

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

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*Dé Máirt, 4 Bealtaine 2021*

*Tuesday, 4 May 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 10 a.m.

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The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála /Deputies	Seanadóirí /Senators
Cathal Berry,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
John Brady,	Joe O'Reilly.
Sorca Clarke,	
Gary Gannon,	
Brian Leddin.	

Teachta/Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir /in the Chair.

## **Foreign Affairs Council and UN Security Council: Engagement with Minister for Foreign Affairs**

**Chairman:** I have received an apology from Deputy David Stanton. I welcome the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Simon Coveney. Today, we have the opportunity of meeting with the Minister to discuss matters that have arisen at the Foreign Affairs Council and the United Nations Security Council. You are very welcome this morning. We understand there is a Cabinet meeting in the early afternoon at a time I am not certain of but I am sure you will let us know. I welcome you and your officials. I also acknowledge receipt of a comprehensive set of briefing notes which was supplied.

Members and the Minister will be aware the format of the meeting is that we will hear the opening statement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs before going into a question and answer session with members of the committee. I remind both members and the Minister of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that we should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her in any way identifiable. I remind members that they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located within the Leinster House complex. For anyone watching this meeting online, some Oireachtas members and witnesses are accessing this meeting remotely due to these unprecedented circumstances and because of the fact that people are attending this meeting remotely, I ask everybody to bear with us should any issues of a technical nature arise. I am pleased to see almost everybody present. I call on the Minister, Deputy Coveney, to make his opening statement. I thank you again for joining us.

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I hope members can hear me okay.

**Chairman:** I think so, yes.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** There is a slight repeat in my headphones but as long as members can hear me, that is the main thing. I understand we have to finish by 11.30 a.m. I will keep my opening statement relatively short so we can get on to questions and answers as soon as possible but I do need to give an overview of the breadth of the areas that we have been involved in.

**Chairman:** Okay. That is fine. Thank you very much.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I thank the committee for the invitation to meet. I look forward to us meeting in person in a room in the not-too-distance future so we can have a more detailed interaction on some of these issues. Given the large number of items discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council since we last met in October, and at the Security Council since January, I will only address selected issues in my opening remarks but, of course, I will be happy to answer any questions you have.

We had a busy first four months on the UN Security Council since joining in January. From rapidly evolving crises in Myanmar and Ethiopia to the challenging situations in Syria, Yemen, Libya and the Middle East peace process, we have been actively engaged bringing our views and perspectives, and seeking to make a difference. The same goes for thematic issues such as climate and security, women, peace and security, and hunger and conflict, all of which Ireland is centrally involved in. That is what we are elected to do, of course.

As part of our work as Council co-penholder on the humanitarian situation in Syria, I visited

4 May 2021

Turkey in January. I saw first-hand the vital role which the UN authorised cross-border humanitarian assistance operation plays in meeting the needs of Syrians, particularly in the province of Idlib. I also discussed wider regional issues with the Turkish Foreign Minister. We have a significant task ahead of us, as in Ireland, in the next few months as we prepare for the renewal of the mandate for that border-crossing operation.

Some 2.7 million vulnerable Syrians in the Idlib area are reliant, almost solely, on the humanitarian aid that comes through what is called the Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey into Syria. It is the only international crossing into Syria left open at the moment. This matter is a top priority for me and my Department. Put simply, if we cannot keep that crossing open, millions of people, most of them children, will be deeply impacted on a humanitarian level. They will not be able to get consistent and structured aid, predominantly through UN aid agencies which will not be able to continue should that mandate not be maintained. If committee members have questions on this matter, I will happily talk to them about why it is difficult to keep that crossing open.

In the context of our role as UN Security Council facilitator on the Iran nuclear agreement, last month I visited Iran to discuss the joint comprehensive plan of action, JCPOA, with President Hassan Rouhani and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif. I encouraged Mr. Zarif to come to the table with the JCPOA participants and start serious discussions on how to get the agreement back on track, including a suggestion that he consider proximity talks. Three weeks after my visit, Iran accepted an invitation, I am glad to say, from the EU for proximity talks in Vienna. There is some way to go but I am encouraged by the progress to date. I have also been clear, however, that Iran's recent proliferation activities are deeply concerning. I have called on Iran to comply with its obligations under the JCPOA.

