



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 22 May 2025

Session 6



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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
17th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jayne Crow (Disasters Emergency Committee)

Frances Guy (Scotland's International Development Alliance)

Huw Owen (Disasters Emergency Committee)

Saleh Saeed (Disasters Emergency Committee)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 22 May 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the 17th meeting in 2025 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

The first item on the agenda is a decision on taking business in private. Are we content to take item 3 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Gaza

09:30

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is an evidence-taking session on Scotland's humanitarian response to Gaza. We are joined in the room by Frances Guy, chief executive, Scotland's International Development Alliance and chair of the Scottish Government's humanitarian emergency fund panel; and Huw Owen, director of external relations, Disasters Emergency Committee. Online, we have Saleh Saeed, chief executive, and Jayne Crow, head of programmes, Disasters Emergency Committee.

We will hear some opening statements from Frances Guy, Saleh Saeed and Jayne Crow, and I invite Frances to go first. Welcome to the committee, everyone.

Frances Guy (Scotland's International Development Alliance): Thank you, convener, and thank you very much for having this evidence session at what, I think, is a very appropriate moment.

I want to be clear about my role: I am chair of the humanitarian emergency fund, which I think most of you will know about. Just to clarify, though, the fund is made up of eight Scottish-based charities, six of which are members of the Disasters Emergency Committee and two of which are not. I am also, as your introduction made clear, head of Scotland's International Development Alliance, and we have other members who have been working, and who are still trying to work, in Gaza. I just wanted to make it clear that, if the occasion arises, I might represent more than one voice.

The Convener: That is fine. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Frances Guy: No—that was all that I was going to say. Saleh Saeed is going to make a statement.

The Convener: Okay. Saleh, would you like to make your statement?

Saleh Saeed (Disasters Emergency Committee): Yes, please. Many thanks to the committee for inviting us to speak today.

Perhaps I can just elaborate by saying that, in times of large-scale humanitarian crises and emergencies, the Disasters Emergency Committee—the DEC—brings together 15 of the United Kingdom's leading aid agencies to respond to people in desperate need. The conflict in the middle east has devastated lives across the region, and millions have fled their homes in search of safety. Many have lost their homes, their livelihoods and, sadly, their loved ones multiple

times over. The humanitarian horror that we are witnessing is truly shocking.

The DEC middle east humanitarian appeal, which was launched last October, has so far raised over £45 million, with £4 million from the Scottish people and £500,000 from the Scottish Government. We are, of course, incredibly grateful for that generous help and, in particular, for the cross-party support in Scotland. By working together with our member charities, national media and corporate partners, we have been able to raise these much-needed funds to reach the most vulnerable communities across Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon and provide urgently needed shelter, food and basic supplies to help people survive.

Last week, I was in Lebanon, where more than 1 million people have had to leave their homes. Some have been able to return, but their homes and lives sadly remain very fragile. I was there to see and hear at first hand how DEC funds, and your support, are helping children to cope with trauma and families to receive essential food supplies as well as helping with the rehabilitation of water and sewage systems for entire neighbourhoods.

While I was there, I spoke to colleagues working in Gaza. The grim reality of the situation on the ground was very evident from their own demeanour; many aid organisations have run out—or are fast running out—of aid supplies that they were able to replenish during the recent ceasefire. One told me how they were still able to purchase vegetables at an extortionate rate on the market and distribute them to the most vulnerable people, but in ever-shrinking portions. Another told me that they are now on their last few weeks' supply of critical nutrition and medicines for malnourished babies and children.

The United Nations has warned that the entire population of 2.1 million people in Gaza is at critical risk of famine. Food and clean water are now desperately scarce, and surviving hospitals are barely operational.

DEC member charities are still responding and remain ready to do more in Gaza, and they are providing whatever they can, but they are fast losing the ability to save and protect lives. The Scottish people have acted in their thousands by giving millions of pounds, and they have put their trust in the DEC, our members on the ground and their local partners to deliver essential humanitarian assistance. I end by asking you all to do whatever you can to help us deliver on this mandate. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I invite Jayne Crow to make an opening statement.

Jayne Crow (Disasters Emergency Committee): Thank you. I want to give some insights into where we are with the implementation of programming. We have moved past phase 1 of the response—a six-month period in which we focused on lifesaving needs—and are now into month 7, or phase 2. Phase 2 is often associated with rehabilitation but for this response, the focus is and will remain on lifesaving needs.

Focusing on Gaza, which has faced the most challenges with regard to access for delivering aid and the safety and security of personnel, we have now delivered 42 per cent of the response as multipurpose cash. Other priority sectors are health, water, sanitation, hygiene and, of course, food.

Members and local partners have delivered phase 1 funding in Gaza; that was enabled largely by the ceasefire in January, which allowed aid to be delivered into Gaza at that point. However, because of the blockade in February, supplies are now running out. Members have adapted their plans and are increasingly focusing on cash as a modality where that is possible and where markets have supplies, although they are extremely limited and are running out, too. They are also focusing on other activities such as fixing water points, trucking water to cut-off locations, mental health and psychosocial support and providing child-friendly spaces.

What is really needed at this point, though, is access to deliver food. The majority of the population is at risk of famine, and we have seen only an exceptionally small number of trucks entering in the past week. We hope that, with mounting pressure, the blockade will be lifted. Meanwhile, we will continue to deliver what is possible with our members and local partners. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We have all witnessed the scenes in the television reports about what is happening. Yesterday morning, the BBC reported that, because Gazans have been without food for 11 weeks, the markets are almost empty; there are no fruit and vegetables, no protein and no meat. There is also no fuel to run the generators for the hospitals and there are no medicines, and 25 per cent of the water is contaminated.

