora that we have here, to make clear, as she rightly says, that the worst of all worlds would be many more decades of deprivation and humanitarian problems in Kashmir. To intervene or interfere, or to try to mediate in a broader way, is not necessarily the role for the United Kingdom. Our role, not least because of that diaspora, is to at least try to present that there must be a better future for future generations of Kashmiris than the last 70 years. We need to focus more attention on the future, rather than past. I very much hope that one way in which our diaspora here can make a contribution is to try to help to build up industry, to provide some prosperity for future generations of Kashmiris.

### **Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)**

I am grateful that my right hon. Friend the Minister is in the Chamber to respond to this important urgent question from the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie

Abrahams). I am very concerned, as many of us are, about the issues that have led to such violence in Kashmir over the past two weeks.

I understand that my right hon. Friend will not play a part as a negotiator or mediator, but will he at least do his best to get around the UN General Assembly and other members of the Security Council and encourage those who are friends of both countries to help them to get together and talk, at least in the margins and the quiet corridors, so that when they get to the actual talks, there is a conversation to be had? Will he also ensure that those members of the UK population with connections to Kashmir are able to support their families and those who may have been cut off or in any way harmed by the economic shocks affecting the region at the moment?

**Mark Field**

We shall do our level best. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that active conversations will take place within the UN corridors of both New York and Geneva. I should perhaps say that this goes beyond simply friends of Pakistan and India. The realisation is that this is an extremely serious situation involving two nuclear powers in that part of the world, and that it is therefore in everyone's interest to see a de-escalation, but with an eye towards trying to solve some of the underlying problems for the longer-term future.

Unfortunately for the man to my right, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), it is the fate of Government Whips that they do not have a chance to say very much—[Interruption.] I am sure that you look forward for that reason to the day I am elevated—or maybe demoted; whichever way one looks at it—to the Whips Office, Mr Speaker. On a serious note, I am well aware that my hon. Friend does a huge amount of work on this, not least because one of the main towns in his constituency, Nelson, has a significant Kashmiri population. I know that that applies to many Members on both sides of the House.

**Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)**

I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for raising this important urgent question. I also thank the Minister for his measured response to the situation to date. However, the House will be concerned about the rise in conflict in that region, especially when the nations involved have access to nuclear weapons. Will the Minister ensure that the serious concerns raised in the House are relayed directly to the Governments of Pakistan and India at the highest level, and that the Foreign Office strains every sinew to make sure that both parties act with responsibility and restraint, and that it insists that escalation is not an option?

Many Members have mentioned positive and meaningful talks taking place. In order to protect the civilian populations on both sides of the border, and indeed within Kashmir, we need to ensure that these populations are not put at any further risk. I know that the Government are focused on other matters at the moment, but I hope that the Minister, or the Foreign Secretary, will be able to keep us up to date with developments on a regular basis.

**Mark Field**

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive words. He is right that this requires a nimble diplomatic approach. I have to say that I have encountered over the last two mornings a blizzard of diplomatic telegrams from Islamabad, New Delhi and, of course, New York recognising the huge amount of work going in from our diplomatic service in trying to keep open lines of communication and trying to speak to individuals in the military and at the political level. We will do our level best as this situation evolves and we are able to say more, and with more certainty, to ensure that the House is kept fully informed.

**Mr Speaker**

The right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) just entered the Chamber carrying, as per usual, a book. I note in passing something of which the right hon. Gentleman will be well aware. In his party, which used to be my party, it was frequently said that to be seen carrying a book was dangerous, but to be seen reading it was fatal.

**Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con)**

I do both. [Laughter.]

**Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con)**

I absolutely condemn the perpetrators of the initial act of violence, but I also condemn airstrikes in retaliation for what really could have been a crime, rather than an act of war. Thousands of my constituents will be alarmed about the prospect of escalation because they have families on not only one but both sides of the line of control. Will the Minister join me in saying to the evil people who perpetrate acts of violence for political causes that they defeat their own ends by the revulsion and horror that they cause?

**Mark Field**

I know full well that my hon. Friend has a significant Kashmiri population in his constituency, not least because I have had the chance to meet some of them in recent weeks. He is absolutely right: it is entirely self-defeating. In many ways, we all want to see some sort of normalcy within the Kashmir area, whether under Pakistani or Indian administration. Above all, the clearest way for that to happen is if there is stability in that region, which would allow for economic prosperity. One only has to look close at hand to our situation in Northern Ireland. It was when the worst of the troubles of the 1970s and '80s were behind us that we were able to see some progress and international investors could comfortably be able to build businesses in that country. That is the great prize if we can de-escalate some of these long-standing issues within Kashmir.

**Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)**

Until his election, Prime Minister Modi was banned from entering the United Kingdom for his part in the Gujarat massacre, which resulted in more than 2,000 Muslim deaths. As Prime Minister, he has pursued a divisive, right-wing, Hindu nationalist agenda that has inflamed tensions in both India and occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Instead of pointing fingers at Pakistan for the Pulwama attack, when will Prime Minister Modi look at his own record of persistent state violence and gross human right abuses, as highlighted by both the UN and all-party parliamentary Kashmir group reports, which caused the rise of the home-grown insurgency in Kashmir?

**Mark Field**

I understand the hon. Lady's heartfelt passion, but let me just say this: that is not relevant to the present situation. We all know we are in a pre-election period in India, and that is one of the factors of concern. We want to see a de-escalation at the earliest possible opportunity to avoid the sorts of issues to which she refers. She will appreciate that from the perspective of the Foreign Office we want to remain strong friends on all sides. To start condemning, in the way she proposes, would only undermine our position of trying to bring both sides together.

**Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)**

May I ask that the Government recognise the severity of the terrorist threat faced by India in relation to Kashmir, and that our Government offer support where the Indian Government take measures they feel are necessary to protect the security of their citizens?

**Mark Field**

We will offer support to all Governments who look to protect their civilian populations, but we will do so in a way that is managed, manageable and not focused on an overreaction to what has happened. I appreciate that, as my right hon. Friend rightly says, the attack on 14 February was one of the very worst single episodes for some decades, but equally we would like to see restraint on both sides, recognising the importance of having a secure region to ensure that civilian populations are properly protected.

**Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)**

Just last week, I returned from leading a delegation of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to Pakistan, during which I met the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister assured the delegation of his commitment, reiterating that he wants a peaceful resolution through diplomacy. I am sure the Minister is aware that the central issue in this crisis is Kashmir. While the people of Kashmir are not given their right to self-determination they will not be free, nor can we truly expect to see long-term peace between India and Pakistan. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to change our policy position on Kashmir and play a central role in helping to resolve

the issue that we played a part in creating when leaving the region as a colonial power? Will he consider making an application to the United Nations Security Council on this matter?

**Mark Field**

I must say—the hon. Lady will recognise this—that I do not agree with her prescription that we should try to intervene. The reality of the situation, as I am sure she is well aware, is that if the UK Government were to offer to mediate or feel that it is our place to interfere, we would simply lose credibility, particularly with the Indian Government. We would therefore end up not being able to play the role we do in trying to ensure a de-escalation of tensions. Our long-standing position is, and must continue to be, for India and Pakistan to find a political resolution to the situation in Kashmir through their own efforts, taking into account the wishes, as she rightly says, of Kashmiri people. If we were to intervene, interfere, prescribe a solution or purport that we can somehow be a mediator, I think that would very much undermine our position on all sides.

**Mr Speaker**

I was going to call the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), but he now seems very pre-occupied with—[Interruption.] We have already heard the fella. I should not have forgotten so quickly. I will remind myself of the eloquence of his contribution in due course.

**Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)**

The Minister is taking a very fine line, trying to sit on the fence, effectively, mindful that there are diasporas from both Pakistan and India living in this country. He is treading a very fine line in his answers. However, where it is abundantly clear that the terrorists are living in one particular country, will he give an undertaking to this House that the British Government will make it absolutely clear to that host country that it should not be tolerating terrorists who are engaging in activity in another country and that they must face the full force of law?

**Mark Field**

My hon. Friend will recognise that, as a diplomat or a Foreign Office Minister, sometimes the most effective way to make an argument to our counterparts is not through megaphone diplomacy. There are robust private conversations that will take place. I do not want to go into detail as to what they will say, but let me just say this. We do understand that there is a need and a desire for any country to act proportionately to secure its borders, people and military, but the idea that the UK should be seen to be robustly on one side of this battle rather than another would be entirely self-defeating. I think it is in the interests of us all to take a calm approach. Of course, we will not in any way do anything other than criticise terrorist organisations. That is one reason why the organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed has been subject to a UN listing for almost 20 years and has been proscribed in the UK for that period of time.