The Middle East peace process continues to be a priority for Ireland. We have been actively engaged at both the Foreign Affairs Council, FAC, and the UN Security Council. At the quarterly open debate on the Middle East peace process, MEPP, at the UN Security Council in January, I underlined my clear view that a two-state solution is the only basis for a just and lasting peace. In April, Ireland delivered a statement on the MEPP on behalf of five current and recent EU members on the UN Security Council. We encouraged the completion of free, fair and inclusive elections across the occupied Palestinian territory, including east Jerusalem, and called on Israel to facilitate elections and international monitoring. I am very disappointed by the decision taken on 29 April to postpone the elections. I encourage the Palestinian National Authority to set a new date immediately and I urge Israel to co-operate in facilitating voting, including in east Jerusalem. In fact, I spoke last Thursday to the Palestinian Foreign Affairs Minister, Riyad al-Maliki, which, unfortunately, was the day before this decision was made.

Since I last met with the committee, the process to end the brutal civil war in Libya has moved remarkably quickly. I welcome the adoption in April of the UN Security Council resolution supporting a new Libyan ceasefire monitoring mechanism. The EU has effectively used the tool of sanctions to support this progress. We have rewarded constructive engagement by easing sanctions. We have expedited sanctions against those who defied the UN arms embargo and are accused of mass killings. The EU's Operation Irbini continues to play an important role in upholding the UN arms embargo and, as the committee knows, three Defence Forces personnel are based in the operation's headquarters. The members of this committee share a sense of pride in our Defence Forces and their unbroken record of contribution to UN peacekeeping. We are using the day-to-day experiences of our Defence Forces personnel to seek to improve peacekeeping mandates as they come forward for renewal at the UN Security Council.

As regards Africa and Asia, Ireland has strong ties in Africa and we have been working closely with our African partners on the UN Security Council. Since we last met, conflict has broken out in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. More than five months on, the humanitarian situation there remains dire. There are credible and harrowing reports of widespread sexual violence against women and girls. Such violence is effectively being used as a tool of war. These atrocities must end and the perpetrators must be held to account. Ireland has been to the fore in efforts to address the situation in both the Foreign Affairs Council and the UN Security Council. In April we led the negotiation of the UN Security Council press statement, which was its first statement on the crisis. We will continue to use our Security Council membership to highlight the need to protect civilians and ensure unfettered humanitarian access into the Tigray region. We are also using our influence to try to make sure Eritrean troops leave that region. They should not be there.

The instigation of a military coup in Myanmar, invoking serious violence and ongoing repression, is another major development of concern since our last meeting. This crisis has been discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council, FAC, on three occasions. EU sanctions have been adopted against individuals and economic entities, and I welcome that the UN Security Council has maintained a united stance, although many would like us to go further.

On human rights and sanctions, promoting human rights is a priority for Ireland in terms of our UN Security Council term and ongoing contribution to EU policy formation at the FAC. In December, the FAC established the EU global human rights sanction regime. This regime seeks to target serious human rights violations and abuses wherever they may occur. To date, we have agreed to impose sanctions on 15 individuals and entities from six countries.

Sanctions have been just one element of the EU response to a series of recent destabilising developments in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods. The EU's relationship with Russia has been discussed on multiple occasions in recent months at the FAC. We have seen little indication of a willingness on the part of Russia to improve relations with the EU, unfortunately. Our extensive FAC discussion in February focused on the High Representative's visit to Moscow, and we imposed sanctions on those responsible for the persecution of Alexei Navalny.

We have agreed that progress in addressing the situation in Ukraine remains a key condition for any substantial change in EU-Russia relations. The FAC met with the Ukrainian foreign minister in April and I underlined our full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The FAC considered EU-Turkey relations in March. During this discussion and during my visit to Turkey, I made clear that Ireland is in favour of developing a more stable EU-Turkey relationship and that this is dependent on Turkish behaviour. Turkey has taken a number of steps which run counter to its obligations, including withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. For real progress to occur, Turkey will need to begin to address its human rights situation for real.