Doctors Without Borders has described this as “not just another conflict zone; it's a place where the very essence of humanity is under siege.”

What have been the DEC's immediate priorities in the humanitarian response to what is happening since the blockade began, and what can the Scottish Government—and indeed the Scottish Parliament—do to support the humanitarian response?

Frances Guy: I will leave the others to talk about the detail of the actual response on the ground, but, as you have said, this is a crucial moment. If I may say so, I am struck by the fact that the committee last discussed Gaza in November 2023, because of a letter that the then First Minister wrote to the then Prime Minister, asking for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access. We are now more than 18 months on and the ceasefire and humanitarian access that were called for remain the most pertinent things. Meanwhile, we are 18 months of destruction and loss of life later. I am sorry—I just feel that this needs to be put in context.

I think that you have lodged with the Parliament a motion recognising the state of Palestine, and I believe that there is pressure on the British Government to join the French and others when they have this discussion in two weeks or so. We need to be able to look forward to something positive as well as dealing with the humanitarian disaster that is happening right now, and we need to focus on the idea that it is possible to have some peaceful solution to this crisis. Therefore, it is really important that, as well as looking to get humanitarian aid let in, we look at something constructive and try to create a vision of an alternative.

One part of that would be support for the Arab League's proposals for reconstruction in Gaza, which are on the table and are supported in the region. The press here talks about alternative ways of reconstruction, but there is a practical programme out there, and we should be talking more about it.

I am sorry—I diverged a wee bit.

The Convener: That is okay. I will bring in Saleh Saeed now.

Saleh Saeed: For us, the answer is simple. We—the humanitarian community, the DEC agencies on the ground and their local partners—must be allowed and enabled to deliver humanitarian assistance unfettered and without any obstruction. That starts with enabling food, water, medicines and other essential humanitarian supplies to get into Gaza.

It is not for the DEC to get involved in the politics of the conflict, but it is for the aid and humanitarian organisations to insist, and demand, that we have access and the freedom to operate and reach the most vulnerable communities in Gaza—and, indeed, elsewhere in the middle east where there is urgent need. During the ceasefire, more than 500 trucks per day were allowed to enter Gaza, and they were distributed to the people there. We were able to build up our stock supplies, too, which enabled people to survive for the weeks of the blockade.

For me, the answer is simple. Aid agencies must be allowed to do their work, and we ask all parties to do whatever they can to enable them to facilitate access in order to help communities in Gaza and elsewhere.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring in Jayne Crow.

Jayne Crow: I want to talk a little bit about what we can do inside Gaza.

A lot of our local partners are very much on the front line and are also personally affected by the crisis. With regard to priorities, we have mentioned the different sectors; food and medicine are a real priority, and we are dependent on access to scale up those parts of the responses.

One priority that we are focusing on at the moment is co-ordination and security, and keeping people safe so that they can deliver whatever they can. We are also looking at some bespoke, community-led approaches; in certain areas, small-scale farming is still able to take place—luckily—and we are looking at how we can enable that produce to be distributed locally.

Those are some of the ways in which we are adapting. DEC funding is flexible, so members can refer local partners and adapt to changing needs. If we can relocate somewhere safer for distribution, we will do so. How we deliver and prioritise things is an iterative and day-to-day process.

The Convener: Huw, is there anything that you would like to add?

Huw Owen (Disasters Emergency Committee): I think that my colleagues have given you plenty of information at this point, but I am happy to answer any other questions.

The Convener: I will now move to questions from the committee. I call Mr Bibby, to be followed by Mr Harvie.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. We have heard about the impact of the blockade, which has been in place for about 11 weeks, and the horrific circumstances in Gaza right now. Jayne Crow talked about the importance of working with local partners and about food and medicine being priorities, and we have heard that stocks need to be replenished. If the blockade was lifted and more food and medicine got in—we want that to happen immediately, and I am pleased that the UK Government has joined Canada and France in calling for that—what is the estimated time that it would take, working with partners, for food and medicine to reach the people who need it? I know that it is very difficult to make an estimate, but there is a difference between lifting the blockade

and ensuring that food and medicine get to where they are needed in Gaza.

09:45

Jayne Crow: That is a really interesting point. We already have supplies waiting for the blockade to be lifted, and other agencies will have supplies, too. As Saleh Saeed mentioned, we had 600 trucks a day going into Gaza, so, as soon as we are able to, we will restart that process. Supplies have already been purchased and are waiting.

There are other issues. For instance, the Israeli Government has introduced a new system at the border whereby most international non-governmental organisations have to re-register, so our agencies are going through that process. As soon as they have done that, they will be able to deliver the supplies immediately.

Neil Bibby: If the blockade is lifted, you can immediately provide supplies and support—food and medicine—to the people who need them?

Jayne Crow: Yes. We are there waiting, but there is a process to get across the border, as there is with any emergency response. We are already in that process.