**Mr Speaker**

My profuse apologies to the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), on whose every word, as he knows, I ordinarily hang. My attention was momentarily distracted, and I apologise to him.

**Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab)**

I must express my grave concern and alarm at the ongoing escalation of the conflict between India and Pakistan in disputed Kashmir. War will benefit no one, least of all the people of Kashmir. As of yet, however, there are no signs of a serious—I emphasise that word—international attempt to put an end to this crisis. Does the Minister agree that the international community must do more and act now to put an end to these senseless acts of military violence? If so, what steps will his Government be taking to achieve that outcome?

**Mark Field**

I thank the hon. Gentleman. As I mentioned earlier, we are working as rapidly as we can within all international organisations. If I may touch on a point I did not address earlier about the UN, we are working within the UN. This is a major issue, not least because of the fact that these are two nuclear powers. I suspect there will be a move to de-escalate and negotiate as far as possible. I know from discussions with our US counterparts that they are also expressing concerns. Ultimately, I believe it must be for the Kashmiri people to find a way forward. I appreciate that there is a lot of history. The worry is that a lot of things can be said and done now that could be very difficult to forget. The prize for the future is to try to achieve a more peaceable solution. Ultimately, that must come from the hearts of those who are in Kashmir, whether of Pakistani or Indian origin.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)**

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), I have many thousands of constituents who are very worried about family members in Kashmir. I was heartened by what the Minister of State had to say about his robust conversations on human rights with both sides. Does he agree that there is perhaps more we can do as a nation to help investigate human rights abuses and ensure that truth is brought to the forefront, rather than the great deal of misinformation we are hearing at the moment?

**Mark Field**

Yes, I very much agree with my hon. Friend. She will be aware that any allegations of human rights abuses are concerning and need to be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently. She will also be aware that our single biggest Department for International Development budget is in Pakistan. Human rights concerns are part and parcel of the money that is spent out there, trying to build up capacity and capability to ensure that such human rights issues are properly dealt with.

**Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)**

The whole House will support the Government and the United Nations in their efforts to get India and Pakistan to draw back from further conflict, but does the Minister agree that it is the people of Kashmir who are both the victims and spectators of their own future because of the failure of those two countries to reach an agreement on what will happen? Above all else, the people of Kashmir want the chance to live in peace and security, and to have the right to determine their own future, as they were promised over 70 years ago when it was suggested that a referendum might be held. That, of course, has never taken place.

**Mark Field**

I am not sure I would recommend a referendum to anyone in the current circumstances—certainly, it would not be wise for the UK—but the right hon. Gentleman makes a very serious, fair point. We continue to raise human rights issues and to look at this in a humanitarian sense. To add to my responses to one or two other contributions, we noted the findings of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reports and are particularly concerned about allegations of human rights abuses and violations in both India and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. I make it clear that we will continue to raise these issues with the Government in New Delhi.

**Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con)**

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; as the former chairman of the all-party Kashmir group, I visited the region. Many thousands of constituents are concerned for family, friends and loved ones in the region and have contacted me to raise their concerns. Does the Minister agree that this situation is worrying on two levels—first, because we have two nuclear powers squaring off against each other, and secondly, because the people on the ground in Kashmir are the ones who are suffering? Given that we have heard about the documented evidence of human rights abuses, does he not agree that the right course of action might be for us to send observers, perhaps with our EU colleagues, to make sure that there are no human rights abuses on the ground in Kashmir?

**Mark Field**

I know that my hon. Friend is also a former officer of the all-party beer group—I wondered whether he was going to express that interest today. Again, he makes a serious point about having observers, whether at an EU or UN level. We will do our level best, particularly as this situation develops, to ensure that the international community has a chance to see what is going on on the ground in order to de-escalate the tensions.

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op)**

Further to the answer that the Minister has just given, he set out his fears of somehow being seen to take sides. Let me tell him that the community in Walthamstow, who are desperately concerned about the situation in Kashmir, want him to stay on the side of human rights. He spoke about the importance of the work that the UN can do in investigating these cases. He has also told us that he is going to have phone calls this afternoon with both the Pakistani and Indian representatives. Will he commit now to raising directly the importance of them allowing the UN to go to the region and investigate, so that finally, when we talk about allegations, we can show the truth and the people of Kashmir can have justice?