Since I last met with this committee, President Joe Biden has been inaugurated. The US elections and transatlantic relations have been discussed at the FAC four times since we met and we held a videoconference meeting with Secretary of State Blinken. The EU is committed to strengthening the relationship, working together on foreign policy priorities, strengthening multilateralism and, of course, tackling climate change.

I thank the committee members for their continued engagement on a broad range of foreign policy issues. I will conclude by saying that Ireland will hold the presidency of the Security

4 May 2021

Council in September. This will be an important opportunity to highlight particular issues and themes, in keeping with the priorities for our term. Of course, planning is well under way for that. I look forward to the members' comments and questions and, as I said at the start, I particularly look forward to being able to meet in person and perhaps more regularly than we have been able to over recent months, for obvious reasons.

**Chairman:** Our meeting must conclude in advance of the 11.30 a.m. Cabinet meeting, so I will go straight into the questions and answers session. I thank the Minister for his presentation which broadly coincides with the work programme of our committee in recent times, having regard to his reference to Myanmar, the situation in Tigray, the eastern neighbourhood, Syria and Turkey.

Normally, I would go to Deputy Brady first but I beg his indulgence on the basis that Deputy Leddin has another meeting pretty soon that he wishes to attend. If members are not unhappy, I will call Deputy Leddin for his question and then proceed to Deputy Brady.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** I thank the Chair and the members for bringing me in early and I thank the Minister for his presentation. I will not take up much of the committee's time and will give the Minister time to answer. I wish to raise the issue of Syrian detainees. The committee met Ms Ghufran Khoufani last Thursday. She told a very harrowing personal story of her three brothers who were detained, tortured and ultimately murdered in Syria. It is believed that tens of thousands of Syrians remain detained and their fate is unknown. This committee undertook to bring the matter to the Minister's attention as a high priority and to investigate the possibility of raising it as at the UN Security Council.

I thank the Minister for his update on Tigray and commend him, his Department and the staff in New York on the recent resolution passed by the UN Security Council, which is very significant. It is a credit to this country that we have raised the ongoing issue of Tigray at Security Council level and got that resolution passed. We have had a very special relationship with Ethiopia down through the decades and perhaps have more influence than most with the Ethiopian Government so it is laudable that we have taken that issue to the highest stage. Could the Minister comment on what he thinks the next steps will be with regard to that situation?

My colleague, Deputy Costello, submitted a question to the Minister, which the Minister acknowledged, on Western Sahara and ongoing human rights abuses as identified by Amnesty International and others. Could the Minister comment on the situation in Western Sahara, Ireland's position and our efforts to improve the situation there?

**Deputy John Brady:** I thank the Minister for his opening statement. There are a lot of areas on which we could and should touch so I will try to be brief because I want to cover a number of areas. In his opening statement, the Minister referred to promoting human rights and how human rights are a priority for us. In November 2020, the European Council adopted the EU's action plan on human rights and democracy. It says that when there are human rights violations and abuses worldwide, we will take action regardless of where they are. Has the Minister read the Human Rights Watch report on Palestine that was published last week because it makes for damning reading? It finds that Israel has committed the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution as defined under the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. I seek the Minister's comments on that report. Another independent human rights organisation has stated that Israeli authorities have demolished 58 Palestinian structures and have approved plans for the construction of nearly 5,000 settler units in occupied East Je-

Jerusalem since the beginning of the year. A number of human rights organisations are speaking about the actions of Israel on the ground in Palestine. We also know that even overnight, Israeli forces raided the homes of Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem, used tear gas and arrested many young people. These families are being forced out of their homes on Thursday to make way for Jewish settlers to take over. A significant number of human rights abuses have taken place, which, in my view, amount to ethnic cleansing. Yet the Government's response seems to reward Israel and we see that by the opening of IDA offices in Israel. As opposed to taking definitive action against Israel, we seem to be rewarding it. There seems to be a level of double standards. Does the Minister view that as ethnic cleansing? Will he comment on the gross human rights abuses that are happening on the ground? Ireland will take over the presidency of the Security Council in September. Will we use the opportunity of our presidency to invite a Palestinian speaker to address Security Council members on the issue of Israeli treatment of Palestinian children and its failures to comply with its obligations as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?