Saleh Saeed: I will amplify what Jayne Crow has said and provide further clarity. Aid organisations in Gaza have also been hugely impacted, with many aid workers having lost their lives, their family and their homes. Although the capacity of humanitarian organisations has been depleted and affected, there remains strong commitment and capacity to deliver. Once aid in trucks has cleared the border and been handed over to the UN and aid organisations, they are able to distribute it immediately, and they have recourse to replenish warehouses for the weeks and months to come.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Good morning. First, I want to acknowledge the gratitude and respect that not only I but, I am sure, many other people have for the work that is being done by people who are putting themselves in harm's way in relation to their physical safety and their wider wellbeing. No discussion that we have can be adequate in the face of what is happening. We are sat here with fresh water on the table, we will all be fed and we will all sleep safely tonight. That is not true not only for Palestinians but for many humanitarian aid workers. Over the past years, a significant number of humanitarian aid workers have been killed during the assault on Gaza, and there is significant evidence that, in a number of incidents, humanitarian aid workers have been deliberately targeted by the Israel Defense Forces.

I want to further explore the issue of safety, which Jayne Crow has mentioned a couple of

times. In particular, what impact is being felt in relation not only to the people who are doing work on the ground but to the effectiveness of the available resources to provide humanitarian relief? What impact has there been on the effectiveness of that work, given that you constantly have to consider the safety and wellbeing of your staff on the ground and, as Jayne Crow said, the locations where aid is provided? How are you able to do that effectively? What is the impact of having to address the safety of your operations?

I will start with Jayne Crow, because she has mentioned safety a couple of times, but others might want to respond, too.

Jayne Crow: Safety is a huge part of the response. All our members and their local partners meet core humanitarian standards and follow humanitarian safety and security protocols, on which they have training. The community volunteers who are used also have training on safety protocols. That is the case day to day. We know that conflicts can move around and that danger obviously moves around with them. There is co-ordination with the UN and other agencies so that all our members and local partners are aware that they might need to adapt daily their locations for delivering aid, for example. That is how we work at the moment in Gaza.

Patrick Harvie: The Israeli Government forbids independent journalism inside Gaza. Does that impose restrictions on humanitarian aid workers and agencies recording and reporting their direct experience of the situation that they face on the ground?

Jayne Crow: As you said, journalists are not able to go into Gaza at this point, but humanitarian workers are not affected in the same way. They are able to move within their organisation's restrictions and controls. There are some unsafe areas, so they have to make judgments based on their security protocols. However, they are not restricted from getting into Gaza; they are already there and have been working there for a long time. Our local partners and some of our members are doing direct implementation there.

Patrick Harvie: Do any of the other witnesses want to comment on the issue? The Scottish Government is contributing resources—albeit at a smaller level, given that Scotland is a non-independent country—in the hope that that will be effective in relieving suffering. What impact is the lack of safety for humanitarian workers having on the effectiveness of those attempts at intervention?

Saleh Saeed: In any live conflict setting, humanitarian aid workers face some level of risk while carrying out their life-saving work, but DEC member charities are, of course, doing everything

that they can to mitigate the risks as much as possible wherever they are operating. We all know that the current situation in Gaza is extremely dangerous. An unprecedented number of humanitarian workers, medical staff and ambulance drivers have been killed. Given the intensity of the conflict and the air strikes, no one's safety can be guaranteed, but our member charities and their local partners follow security protocols to try to keep safe and to help volunteers on the ground to keep safe as they go about their life-saving work.

Like many other people in Gaza, most of our members' staff have had to flee their homes and are trying to keep themselves and their families safe while delivering life-saving aid. Last week, I spoke to a colleague in Gaza who told me his personal story of having to go to find food and safety for his family after working long hours every day to help to save other lives. That shows that the impact on local aid workers is twofold—there is an impact not only on their communities through their work but on their personal lives and families.

Frances Guy: Jayne Crow made a point about organisations and their partners applying core humanitarian standards. In the discussion about alternative ways of delivering aid, which is part of the background to the current reality, it is important to say that those standards have built up over years of experience of working in conflict situations. They help to provide some minimum protection levels and safety checks for humanitarian workers and for those who receive aid, as they are not forced to go through insecure places to receive it. There is that part of the story, too. If you hear more about alternatives, please bear in mind the fact that core humanitarian standards have been built up over years of experience and are worth adhering to.

One or two small Scottish charities that were working in Gaza—providing support for children, mental health and so on—have had to close and are no longer delivering that support as a result of not being able to guarantee people's safety.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To pick up on that point, Ms Guy, are there no Scottish charities on the ground in Gaza at the moment?

Frances Guy: There are members who are working with partners—there are plenty of Scottish charities represented in doing work on the ground in Gaza. I was just referring to a couple of very small charities that had been working in Gaza for years but are no longer able to.

Stephen Kerr: Will you illustrate the kind of work that is being done by organisations from Scotland that are engaged on the ground? It is a

wholly deplorable situation and it would be good to hear exactly what is being done.

Frances Guy: Some of those involved are members of the DEC—notably, Christian Aid. I used to work for Christian Aid, so I am aware of the programme in Gaza that has been on-going for more than 20 years. It has very strong partners on the ground and will be delivering exactly the things that Jayne Crow talked about. The Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, which is part of Caritas International, will similarly be delivering with its long-term partners on the ground. There is also Mercy Corps, which in the past has had some incredibly imaginative programming in Gaza but will now be simply focusing on humanitarian action.

Stephen Kerr: What specific kind of work are they doing on the ground? Just illustrate that, if you would not mind. We see the pictures on the television, but we do not necessarily see the whole picture, as has been alluded to. Can you elucidate a little?

Frances Guy: We heard from Jayne Crow the practical things that are possible in the current situation.

Stephen Kerr: Yes, I heard that, but I want to know exactly what is happening.

Frances Guy: I cannot add any more to what has been said, sorry.