**Mark Field**

I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I will be only too happy to commit to making that pledge, as it were, in the telephone calls that I will have later this afternoon. I talk about not taking sides, but the side we take is obviously with the people of Kashmir to try to ensure that lives that have been so blighted can thrive. The danger with being seen to take a side on this issue is that we will lose any leverage or credibility with one or other of the Governments concerned. We are well aware that there is a large diaspora in this country, but this is not simply about there being a diaspora here; it is about doing the right thing as well, and these human rights issues are clearly of grave concern. As I said, I will commit in my conversations not just today, but in the days to come, to ensure that the voice that she puts across—

**Mark Field**

I am amazed I am so popular—it is great to see. I will ensure that that voice is properly heard.

**Mr Speaker**

Opposition Members' concern, I say to the Minister, is for the knee muscles of Government Back Benchers buoying up and down in eager expectation of their opportunity to be called.

**Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)**

Apart from being the chair of the all-party group on Pakistan, I was born in Kashmir, and in the 2005 earthquake, I lost 25 relatives, including my grandfather. Muzaffarabad is very near the line of control. The people of Kashmir want peace, prosperity, human dignity and to be masters of their own destiny. As the Minister says, our long-standing position is in line with the 1948 United Nations resolutions 47 and 39, which the United Kingdom signed up to, saying that we will support the people of Kashmir's right to self-determination. That being the case, will the Minister please push for that at the United Nations and, as other colleagues have said, for a United Nations human rights fact-finding mission? Whatever it says and whoever it finds against—the Indian or Pakistani sides—we will all accept it.

**Mark Field**

I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As I said, we note the findings of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reports, which are deeply concerning. We will make sure that these are brought up in international committee, both in New York and in Geneva.

**Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind)**

The attack in Srinagar was absolutely atrocious, and the prospect of descending into a tit-for-tat exchange is immensely depressing. As the Minister knows, this is an incredibly serious issue. I speak as the former chair of the all-party Kashmir group. Last year, we published our report on our inquiry into the human rights situation, as the Minister knows, because he heard a recent presentation on that. I hear what he says about Government policy, but we have a responsibility to help to support confidence-building measures. We have a legacy responsibility in that region of the world, and the UK has an obligation to lead and show the way forward for human rights and peace in this area.

**Mark Field**

I take on board what the hon. Gentleman says and support the idea that there is a leadership role, not least within the UN Security Council, where clearly, long-standing connections between the UK and both India and Pakistan will be brought to bear. We will continue to be in the closest possible contact at senior level in both India and Pakistan to try to avoid escalation and ensure regional stability. Part of that is obviously about the capacity building to which he refers. I think he will understand that quite a lot of work goes on both in India and Pakistan to try to ensure that this is brought to bear and hopefully make lives better for all concerned.

**Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)**

My right hon. Friend referred to the discussions and channels that are being used through diplomatic routes both with the UN and directly, and it is very fortuitous that he happens to be visiting the region in the next few days. Before he goes, will he also engage with the Ministry of Defence to encourage senior military leaders and Ministers to engage with their counterparts both in India and Pakistan to make sure that there are senior-level military-to-military back channels between the two armed forces, so that they can help to avoid the accidental escalation of conflict?

**Mark Field**

I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He, of course, was a Defence Minister and will understand that those back channels exist. Clearly they are not always entirely avowed, but the UK has back-channels with both the Indian military and the Pakistani military, and I am well aware that conversations have already taken place and will no doubt continue at pace.

**Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab)**

This is the latest chapter in a horrendous story for the people of Kashmir, as I am sure the whole House agrees. What efforts is the Minister making to ensure that day-to-day communication with the diaspora community is ongoing so that they know what is happening to their friends and family in Kashmir?

**Mark Field**

I very much understand the hon. Lady's concerns. The picture is very confused at the moment, and I wish we could confirm more what is happening on the ground. Part of the reason that I have not been able to be as expansive as I would like is simply that there are conflicting reports of what is happening. Obviously, we will do our level best to ensure that as many of the diaspora, who must be increasingly worried about the wellbeing of their relatives close at hand, are kept as informed as possible in the circumstances. When I am in the region, I will make sure that we express that.

**Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)**

I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this urgent question. Like many hon. Members, I have a significant community of Kashmiris in my constituency, who are extremely concerned. I am also the senior vice-chair of the all-party Kashmir group. Does the Minister agree that we must condemn the use of violence and the abuse of human rights wherever it occurs and by all parties in Kashmir?