The Minister covered the issue of Tigray. There are major concerns regarding Tigray, the involvement of Eritrea and the wholesale slaughter of innocent people. We see the mass destruction of aid and the burning of villages. I note the statement made by the Security Council. Ireland can play a leading role given our strong links with Ethiopia. While the Minister mentioned the issue, we need to do more. We need to use our influence to address the appalling situation in Tigray.

We have received a number of briefing notes from the Minister and his Department on the situation in Yemen and the massive humanitarian crisis unfolding before our eyes in a conflict that has been largely forgotten by the international community. What definitive actions are being taken by the international community? On the one hand, we see statements issued condemning what is happening there and, on the other, we see many European and foreign countries providing arms to the Saudi Arabian regime. Would the Minister and the Department support an international arms embargo to help bring that dire situation in Yemen to an end?

Syria was mentioned. The situation there continues to be extremely concerning. The Minister touched on the issue of Idlib, which is worrying, but I wish to raise the broader picture of more than 13.4 million people in all areas of Syria relying on humanitarian aid. What is the Government's view on the unilateral sanctions on Syria, which are adding to the humanitarian crisis? What action is being taken against Turkey, which is using water as a weapon of war in restricting the water flow of the River Euphrates into Syria? That is impeding the generation of electricity and having serious consequences for irrigation and food production. It has been reported there have been up to a dozen attacks on fuel being imported into Syria predominantly from Iran and it is suggested those attacks are coming from Israel. I suggest there is piracy on the high seas and, as a result, ordinary people in Syria are having to live with the dire consequences of all of that.

I wish to raise two more issues. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the blockade on Cuba. Since 1992, the UN General Assembly has voted overwhelmingly for the US to end its policy of economic aggression against Cuba. On 23 June, the UN General Assembly will again consider a resolution to put an end to the blockade on Cuba. It is time to end that illegal blockade. What are the Government's views on this? Does the Minister think that there is an opportunity, with a new US President, even though the new Administration stated that Cuba is not a priority for it, to resolve this? Can the UN and the Government use their influence to pressurise the US Administration to end the blockade of Cuba?

The final issue I want to raise is that of trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights, TRIPS. The WTO met on Friday. There is a significant issue that is, unfortunately, playing out before our eyes in India. It is only the tip of the iceberg. In Thailand and Myanmar, cases of Covid are on the increase. The Government did lend some welcome assistance, although, in my view, it was tokenistic, to India, helping out with oxygen supplies. The real issue involved is the TRIPS waiver which needs to be introduced and implemented. Until everyone is vaccinated, we will not be out of the Covid crisis. The committee has done much work on intellectual property rights and the pharmaceutical companies that have developed and produced vaccines using substantial amounts of taxpayers' money. Now is the time to sign up to a TRIPS waiver. It is also time for the Government to sign up to the Covid-19 technology access pool, CTAP. What are the views of the Government on this? The European Commission said now is not the time for a TRIPS waiver or to address the issue of intellectual property rights. When is the time? There are 20 million cases of Covid in India and we see bodies being burned on the streets there. If now is not the time for a TRIPS waiver, when is? We can send over more oxygen supplies, which is welcome, but, in real terms, it is tokenistic. The major issue is to ensure people have access to a Covid vaccine.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I welcome the Minister. There is a great appreciation on the part of all parties and none of the high profile he maintains internationally and how proactive he is on all of these issues.

In Syria, 90% of the population is in poverty, with 13.4 million people in need of humanitarian aid. After ten years of civil war, it is a horror story. Will the Minister elaborate on getting access to aid for Syria at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing? There is a huge crisis around Idlib and access to aid there is critical. How confident is the Minister that we can maintain access in that area?