Salah Saeed: DEC organisations and those that also operate in Scotland, such as Islamic Relief, Christian Aid and others, are operating directly in Gaza. I have visited Islamic Relief in Gaza in the past. Others that have local partnerships on the ground are delivering things like food when that is available—clearly their warehouses are fast depleting now, as we have said—water and sanitation, urgent medication and cash, where there are things available on the market. We are often able to give out cash vouchers so that people can buy their own things. I am sure that Jayne Crow will add even more detail about the activities that Scottish and UK organisations are delivering.

Jayne Crow: Frances Guy mentioned Christian Aid. I gave an example earlier about supporting local producers and distributing the food that is available in Gaza. That is one of the lead activities by Christian Aid's local partners in Gaza. Mercy Corps was also mentioned. It is not a member of the DEC, but we co-ordinate closely with it. Its expertise is in cash delivery globally, but that is its specific focus in Gaza.

Stephen Kerr: Sorry, did you say “cash delivery”?

Jayne Crow: Yes. I am happy to explain that as a modality for aid. Multipurpose cash is a modality

whereby rather than giving items of food, you give either a voucher or cash and that is based on a minimum expenditure basket per family. It is also based on markets being active or suppliers or vendors being able to exchange goods for vouchers or cash. That basically gives the family more agency and dignity so that they can buy the things that they need rather than being reliant on a standard issue distribution, if that makes sense.

10:00

Stephen Kerr: One of the concerns that I have is about who controls the distribution of food. If the civilians involved are getting direct cash support, or vouchers, and they are trying to look after themselves by buying the basic essentials—food, water et cetera—my concern is about who is controlling the distribution. Can you comment on that? I think that you can understand where I am going with this. This is an area controlled by a proscribed terrorist organisation. How do we make sure that the donations that are coming from Scotland and the rest of the UK, which I hope we will talk more about, are not ending up in the hands of Hamas?

Jayne Crow: Sorry, Saleh. Did you want to come in?

Saleh Saeed: Go ahead, Jayne. I will come in after you.

Jayne Crow: Our members and their partners use financial service providers that have been vetted and checked; they follow their own procurement policies to do that. The vendors follow the same process, so there are processes and systems in place to do that vetting and checking to make sure that it is all viable.

Saleh Saeed: In addition to all the vetting and checking, we have robust serious incident reporting if there are any incidents of misappropriation of funds. However, let us be clear here: the situation on the ground is that more than 2 million people are on the brink of famine and children are dying of hunger. DEC member charities are, of course, neutral humanitarian organisations, and we have robust protocols that we have been operating in all conflict zones, whether that be Ukraine, Syria, Gaza or Lebanon. Our response is to be efficient and effective at distributing the aid but also aware of and diligent about the dangers to which you refer. Such incidents are few and far between. The real focus and priority for us is to try to lift the blockade and get food to people who are desperately in need of it at the moment.

Stephen Kerr: Can I ask you directly about Hamas? It is not in any way directing who gets the aid, is it?

Saleh Saeed: We have seen no evidence to suggest that any party such as that is directing the aid. We need access and we need to be able to improve the access in Gaza. We saw during the ceasefire that there were very few incidents of looting, which goes to demonstrate that where there is food coming in, there is less crime and less looting. When there is no food and there are the challenges of people being desperate, such incidents increase.

Stephen Kerr: Absolutely. We need an end to all the violence and for the work of reclaiming and reconstructing Gaza to get under way because, ultimately, that is the route out of all of this—I think that we all agree on that.

You mentioned the vetting process for the vendors. Who does that? How is that done? I imagine that much of it is just pop up. I cannot imagine that there are established supply chains such as there would be in a country that has not been utterly destroyed by war.

Saleh Saeed: We have well-established processes to screen, identify and triangulate who we are working with on the ground, and the member charities on the ground have years and decades of expertise. There are international lists that people can cross-reference and, generally speaking, DEC organisations are dealing with international organisations that are helping to import and deliver food. In this kind of crisis it is the UN organisations that deliver food and fill the warehouses, which are then passed on to the international NGOs and local organisations.

There are well-established ways of vetting and identifying both traders and people that organisations have to work with, but also the communities where the aid is distributed. No system is infallible and where there are incidents, where anything wrong is identified, there are ways to report that, to deal with it and to recover any lost aid or funding.

Stephen Kerr: Are there examples of that? Is that a system that is working in Gaza right now? Are you aware of a small number of incidents that have been reported where there has been a misuse of that cash?

Saleh Saeed: Not of the misuse of cash. The system is working and what we are saying is that often the reporting that aid is being diverted and so forth is much exaggerated. The reality is that aid organisations are able to deliver and are reaching the vulnerable communities. What we need is the assistance and the aid to be able to do that.

Stephen Kerr: And, fundamentally, an end to the violence.

Saleh Saeed: Absolutely.

Stephen Kerr: Can I ask you about the amounts of money? A little briefing that was shared with us ahead of today's session mentioned that the UK Government matched the first £10 million of donations from the British public that resulted from the middle east humanitarian appeal. Will you bring us up to date on the sums of money that have been raised from the public directly and on how much money you have received from the UK Government?

Saleh Saeed: Sure. The DEC middle east humanitarian appeal has raised more than £45 million, of which £10 million is from the UK Government in the form of UK Aid Match funding, which provides an incredibly efficient way of encouraging the public to give. We have raised £4 million in Scotland and received about £500,000 from the Scottish Government. Jayne Crow can elaborate on how those funds are being allocated and how we distribute them to DEC organisations.