**Mark Field**

I agree entirely. We do, and will continue to do so.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)**

Those of us of south Asian ancestry were overjoyed recently at the opening of the Indo-Pak border—an historic and commendable decision by both Governments—so that Sikhs and others could pay homage at the final resting place of the founder of the Sikh faith. We had hoped that there would be further border openings, but simultaneously we expressed concern that terrorist attacks or abuse of human rights would once again sow the seeds of hatred and division. Does the Minister agree that we need to impress upon both nations the need to urgently de-escalate tensions, and that we need to work with them to find lasting, sustainable peace for the long-suffering but wonderful Kashmiri people?

**Mark Field**

I thank the hon. Gentleman, who always speaks with such calmness about such matters. I have had strong dealings with him on a number of issues, at both ministerial and constituency levels. I entirely endorse what he said. I think we all want to see a regularisation of the situation, with as

much access as possible for those who are currently living in India, or currently in Pakistan to be able to go to homelands that their forefathers lived in.

**Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con)**

I declare an interest as a friend, admirer and former relative of the new Prime Minister of Pakistan. Does my right hon. Friend share my view that everything we have seen so far from the new Prime Minister demonstrates an absolute commitment to tackling extremism and terrorism? Does he agree with the new Prime Minister's words, shortly after he was elected, that the surest route to peace between India and Pakistan in the long term is to increase and expand the trade movements between the two countries?

**Mark Field**

I could not agree more. I had a chance to meet Imran Khan, at a time when he was regarded as a potential kingmaker, when I visited KP—Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—the region where his party was the strongest, back in 2017. Obviously, he has arrived at a pivotal time in India-Pakistan relations, with an imminent Indian election, and with all the financial issues concerning Pakistan, which have inevitably taken up quite a lot of his time in his first few months as Prime Minister. Yes, his rhetoric has always been in favour of peace, but he has also shown recognition that having the broadest range of friends across the world is the surest way of seeing prosperity and normalcy in all parts of Pakistan.

**Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)**

Perhaps there is a point on which we can have agreement across the House while, as we sit here today, the drums of war beat once more between two nuclear powers. Surely we must now, in this House, realise our ethical, moral and historical duty to help to provide peace and stability in that region. The central issue, as hon. Members have said, is Kashmir; and the voice that has gone unheard for over 70 years is that of the sons and daughters of Kashmir, who, in the face of oppression, violence and persecution, continue to look towards this House for justice. So, Minister, now is the time to move away from gesture politics and towards finding a concrete resolution, fulfilling our international obligations to actively support the birthright of the sons and daughters of Kashmir, which is self-determination.

**Mr Speaker**

Order. Could I just very gently say, and I say it in a convivial spirit to the hon. Gentleman, that the erudition of his inquiry was equalled only by its length, and that has been emblematic of the exchanges on this urgent question—nodding assent to which is provided by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). It would be a pity if we took an hour on an urgent question with only about 30 quizzers, because that really should not happen.

**Mark Field**

I think he is suggesting that I am at least 50% to blame for that as well.

I respect deeply the passion of the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I hope he does not feel that gesture politics is involved here. We shall do our level best to bring parties together. While I have always said that there is a set policy that we will not have an official mediation, please be assured that we are doing our level best to bring people together. The one message I would give to the hon. Gentleman is that we need to try to de-escalate and calm some of the passions that we shall see within our own country in the weeks and months ahead. It is in the interests not just of all Kashmiris, but of stability within the UK as well.

**Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)**

Over decades, people have been subjected to violence, oppression and human rights abuses in Kashmir. The events of recent weeks will only compound the challenges and divide people more, rather than bringing a solution in Kashmir. Will my right hon. Friend and the Government do all that they can to use UK influence to bring dialogue between India and Pakistan, to try to prevent the escalation of these issues and the terrorism that is going on, so that we can start again to focus more on dealing with the issue of how Kashmir determines itself?

**Mark Field**

I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is aware that we are trying to do our level best, precisely along the lines that he has suggested. May I just say this to the House? Interestingly, when I speak to many of my Indian, and indeed Pakistani, constituents, they often marvel at the fact that, on my very first visit to India back in 2003, I had the chance to go to both Srinagar and Jammu. The tragedy, in many ways, is that it is a beautiful part of the world and would offer tremendous opportunities not just for tourism; it would be an amazing place for many, many people with Kashmir in their hearts to visit. That is the great prize—to ensure that things are normalised. We know that a painstaking diplomatic approach will be required to bring about that normalisation, so that the beauty of that part of the world may become obvious to many, many people.

**Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab)**

The Minister's focus on the human rights of the people of Kashmir is genuinely welcome, but the fact remains that the humanitarian crisis has been raging in Kashmir for decades, largely ignored by this country and the rest of the world. Hon. Members throughout the House, from all parties, have repeatedly asked for us to take a leading role and to bring diplomatic peace talks to the forefront. Does he agree that it is a terrible shame that it takes an escalation of violence between two nuclear powers to achieve what, hopefully, will be a wake-up call for the British Government?

**Mark Field**

I am sorry that the hon. Lady thinks this is a wake-up call. This is something that is close to all our hearts, not least because there are significant numbers of diaspora and their many Members of Parliament raise these issues, whether in parliamentary questions or in urgent questions such as today's, and indeed with the all-party parliamentary group, which I know she attended only a few weeks ago.

Let us be candid. What is particularly serious here, as one or two hon. Members have said, is that we are now dealing with two nuclear powers. The issues of Kashmir were not in a nuclear-to-nuclear state until Pakistan acquired nuclear capability, 25 to 30 years ago. That is why the matter is of particular seriousness. That is not to say that a huge amount of work has not been going on behind the scenes for many years. Obviously, it becomes a lot more high-profile with all that is happening now.

**Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)**

I know that the Minister will not want to comment on the claim and counterclaim around aircraft being shot down and around the specifics of pilots having been captured, but would he perhaps agree that the chances of a calm dialogue between the parties will be much increased if treatment of each other's personnel is seen to be humane?

**Mark Field**

I entirely agree. I cannot speculate other than on reports that have come through and I will not go into any great detail on those, but I very much hope that, if there are military captured on either or both sides, they will be dealt with and treated within the Geneva convention and in a humane way.

**Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op)**

I do not think any fair-minded person would expect the Government to take the side of Pakistan or India, but we are absolutely expecting the Government to step up and give a voice to the people in Kashmir. In the pursuit of power by aggression, it is always everyday people who pay the ultimate price, and too many people have had their lives on hold for generations. This matters to people in Oldham West and Royton, with a large heritage in that country; when this happens, it happens to their parents, their sons, their daughters, their brothers and sisters. They are just reaching out to the UK Government to say, "Give us a hand. Bring people together, convene and use that role in a positive way."

**Mark Field**

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. We will do all that we can, along the lines that I have suggested. This is a very fluid situation, and obviously the most important thing is to de-escalate the tensions because they are at a very worrying level. He is right to point out, however, that there are underlying issues that also need to be dealt with.

**Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op)**

We have all been appalled by this terrorist attack. As has been said, communities like ours across the country are deeply concerned. Many of my constituents have families and friends in the region, and a member of my staff is currently trying to get there to attend a family wedding. Does the Minister agree that any reprisals against entirely innocent Kashmiri civilians elsewhere in India must stop, and will he make it clear to his Indian counterparts that, while we understand their anger, they must ensure that innocent people are not harmed when responding to this horrific attack?

**Mark Field**

I shall be happy to express those direct concerns when I speak to the Indian high commissioner later today.

**Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)**

May I echo the comments of colleagues? Because of our history in the region, and because of our influence and close relationships with both India and Pakistan, Kashmiri families in my constituency look to the United Kingdom to take a leading role both in the immediate and dangerous conflict that we see before us now, and in bringing long-term peace, justice and freedom to Kashmir.

**Mark Field**

I am sorry, but as the hon. Lady will appreciate, we are just covering the same old ground. I well understand that each and every Member here wants to have his or her say for a range of reasons—often because of the diaspora, but often as well because they feel passionate about the relations between India and Pakistan. I suspect that there is little new that I can add, but I thank her for her words.

**Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)**

We all condemn all forms of terrorism, and I think we all understand that war is not an option. Many of us have raised this matter multiple times in the House, but have received the same response from the Government time and again. This is an issue between India and Pakistan, but recent events reveal that it is not just an issue between those countries: it desperately requires international attention. The British Government need to facilitate talks and to play a greater role in de-escalating the dangerous level of tension between the two countries. I should like them to do more at a human level to ensure that there is an international investigation of what has happened, and to move towards the core issue, which is the issue of Kashmir.