The issue of sanctions is a perennial one. Over the years, right back to South Africa and apartheid, we have always discussed who they hurt. Given that Assad has clearly won the war at this stage and in view of the fact that sanctions are hurting ordinary people, does the Minister think that now is the time to look at their removal and how might that impact the situation?

There are disturbing reports from Denmark and Lebanon about returning refugees to Syria on the basis that there is calm there. From the Minister's presentation, however, it is clear that it is widely accepted that there is not the level of calm there that one could send people back in any involuntary way. I would like the Minister to comment on the return of the refugees. I am surprised by Denmark but I would like a comment on that. The fact that we are all in the EU and friends together does not mean we should fail to criticise them for what is wrong. Similarly, I believe there is a major effort to push back refugees from Lebanon.

Regarding Palestine, I would like the Minister to comment on the settlements and the demolitions. My understanding is that the settlements and the demolitions are threatening the two-state solution, which we all aspire to and which the Minister rightly stated as an ambition in his presentation. Could he comment on the extent that is the case? Is he optimistic that through the use of diplomacy, our role on the UN council, etc., we can achieve anything in halting the illegal settlements, the demolition and, of course, the human rights abuses?

It is extraordinary that the elections are postponed. Is that because of East Jerusalem and is it the specific fault for the postponing of the elections with Israel in East Jerusalem? Is internal politics among the Palestinians a factor? The fact that there was a difficulty with East Jerusalem people voting is a horror.

On vaccinations, I understand Israel has virtually vaccinated its own population. It had been negligent with vaccinations to Palestine. Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access, COVAX, had been coming in there, but how is the vaccination situation?

The Minister made a point about the sexual violence in Tigray. It is a horror, almost, as he said, on an industrial scale. It is almost as if it is a policy, which is dreadful, or a military option. I would like him to comment on the Eritreans. While it is officially said that they have gone, it is clear that they have not. I understood that they were masking going in - using other uniforms and camouflaging their presence. Could the Minister comment on the Eritreans getting out of Tigray and being removed from there, how optimistic he is and whether we can do anything practical about that in the short term?

Moving to Ukraine, I would like the Minister to comment on the situation in Donbas. I understand the military build-up around Ukraine has been softened down and moved, but is he confident that the position is stabilising? Is there any risk that there is deliberately stirred-up disturbance in Donbas? What is his assessment?

I understand the breakdown of Navalny's apparatus or support base and the arrests but I would like the Minister's comment on both his personal situation and on the wider arrests of his people.

I had people on to me recently, including somebody known to many here. I presume, if he was on to me, he has been on to all of the members of the committee. It is a local agency dealing with Belarus. Belarus remains one of the great horror stories of contemporary times. I would like the Minister's comment on where we are at there.

Could President Biden's attitude to Saudi Arabia make a difference to Yemen? Is the UK still providing arms to Saudi Arabia? If so, and I am aware they are outside of our control to a degree, can anything be done about that? Generally, the supply of arms is a major factor in the trouble there and I would be interested in the Minister's beliefs around what difference President Biden might make there.

Lastly, I agree with the previous speaker, Deputy Brady, regarding the crisis in India. I would like the Minister to comment on what we are exactly doing, where he sees it going and what more we could do. It is a very interesting point Deputy Brady raised about intellectual property rights, which are often talked about now. There is an argument that if we make the vaccinations available and remove those rights that would be a disincentive. I would like the Minister to comment on that. Surely there is a compelling case to get vaccines to India, and to deal with the crisis there.

I thank the Chair for the opportunity and thank the Minister for being with us.

**Chairman:** I thank the Senator. I call the Minister. I am conscious of the wide range of issues raised. I ask the Minister to deal as expeditiously as possible with the points raised and then I want to give Deputies Clarke and Gannon an opportunity, in that order.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** A lot of issues were raised but I will try to deal with them as quickly as I can. If I miss something, any member who wants to come back can do so, or if they want to give me a call after this meeting, I will happily talk through any of the issues they have that have not been fully addressed.