Jayne Crow: We have already allocated £28 million to members. Under phase 1—I explained that that was the first six months—we spent £12 million, and 72 per cent of that was in Gaza. Our phase 2 response plan is now on-going. As I said, that started this month and will involve spending a further £13 million. The appeal is still open, so there will be another allocation in six months' time.

Stephen Kerr: Those numbers are fantastic and they represent the best side of all of us. Did you say that the public have raised £45 million and that the UK Government has provided another £10 million?

Saleh Saeed: No—the £45 million includes the £10 million from the UK Government.

Stephen Kerr: You are right—the £10 million is from people's taxes. You are correct to correct me. The fact that £4 million was raised in Scotland is a measure of the generosity of this country's people. You mentioned—I ask Frances Guy directly about this—that the Scottish Government first allocated £250,000 to support the humanitarian situation in the middle east in October 2024, and £200,000 of that went to DEC. I am not clear about where the other £50,000 went.

Frances Guy: That is fair to ask. As I explained, the humanitarian emergency fund involves a panel of eight agencies, and six of them are members of the Disasters Emergency Committee. This depends on the emergencies that happen in a year, but the fund is structured so that half of it is used to respond to DEC appeals, and the two panel members that are not members of the DEC also get a proportion. Of the allocation of £250,000, Mercy Corps and SCIAF got £25,000 each, as the two members of the panel that are not part of the DEC.

Stephen Kerr: How did they use that?

Frances Guy: They used most of that allocation in Lebanon and Syria rather than in Gaza but, for other appeals, the funding is usually used in the same place.

Stephen Kerr: How do you track how such money has been spent? The DEC has well-established methods for auditing the money that is raised and spent. How does that work? I know that £50,000 is a small amount of money in relative terms.

Frances Guy: You are right to ask about the systems. The DEC provides some secretariat function for the humanitarian emergency fund, which is partly why Huw Owen is here. We have proper reporting mechanisms. Proper reports are sent to the Scottish Government's international development team and there is lots of back and forth. You will find all the details in the annual report. The latest report is due out shortly, so you will see all of last year's details soon.

Stephen Kerr: Another £240,000 was allocated last month.

Frances Guy: There was £300,000 allocated, of which £240,000 went to the DEC and £60,000 went to Mercy Corps and SCIAF.

Stephen Kerr: We did not have all that information in our briefing, and it is helpful to know. The Scottish Government's total contribution to the DEC has been £200,000 plus £240,000.

Frances Guy: That is correct.

Stephen Kerr: Another £110,000 has been allocated to the other charities.

Frances Guy: Your arithmetic is quicker than mine—thank you.

Stephen Kerr: It is useful to know the scale of the commitment. Am I right to say that the total budget allocation for the fund is more than £10 million?

Frances Guy: For the humanitarian emergency fund, the allocation is £1 million a year. My predecessor, who came to the committee more than three years ago, pointed out even then that—

Stephen Kerr: It is £1 million—I am sorry.

Frances Guy: In the context, the figure is quite small.

Stephen Kerr: I got my decimal point in the wrong place. If the figure is £1 million, there is still money in the fund for this budget year, because the budget year has just started.

Frances Guy: We have only just started.

Stephen Kerr: Exactly. What will happen? There is the situation in Gaza and there are other

humanitarian disaster black spots around the world, including ones where Scottish charities are involved, such as in South Sudan.

Frances Guy: Absolutely. A lot of last year's funding went to Sudan and neighbouring countries. We have just put in an activation for funding to go to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where there is an on-going disaster that is not getting enough attention.

Stephen Kerr: I suggest to the convener that it might be useful for you to come back at some point. You mentioned Congo, and there are situations in Nigeria and South Sudan. The situation in South Sudan has been with us for ever, and it is not getting better at all. At the minute, there is no projection of how the £1 million—I was overly generous with my original estimate—will be allocated in this financial year.

Frances Guy: We have the £250,000 that has gone to the middle east and £250,000 to Congo, if the Scottish Government agrees to that. Later in the year, we will agree on the remaining £500,000.

Huw Owen: I will come in briefly to add a bit more detail about the structure and the operation of the humanitarian emergency fund. It is designed to support the Disasters Emergency Committee when it launches an appeal and, notionally, half the fund—that is £500,000 annually—is allocated to crises that the panel of aid organisations recommends that the Scottish Government should support. On a number of occasions—including times last year, as Frances Guy said—a lot of that money was for what we describe as hidden crises. There is not as much media coverage, but you all know that millions and millions of people are affected in Sudan and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

The fund is designed to meet both needs. It is worth while saying that, although the Myanmar earthquake has almost disappeared from view, it also triggered a Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. The Gaza funds that we are talking about were provided from last year's funding envelope, and £250,000 from this year's funding has been allocated to the Myanmar earthquake. Notionally, there is £750,000 from the Scottish Government for the rest of this financial year to support all the crises in the world.

Stephen Kerr: I have a quick question on the relationship with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I presume that the Scottish humanitarian emergency fund, the Scottish Government and the FCDO are working to the same template on what the priority is and how to support people on the ground best in such situations.

Huw Owen: My colleagues Jayne Crow and Saleh Saeed can speak about the FCDO

approach. In Scotland, the panel of eight organisations advises the Scottish Government, through what we call an activation. The panel meets regularly and triangulates which humanitarian crisis the small amount of funding would be most valuable to.