**Mark Field**

The hon. Gentleman always adopts a measured tone, which I think is important for all our constituents. He should be assured that a great deal of work has already been done by the United Nations in the last fortnight since the latest phase of escalation. Obviously, the events of the last couple of days have been a great worry and there is concern about what may come to pass, but a huge amount of work is going on behind the scenes diplomatically. The UK has an important, although by no means exclusive, part to play at the United Nations, and we shall continue to bring that to bear.

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)**

My constituent Madni Ahmed Tahir is one of my many constituents with Kashmiri roots, and has family in Kashmir. Can the Minister explain in a bit more detail what travel advice will be offered to my constituents, and what consideration his colleagues in the Home Office will give to visa applications that are currently in progress?

**Mark Field**

As the hon. Lady will recognise, those applications are a matter directly for the Home Office, but there will clearly be liaison between the two Departments. We are closely monitoring the situation relating to travel advice, on an hour-by-hour basis, as we become aware of confirmation of what is happening on the ground. We will keep that advice under constant review, and will update it on the website regularly.

**Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab)**

Let me say, at the risk of repeating what has been said by other Members, that we constantly hear of human rights violations in occupied Kashmir, and we cannot be bystanders. What efforts is the Minister making to ensure that a thorough, transparent inquiry into these crimes is commissioned?

**Mark Field**

The hon. Lady will be aware that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights produced a report recently. She will forgive me if I do not try to say any more now on the Floor of the House. I will try to write to her, if I may, providing a list of the actions that have been taken over the past 12 months and an account of what we propose to do in the months to come.

**Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)**

I must say that I am very disappointed with the Minister's response so far. His Government are failing to take the necessary responsibility. This issue is far more serious than he and the Government are suggesting. Tensions are high, and two nuclear countries are on the verge of another conflict. Kashmiris have been dying since 1947. Will the Government take some real

action and show some responsibility? Will they put both India and Pakistan at the table, so that they can resolve their issues through dialogue?

**Mark Field**

I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answers on this matter. Successive Governments have clearly tried to work on it on a bilateral basis, which I think has been more helpful. A huge amount of work goes on. Our high commissions in both New Delhi and Islamabad, and other staff, work closely together in trying to do what can be done on the ground in Kashmir but, as I said at the outset, it is not our role to bring both parties to the table in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests, and I think that trying to do so would be entirely counterproductive.

**Mr Speaker**

Eloquence and brevity combined? Mike Gapes.

**Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind)**

While we should not exaggerate the influence that the British Government could have at this time, is it not nevertheless important for us, as a nuclear-weapon state, to do what Jack Straw did in 1999 during the Kargil crisis, when the role of the British Foreign Office was central to ensuring that it did not escalate into an all-out nuclear war?

**Mark Field**

The hon. Gentleman is right: the issue of being a nuclear state makes the situation particularly serious at the moment, and it is one of the reasons why I think the international community will want to have a part to play. He clearly has some knowledge of and interest in the foreign affairs of 20 years ago, and if he feels that there are important lessons to be learnt from what happened at that time that we could bring to bear on this crisis, I should be happy to speak to him about them.

**Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)**

I declare my interest as the recently appointed co-chair of Labour Friends of India.

The Minister has spoken today about the direct involvement of the Government with embassies and through the United Nations Security Council, but what work should the Commonwealth be doing to bring about stability in the region?

**Mark Field**

I think that one of the most important things the Commonwealth can do—I am sure its Secretary General will have it very much in her mind—is bring people together and keep lines of communication open. The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that leading figures in the

Commonwealth, in both India and Pakistan, have a political or an NGO-related background. We want to have as much dialogue as is possible in these very trying circumstances.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)**

I thank the Minister for his deep interest in this matter. As chair of the all-party group for the Pakistani minorities, I visited Pakistan in September last year as part of a cross-party delegation to inquire into human rights and the persecution of Christians and religious minorities. We met the regional president of the Pakistan-Kashmir province, who made us aware of attacks on and killings of Pakistan Kashmiris, including the sexual abuse and rape of women. The president told us that the United Nations had a key role to play. What discussions has the Minister had with the UN to bring about a peace process?

**Mark Field**

Discussions about the current issue have taken place at the UN with our head of mission. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, rather than giving a glib and quick answer here, I will write to him in detail about precisely what has happened in recent months.

**Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)**

Members of the Kashmir diaspora make an extraordinary contribution across our communities, nowhere more so than in Nottingham. They will understand, as I do, the Minister's reluctance to pick a side, as he puts it, but will he be absolutely clear with the House and make a solemn commitment that when it comes to working through international organisations—especially the UN—when it comes to human rights and when it comes to humanitarian aid, the British Government will not be found wanting?