Deputy Leddin raised the issue of Syrian detainees. I had a good conversation with Geir O.

4 May 2021

Pedersen, who is the UN special envoy for Syria on this and a whole range of other issues. UN Resolution 2254, which has essentially been agreed by all member states of the UN Security Council, is the template to move forward. It is about trying to put in place an acceptable political structure to have elections that would be free and fair and to look at the release of detainees, most of whom have been detained arbitrarily. The truth is we have been making no progress on that for a long time. We are potentially likely to see some new thinking and initiatives coming from the UN in trying to move some form of process forward. Any process needs to involve the release of detainees who have been imprisoned, in the vast majority of cases with no charge at all. They are simply seen as enemies of the Government and therefore they have been detained and in some cases tortured.

If there are individual cases the Deputy wants me to raise at UN level, he should send them onto me and we will try to find the right forum in which to raise those detentions and the fears people's families have on what has happened to many of their loved ones in detention. If there is to be a political process to move forward in Syria, it has to involve one of the things that the Assad regime can do, and the international community needs to assist on it doing, namely, the release of many thousands of people who have been arbitrarily detained with no judicial system or legal protections. That is what happens when there is a decade of war when no rules apply, which is what we have seen across Syria.

I will happily continue to update the committee on Syria because it will be an evolving issue, whether it is on access to humanitarian assistance, detainees, trying to move a political process forward, the safe return of refugees when they want to return and can safely do so, or how the EU engages in the reconstruction of Syria at some point in the future and what conditions are required for that to be facilitated. We are spending hundreds of millions of euro on humanitarian assistance to people in Syria but we are not spending the kind of money that needs to be spent on rebuilding infrastructure in that country in a post-war situation because of the unwillingness of the Assad regime to move ahead on the basis of the UN resolution. That is something we will need to follow closely and I would like Ireland to be involved in it, particularly on the humanitarian side and in the safe return of refugees, because we have some credibility in that space.

A number of other members mentioned the issue of the Bab al-Hawa crossing, which I visited. There are hundreds of trucks per day crossing into Syria from Turkey, full of food, tents, medicines, clothes, blankets and the basic stuff on which families living in large-scale refugee camps, most of them tented villages, towns or cities in their scale, rely daily and weekly. There is much tension around that crossing because Russia, Iran and the Assad regime see it as a crossing they do not trust with regard to supplies coming in to feed the resistance to the Assad regime in Idlib province, which is where most resistance still is. There is a political element to this debate. If we cannot find a way before the end of June to extend the resolution that allows for that crossing to be formally maintained under UN supervision and control, it will be closed and instead we will be relying on a far less transparent and less reliable series of crossings into Idlib from Turkey, with much tension and mass movement of people as a result.

Ireland is immersed in this along with Norway. We are co-penholders for humanitarian assistance going in to Syria. In simple terms, we have to find a way to persuade Russia to support the maintenance of that crossing, which is not straightforward, given the history of different perspectives about Syria and a ten-year war there. We will leave no stone unturned in trying to ensure that crossing stays open. It is currently supplying almost 3 million people. It really is an enormous responsibility.

A number of members asked about Tigray. We have probably been the most vocal country

in the EU and the UN on this issue. That is arguably because we are quite close to Ethiopia. My political adviser is a former ambassador to Ethiopia. We have really good knowledge about Ethiopia in the Department. The Ethiopian Government is a partner for Ireland and has been for many years. Our largest development programme is in Ethiopia. We had staff in Tigray. We had a really good agricultural project there. I visited it as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine nine or ten years ago. This is a country we know well. That is why Ireland has been so exercised by what has been happening there. It has been brutal. There has been much evidence to suggest breaches in humanitarian law and international law. There is increasing evidence now of sexual violence against local populations of women and children by soldiers and paramilitary groups. It is awful. That is why we have contributed to gaining traction for an international response.