Saleh Saeed might be able to pick up the question about the FCDO, whose priorities probably differ from those of the panel of eight organisations here in Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: There is no FCDO involvement in the Scottish fund.

Huw Owen: No—there is not.

10:15

Stephen Kerr: The FCDO is obviously involved with the DEC. Would you like to comment on that? By the way, this is my last question.

Saleh Saeed: We are really grateful for the partnership that we have with the FCDO, the UK Government and the Scottish Government. All have been generous contributors to the appeal and have helped by sharing intelligence when necessary. Clearly, the co-ordination of aid deliveries happens in the region and on the ground with UN organisations and other international organisations. The DEC works with the FCDO and the Scottish Government, but that is more to do with receiving funds and reporting on how they have been spent. We are given a free hand to co-ordinate activities on the ground, which ensures that we are able to do the real co-ordination where the gaps are and where the aid is most desperately needed. Does Jayne Crow want to add anything?

Jayne Crow: As I mentioned earlier, our members meet core humanitarian standards, so the FCDO is able to do match funding, as it knows that DEC members, with all their years of experience, are reliable partners that will deliver aid quickly. That is why we have such a relationship and partnership and why we can release funds so quickly with the FCDO.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the witnesses for their frank and full updates so far. Many of our questions have already been answered. What I am hearing from you and from others is that the horrific and harrowing situation is now at a tipping point. The UN humanitarian office has said that partners are warning that, without immediate fuel deliveries, a full shutdown of water and sanitation will possibly happen by the end of this week. That takes us to a different level.

You have talked about the number of trucks that have been going in. I believe that about 80 trucks went in on Monday and Tuesday of this week. You

have touched on the potential for malnutrition as a result of that reduced supply of food and the difficulties with medication, and there is now the potential issue with the supply of water and sanitation. Where do you see the situation going, given the stark warning that we have had from the UN about what could happen this week?

Maybe Saleh Saeed wants to answer that.

Saleh Saeed: Before the conflict, there were, I believe, well over 600 or 700 trucks of aid getting into Gaza, which seemed to be the bare minimum to maintain survival in some sense. However, we must remember that many more commercial trucks were getting into Gaza with other supplies. Of course, the blockade means that those have stopped, too. On top of that, people, communities, aid organisations and others were able to support farms and use other locally sourced materials. There was also the delivery of non-truck-related aid, such as psychosocial support for children, women, vulnerable communities and so forth.

The current situation, in which water is impacted and fuel is being cut short means that we are facing the grim reality of total aid being stopped. That means that, within days or weeks, we will see a total disaster unfold in Gaza. I can only hope that people are now waking up and realising that, and that international pressure is starting to work to lift the blockade and get the supplies to the people in Gaza that they so desperately need. We cannot wait to see this disaster unfold any further, because that will be a truly shocking situation that we will all live to regret.

Alexander Stewart: We have discussed the difficulties with security that aid agencies and staff on the ground have to face. How do we make progress on that? You have said that international organisations require to have pressure put on them but, for the people on the ground who are living with and dealing with the situation daily, what hope and what support can you give them in relation to how they can manage the situation?

Saleh Saeed: That is increasingly difficult. I have been speaking as regularly as I can to colleagues in Gaza. I mentioned the call that I had last week, when it was clear to me how the demeanour has changed in the past few weeks, in that people are starting to feel really helpless and hopeless. I do not think that we can say much more in trying to lift the morale of aid workers and others in Gaza because, obviously, there is just the grim reality of what is happening.

The only thing that we can do is bring pressure to bear to try to ensure that we can bring in the much-needed aid supplies. I know how passionate and committed aid workers are on the ground, and they will carry on working, at risk to their own lives to deliver what they can. The onus is now on us

and the international community to do whatever we can as quickly as we can, given the dire situation.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): In the context of all the life-saving and dangerous work that the agencies do, have you had time to assess any impact that there might be of the UK Government's decision to slash international aid in future? Will that affect you, or is that still unknown?

Frances Guy: That is part of a broader context. The thing that has really impacted the ability to deliver humanitarian aid is the United States Agency for International Development cuts, because USAID accounted for 60 per cent of the world's humanitarian funding. There is perhaps a lesson in there about not being so reliant on one donor, but that was the reality. If we look at the global situation—we have talked a little about sub-Saharan Africa—we find that the needs far outweigh the aid that was there, even with the USAID funding. That has been completely slashed, and nobody is rushing to fill the gap. The UK is cutting aid, but France, Sweden and Germany are also doing so—unfortunately, it is a wider phenomenon.

We are seeing some of the UK funding cuts. You might know that Jenny Chapman spoke to the International Development Committee at Westminster a couple of weeks ago. The Government is trying to maintain some of the commitments for 2025-26 and has made some commitments for key humanitarian funding in Gaza and Sudan—and somewhere else that Saleh Saeed might remember better than I do. That begs a question about all the other humanitarian needs around the world.

I am afraid that it is a very difficult space. Many of our members do not get UK funding and many do not get Scottish Government funding either but rely on donations from the public. Ironically, in a way, some of them are better placed than those that have relied on institutional funding. I point that out just for context.

Saleh Saeed: The issue is not only the significant loss of funds from USAID and, as Frances Guy said, from the UK and from across Europe and elsewhere; it is also about the way in which the USAID funds were stopped, which left many aid organisations, programmes and projects on the brink, with many stopping overnight. We are very concerned about the impact on many vulnerable communities across the globe, and particularly in humanitarian settings, and about the impact on the work of DEC charities, which we rely on because of their scale and footprint or reach. When there is an emergency, we rely on that vast network of aid organisations to help us to get

funds out and spend them on humanitarian supplies as quickly as possible.