**Mark Field**

I hope the hon. Gentleman will feel reassured that that is very much the British Government's approach. It is important that we work together on this, not just in the context of the urgent question but in the context of APPGs. I hope that we can work across Parliament, because we will have an even stronger voice if we speak as one. There will of course be disagreements at the margins, but if we can speak as one for Kashmir and Kashmiri people, our voice will be all the more effective in dealing with our Indian and Pakistani counterparts.

**Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op)**

I heard what the Minister said about not wishing to be seen to take a side and that he does not believe it is the UK's role to bring together the Indian and Pakistan sides to form a compromise, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) pointed out, what the Kashmiri community both here and in Kashmir are looking for is a friend and ally who

will speak up for them in the international forums, so may I ask the Minister what specific actions he will take inside the UN to make sure it fulfils its responsibility to speak up for that minority community?

**Mark Field**

I would not wish the hon. Gentleman to misunderstand the situation: we are a friend for all Kashmiris, and we are a friend of that region and indeed a strong friend for India and Pakistan internationally on this and related issues. It is a fluid situation and therefore I cannot go into specifics regarding the UN other than to say that feverish conversations are taking place there, albeit while trying to instil a sense of calm. I am sure this matter will be formally dealt with at the UN General Assembly, as well as at the Security Council in the days to come.

**Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)**

The prime minister of Kashmir was in Glasgow last weekend discussing with a cross-party group of political representatives there the situation in Kashmir. The prime minister of Kashmir is in London today—he cannot return home because of closed airspace. Will the Minister meet him today—he will be in Parliament from 4 o'clock onwards, I understand—to hear directly from the direct representative of the Kashmiri people?

**Mark Field**

The hon. Gentleman refers to the prime minister of Kashmir. The Foreign Office deals only with those whom we formally recognise. I am not sure of all the facts of this situation, but if he is not an individual we formally recognise, this is not a matter that I can pursue. No doubt, the hon. Gentleman will fill me in on the details in due course. I already have phone calls lined up with the high commissioners for Pakistan and for India during the course of this afternoon and will have other conversations as well.

**Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op)**

There have been worrying reports emerging in the last few minutes that the Indian and Pakistani armies are now engaged in heavy artillery exchanges at several locations on the line of control in western Kashmir, so the situation appears to be escalating rapidly. The Minister has undertaken to communicate with both sides in the conflict and understand the situation; will he commit to the FCO updating this House within the next 24 hours on the latest position and the actions the FCO will be taking to de-escalate it, in particular addressing the UN Security Council on this issue?

**Mark Field**

We have the mechanism of urgent questions to deal with such matters, and if there is an update we will want to make the House aware of it at the earliest possible opportunity. I hope to be in

the region in the next 24 hours, so that might not be done in quite the timeframe the hon. Gentleman has in mind, but we will do our best once facts are established to inform the House of what is going on.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)**

Because of the conflict global markets are now trading lower, with Asian investors seeking sanctuary in either the yen or the Swiss franc. Can the Minister give UK investors assurances about their investments within the region? I do not have a huge Indian or Pakistani diaspora, but one UK-born citizen from Dumbarton, Jagtar Singh Johal, is in an Indian jail, held arbitrarily without trial for over 500 days by the Indian republic. Through the fog of impending war, can the Minister, to whom I am grateful for going to India, remind the Indian state of its duty to uphold the rule of international law in border affairs and in human rights for UK nationals in its jails?

**Mark Field**

The Johal case has been raised on the Floor of the House, and as the hon. Gentleman is well aware, we have met on two or three occasions in the Foreign Office on this matter. I pledge to bring it up in my discussions in New Delhi that I hope to undertake on Friday.

It would be unwise to say anything about the international markets. Suffice it to say that I very much hope that businesses, particularly those where the diaspora is engaged in Kashmir and the region, will feel confident in the longer term that they are doing the right thing by engaging as fully as they are.

This urgent question has taken a long time—well over an hour—and I am struck by how passionate many Members are about this issue, and not just those with significant diaspora communities. This is obviously a fast-moving, fluid situation and I am sure we will come back to the House at some point to discuss it further. The one big message for all of us is to do all we can in our communities to de-escalate and calm the understandable passions that have been raised.