The culmination of that so far has been a statement at the UN Security Council that everybody signed up to, which is quite unusual at the Security Council. We would have gone further if we did not have to get consensus across all of the member states, including the African three and the five permanent members. We still got a strong press statement calling for full, unfettered humanitarian access to all parts of Tigray and strong reference to sexual violence and the need for a credible international investigation, which is now moving ahead under the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR, working with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. We are satisfied that investigation will be on the ground soon.

Having said that, there are still real problems. We did not manage to get anything about Eritrean troops into the statement. We could not get agreement on that, unfortunately. Even though there is a commitment from Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali and from the Eritrean side that troops will leave Tigray, we have not seen any evidence of that on the ground yet. There is continuing tension and violence in that region that we, as a country that cares about Ethiopia, need to, and will continue to, shine a light on. I hope we can make real progress on that. The USA has become much more exercised about the Ethiopian issue in recent weeks, which has changed the tone of the debate in the Security Council in many ways. It has added real impetus to the need for change and has put pressure on everybody, which is welcome indeed.

The Security Council held closed consultations about Western Sahara on 21 April. Ireland made clear its long-standing position and urged de-escalation. Our ambassador to the UN separately met with Colin Stewart, the head of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, MINURSO, about the mission's work and the challenges faced in implementation of its mandate. I have made clear that negotiations must resume under UN auspices and that the parties should approach these negotiations without pre-conditions. I spoke to the Moroccan foreign minister about this last week. Ireland will continue to press for a new UN envoy to be appointed soon. It has gone for far too long without a UN special envoy. We will engage where we can be of most assistance to the UN-led process, ahead of the renewal of MINURSO's mandate on 30 October this year. Our position on Western Sahara has not changed. It has been consistent for a long time. We have two Defence Forces personnel in Western Sahara. They will probably not stay there indefinitely but I reassure the committee that Ireland's interest will remain consistent and strong.

Deputy Brady raised the Human Rights Watch report. The official position on this is that Human Rights Watch is certainly a respected NGO and I value the role that it and other civil society organisations play. I have been forthright in expressing my concerns regarding Israeli occupation of Palestine. Ireland's position on this will continue to be based on international law, Israel's obligations as the occupying power under the Fourth Geneva Convention and the

4 May 2021

relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council that have been passed. Our approach is rooted in the illegality of Israel's occupation and the right of Palestinians to self-determination. The restrictions that are imposed on Palestinians undermine the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, a right which is at the heart of a two-state solution, which we continue to advocate for and insist upon as the only viable way forward. Ireland remains committed to a two-state solution and will continue to work with partners to revive a political process in line with international law, which ensures equal rights and is acceptable to both sides.

I note the publication of this report and its contents, which my officials are reviewing in detail. I will happily come back to the Deputy again about that report. It is a lengthy and detailed report and our legal team is looking at it at the moment. Anything that we describe as apartheid, or any other such term, has to be consistent with definitions under international law. For us to be credible, we need to make sure that we examine that report fully before I make any determination about the terms that are used in it. I am on the record on many occasions about settlements, their existence and expansion, what is happening in East Jerusalem and the deliberate actions of an Israeli Government that make a two-state solution more and more difficult to achieve as settlements continue to expand and we see more frequent demolitions in parts of the West Bank. Perhaps most concerning, we have seen an unacceptable series of announcements around settlement expansion and moving ahead with building contracts in East Jerusalem and areas in close proximity to it. I have probably been one of the most vocal EU ministers on this issue in recent months along with perhaps the minister from Luxembourg. I will continue to be vocal at UN and EU level. Essentially, we want a new round of real talks and consultations where there is equality of esteem between both sides and where a two-state solution can be progressed. It certainly would have been helpful in terms of the mandate for the Palestinian Authority if elections had gone ahead this month because there have been no elections across the Palestinian territories for 15 years. I spoke to the Palestinian foreign minister, Dr. Riyad Al Malki, last week about this. Unfortunately, they have decided that they cannot proceed at this time because of the East Jerusalem issue. This is regrettable but I have issued a statement on that to say that we would like to see a new date for elections as soon as possible. We will do everything we can to work with the international community and the Israeli Government, which has not been fully formed after the election, to try to ensure that elections for Palestinians in East Jerusalem can be facilitated.