The full impact of the loss of funds is yet to be truly seen. I mentioned that I was in Lebanon last week. I spoke to a local women's organisation in a southern suburb of Beirut that had lost 70 per cent of its funding through USAID cuts. That was one of the projects that we were supporting in relation to gender-based violence, with cash programming for female-headed households. Even with the loss of funds that that organisation is experiencing—it is struggling—the people involved are incredibly grateful that the UK public, including the Scottish public, are giving generously to the DEC appeal to help not only in Lebanon but the people of Gaza. They were clear that they understood that the priorities remain in Gaza, given the desperate needs there, despite their hardships in Lebanon.

I hope that that gives you a flavour and an example of how the USAID cuts and aid cuts from other Governments are impacting vulnerable communities across the globe.

Keith Brown: My next question goes back to Mr Bibby's question about readiness if the obstacles that are currently in the way of activity are lifted. I imagine that, to people outside, the incredible concentration on ensuring that every single vendor is vetted to the nth degree seems a wee bit absurd, compared to the gravity of the crisis, with 2 million people on the brink of starvation. I think that that would be very puzzling to many people.

We are talking about 2 million people, which is almost half the population of Scotland, so six or seven truck loads will not do a great deal in the meantime. I think that Mr Bibby was asking whether, if the restrictions are lifted, the trucks and warehouses outwith the area are fully ready to go. Is everything ready to go if eventually we get rid of the structural obstructions that are preventing aid from getting through? Is everything ready to go at the push of a button, or are you seeing depleted supply lines because of diminishing resources?

Saleh Saeed: There are trucks in Egypt and elsewhere in the region waiting to get in and full of goods ready to be distributed. Aid charities in Gaza are on standby and have the capacity to distribute immediately. We are on standby and ready. We are desperate, and I use that word knowing the situation on the ground. We can and will deliver as soon as we are allowed to. The stocks in the warehouses are running out fast and the trucks, if allowed to get in, will replenish those stocks, because there could be yet another blockade further down the line.

Of course, funds are still required, because we have to plan not only for tomorrow but for the weeks, months and years ahead, as it will take years for Gaza to recover. However, the

immediate priority is, of course, to get people food, water and nutrition.

You will have heard Tom Fletcher, the UN humanitarian chief, only a few days ago, warn that more than 14,000 children are critically and severely malnourished and need desperate assistance now as we speak. Therefore, the priority must be lifting the blockade and enabling unfettered access for the humanitarian organisations in Gaza.

10:30

Keith Brown: I think that Frances Guy mentioned that the Arab League has proposals for reconstruction that are practical and realisable, unlike the proposal to create a Gaza strip like the Las Vegas strip and so on. If that is the case, will the people behind that organisation—I do not know enough about it—not also potentially have resources to provide aid to meet the immediate needs in the meantime? Will that help to replace the moneys that are being withdrawn through USAID and so on, or is that already factored in? Are they in a position to provide immediate aid, or are they already doing that?

Frances Guy: If you are referring to Gulf countries and other countries of the region, they are already delivering substantial amounts of aid although, yes, they could probably do more. They are certainly ready to participate in reconstruction, but only if there is some sense of a move to a just peace, which is reasonable. They have already put in lots of money, as has the UK Government, in rebuilding in Gaza over the past 20 years, which we have now just seen destroyed again. It is a difficult place for everyone.

Keith Brown: Thank you.

The Convener: Are there any further questions?

Stephen Kerr: I got my numbers mixed up earlier. I quoted a figure of £10 million. I did not express it properly, but I was referring to the international development fund money in the Scottish budget, which this year went up from £11.4 million to £12.8 million. My question is for Frances Guy: is the £1 million in the humanitarian emergency fund static, or has that gone up in line with the growth in the funding for the overall development fund envelope?

Frances Guy: It has been static for a number of years—it has not increased at all. The Parliament's commitment at the beginning of the parliamentary session, was to £15 million for international development, which we have not reached.

Stephen Kerr: Was the Scottish Government commitment for it to reach £15 million in the final year of this parliamentary session?

Frances Guy: Yes, but it was not clear at the beginning of the session of Parliament that the Government would wait until the end—if I can put it that way.

Stephen Kerr: This is the end of the session—we are in the end.

Frances Guy: I appreciate that.

Stephen Kerr: It is £12.8 million minus the £1 million, which makes £11.8 million.

Frances Guy: Yes.

Stephen Kerr: Is any of that money available to be moved? Maybe I am asking you difficult questions because you are not directly involved in the—

Frances Guy: No, you are right. You mentioned that there was some additional money. That is where that additional money comes from—it is unspent or underspent international development funding.

Stephen Kerr: So, might there be funds that could be utilised if that was felt to be appropriate?

Frances Guy: It could be possible. It is difficult to manage things if you get the funds at the last moment. Obviously, humanitarian response is about doing things quickly, but as we have also heard, planning is very important. Understanding in February that there might be a bit of extra money to spend by the end of March makes it very difficult.

Stephen Kerr: One of the key funders of activity in Gaza is Qatar, which has just given an aircraft worth around \$500 million as a gift to the United States Air Force, apparently. There is money in that region to be spent. How it is spent is a matter for the judgment of the people.

Frances Guy: As I said, Qatar has spent a lot of money on reconstructing Gaza and south Lebanon over the last 15 years.

