

22 February 2017

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Rt Hon George Howarth MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

Dear George,

Thank you for your letter of 31 January to the Defence Secretary on behalf of your constituents about the conflict in Yemen and UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia. I am replying as Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister responsible for our relations with the Middle East.

I share your constituents' I share your constituent's concern about the effects of the conflict on Yemeni civilians. I am acutely aware that during armed conflict, civilians often pay a heavy price. They face daily threats of violence and death as they find themselves inadvertently caught up in the middle of a conflict. We urge all sides to minimise civilian casualties and damage to critical infrastructure and raise the importance of this regularly with Coalition countries at the highest levels, including during the Foreign Secretary's recent visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2016. The Foreign Secretary reiterated this most recently with the Saudi Foreign Minister on 10 February.

Your constituents raised the issue of cluster munitions. The UK takes its obligations under the Convention on Cluster Munitions very seriously and continues to fulfil them. In line with our obligations, we continually urge Coalition members involved in the air campaign in Yemen to accede to it without delay. We have also made clear to the Coalition that the UK opposes the use of cluster munitions.

As the Secretary of State for Defence, The Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon said in his statement to the House on 19 December 2016, our initial view, as set out by the then Minister of State for Defence Procurement, on 24 May 2016 and based on the information we held at the time, was that UK-manufactured cluster munitions had not been used, but we committed to analyse the allegations made and to seek a full investigation by the Coalition. That is what they have now done and the Coalition has stated that the munitions were in fact used against a legitimate military target. The Government nevertheless welcomes their confirmation that it will no longer use UK-manufactured BL-755 cluster munitions.

We take alleged violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) very seriously and where there are concerns raised, we insist that these are properly investigated. We have provided advice and training to help the Government of Saudi Arabia in this regard. In addition, we have raised our concerns with the Houthis on the importance of compliance with IHL. It is important that Saudi Arabia in the first instance conducts thorough and conclusive investigations into incidents where it is alleged that IHL has been breached. They have the best insight into their own military procedures and will be able to conduct the most thorough and conclusive investigations.

It will also allow the country to really understand what went wrong and apply the lessons learnt in the best possible way. This is the standard we set ourselves and our allies. The Saudi-led Coalition Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT) have published 13 reports, with the most recent on 6 December. We welcome their recommendations on improving procedures and we will continue to encourage the Coalition to publish further reports into incidents of concern and to act on JIAT recommendations.

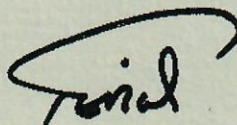
The British Government takes its arms export responsibilities very seriously and operates one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world. All export licence applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria, taking account of all relevant factors at the time of the application. Our export licensing system allows us to respond quickly to changed circumstances, with options to review, suspend or revoke licences if necessary. A licence will not be issued where we assess there is a clear risk that items to be licensed might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law. We have kept the situation under careful review throughout the conflict in Yemen and continue to monitor it closely.

The Government will continue to work hard to improve the humanitarian situation and support peace and stability in Yemen. The UK is the fourth largest donor to this crisis, with the UK's total humanitarian funding currently over £100 million this financial year. We have donated a further £5 million to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. In both 2015 and 2016, we helped over 1 million Yemenis with food, medical supplies and clean water. We will continue to push donors and partners alike to step up their efforts in support of the UN appeal for life-saving assistance which was launched on 8 February.

The most effective way to achieve a lasting solution to the crisis in Yemen is through political negotiation. Resuming peace talks are the top priority. We welcome and fully support the work of UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed in trying to achieve a political settlement and commend his efforts to date.

The UK is playing a leading role in bringing together the US, Coalition members and UN to find a peaceful solution to the conflict, the first of which meeting was hosted in London in July and attended by the Foreign Secretary. Subsequent meetings have taken place in August, September, and October and December with ministerial attendance. I actively look for opportunities to engage with parties to the conflict to stress the need for the political settlement that is needed and most recently spoke with President Hadi on January 15.

Yours sincerely,



TOBIAS ELLWOOD MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State