Stephen Kerr: There is a whole discussion we could have around that.

Frances Guy: We could.

Stephen Kerr: I am not sure that the convener would want that, but I appreciate the further information that you have given. It is important—I think that you alluded to this, and that you agree—that we account for the money that we spend because it is taxpayers' money and therefore it must go to the right purposes.

Frances Guy: Absolutely.

Stephen Kerr: People are very generous in Scotland and they want to see the money used to help the innocent people who are the victims of the violence, which we would all like to see come to an end.

Frances Guy: On that point, the cross-party group on Palestine is doing a report on international development funding that will come out very shortly. One of its recommendations—I do not think that I am divulging anything—is that Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee might spend a little bit of time, once every three years or something, considering such funding, because of that important point about accountability.

Stephen Kerr: Good. I would certainly welcome that.

Patrick Harvie: Before we end, I just wanted to broaden out the discussion a little. The subject of the evidence session is Gaza, because the scale of the violence and the collective punishment of the people of Gaza is so severe. Your written briefing, however, also mentions the West Bank, which is obviously connected. As your briefing indicates, there have already been situations where people have had to flee refugee camps in the West Bank, as a result of violence either by illegal settlers or by the occupying power itself, and the political intent that is clear from statements that have been made at the highest level of the Israeli Government is very similar. Those who have expressed explicitly genocidal intent in relation to Palestine make similar comments about all of Palestine, not just Gaza.

Is there an anticipation that the situation and the humanitarian need in the West Bank could reach something comparable to what we have seen in Gaza, if the statements that we have seen from senior members of the Israeli Government become active policy?

Frances Guy: I think that some residents of Tulkarm and Jenin might argue that some of that is already happening: 20,000 to 40,000 people have already been displaced from their houses and those houses have been destroyed. It is clearly not quite the same scale as what we see in Gaza but it is an on-going situation. That is why we roll back to the point that this is all about politics. That commitment to a ceasefire and to finding a track towards a just peace is the only way of stopping further humanitarian disaster in Gaza and in the West Bank.

Patrick Harvie: Saleh Saeed talked about the need for humanitarian agencies to balance the immediate action that is required with the need for long-term planning over months and even years. How possible is it to do that, when the statements that have come from the Israeli Government at the

highest level seem to suggest that its intention is to make the situation far worse?

Saleh Saeed: Is that a question for me?

Patrick Harvie: If you care to respond, I would welcome that.

Saleh Saeed: Look, the reality is that the immediate priorities have to be about saving and protecting lives in Gaza, first and foremost. I take the point about the West Bank, and DEC organisations and their local partners are working in the West Bank under perhaps slightly less stress and pressure than they are in Gaza.

While the world's media is focusing on Gaza, and quite rightly so, we have an opportunity to continue not only to raise awareness about the horrors and atrocities that are going on, but also to raise much needed funds, because, sad to say, we know that once the cameras are switched off, the funding also tends to dry up. That is why we need to plan effectively how we help people in the long term. For us, that is not about reconstruction, although of course, that is an important part of what needs to happen to Gaza in the future, but is about helping people to continue to survive when the cameras are switched off. I hope that gives you an answer to your question.

Patrick Harvie: Thank you.

The Convener: I do not see any colleagues who want to ask further questions, so I will finish up.

It is heartening to hear about all the work that is being done. I want to ask about the ability to pivot around the plans. You said that you have moved into phase 2 of the planning process, but the situation on the ground has severely worsened following the blockade. Going forward, I would like to understand what the needs will be. Obviously, on the ground, there will be much sicker children and people, given famine, the issue with the water contamination and other things. Are you seeing an appropriate level of medical intervention? Is that something that will need to be ramped up if the situation worsens, as is happening at the moment?

Jayne Crow: Medical need and food need are the two top priorities at this point. The integrated food security phase classification data came out in May, which showed that around one in five people are already experiencing famine, and in addition, the lack of sanitation has led to the spread of disease. Therefore, medical supplies are a top priority. As Saleh Saeed mentioned earlier, we have supplies that are on the border—waiting. We know that a lot of those are medical supplies, as well as food. I give you the example of the hospital that the British Red Cross is running in Rafah. That hospital currently has supplies but they will

run out soon. This is where we are at the moment. Those are the top needs.

As we speak, there is a co-ordination call going on with our members and local partners around that prioritisation and how they can scenario plan, pivot and scale up as soon as the blockade is lifted.

The Convener: Thank you. That is very helpful. Does anyone else want to come in on that point?

Saleh Saeed: Just to add to what Jayne Crow has said, it is clear that there is an urgency to get as many medical supplies and as much medical equipment as possible, but also to bring in even more doctors, nurses, and others who are willing and able to volunteer to help.

However, it is also the other way around, by which I mean evacuating critical patients who cannot receive the care that they need in Gaza. I was glad to see that, at the end of April, through funds from donors in the UK, two children were able to receive the treatment that they need in the UK. However, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of children in Gaza who desperately need that medical equipment and medical expertise. Often, that has to be provided not in Gaza but in the region or elsewhere, and we are encouraging and urging all those who can to help facilitate those urgent evacuations.

The Convener: That is very helpful. Thank you all for your attendance at committee this morning and for all the work that you are facilitating and helping with on the ground on our behalf—not just in respect of the public money that has been spent but also from the humanitarian point of view. It is truly humbling for us to have had you at the committee and to have heard what you are trying to achieve out there.

10:43

Meeting continued in private until 11:08.

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