I hope I can use the Irish presidency in September in respect of the Middle East peace process and the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Ireland has been a very strong and consistent voice in this space and I would like us to ensure that at some point during our presidency from September, we can use that profile to be able to create some positive traction in this space, which we have not had for quite a number of years. I dealt with the issue of Tigray but if there are more questions on it, members can certainly come back to me.

I have spoken on a number of occasions to Martin Griffiths, who is the UN special envoy on Yemen. He is an incredibly patient man and is doing everything he possibly can to try to get a ceasefire to stick and to move towards a political process that can guarantee that this ceasefire lasts but it has been a really difficult process. Just when we think we are almost there and he injects some optimism at UN level, there is a setback. When I was in Tehran, I spoke repeatedly to him because we were trying to use that visit not only in the context of the joint comprehensive plan of action but also to try to ensure that Iran would use whatever influence it has over the Houthis in Yemen to ensure that a ceasefire would happen and take hold. There is ongoing fighting around the Marib region, which is a particular focal point of concern, and there are broader concerns as well that are leading to a lot of humanitarian tragedy and, quite

frankly, misery throughout Yemen that the international community needs to address. We will remain vocal on that issue. There is no consensus at EU level on an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia or any member of the coalition that has been involved on one side of the Yemen conflict. Such decisions require the agreement of everybody. Irish efforts are concentrated on ensuring the effective implementation of agreements to which member states have signed up. This includes export controlled regimes, including the EU's common position on arms exports and the implementation of the 2014 arms trade treaty. This has been signed and ratified by all member states and should be honoured. These obligations require states to assess the potential that arms exports could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian or human rights law and consider measures to mitigate the risk of these violations.

The EU has effective measures in place to monitor the trade of arms and other dual-use goods to ensure that the highest standards of international arms control are met and to tackle the illicit trade in arms. We need to ensure these measures are being implemented and that is the focus of our engagement on the issue. Several arms exporters in the EU have stated they will not export arms to Saudi Arabia until there is a permanent ceasefire in Yemen. That is progress in this space and it is important to state that. The change of Administration in the US has put a significant amount of pressure on Saudi Arabia in respect of Yemen. In my view, there is certainly a political willingness in Saudi Arabia with regard to a ceasefire and a political process. That is certainly my understanding from the conversations I have had with the deputy foreign minister of Saudi Arabia.

As regards Syria and the role of Turkey, if one looks at the Astana process, which is probably the most effective process in terms of finding a way forward in Syria, the roles of Turkey, Iran, Russia, the US and the EU are all relevant here. All the issues in this context, whether it is humanitarian access, reconstruction, ongoing conflict or the future of the Assad regime, are interconnected and that is why, effectively, an understanding between Turkey and Russia is probably the most important element to the challenge we have here in terms of keeping the humanitarian access point at Bab al-Hawa open in the coming weeks.

On Cuba, I can be clear that we do not support the ongoing blockade of Cuba. Ireland has been and will continue to be a committed supporter of Cuba's UN General Assembly resolutions calling for an end to the US embargo. The injustice and severity of the US embargo is something that needs to be highlighted. We have raised that issue both with the US and within the UN. We believe these measures serve no constructive purpose and object to unilaterally imposed measures that impede economic and commercial relations of EU member states with Cuba. I think we are pretty clear on that.

On the issue of TRIPS and the WTO, I caution members against assuming that a simplistic solution here will solve all problems. I have a significant amount of sympathy for the argument that states we cannot allow intellectual property rights here to prevent the manufacturing of safe vaccines that can save people's lives. The tragedy we are seeing unfold in India obviously reinforces that point. As was stated, India is not going to be the only country facing extraordinarily traumatic scenes on its streets and elsewhere. There other densely populated countries that have health systems which are probably far weaker than that of India, so we are likely to see aggressive strains of this virus wreaking the kind of havoc we are currently seeing in India in other parts of the world. We have to find a way of significantly ramping up manufacturing capacity beyond the sites that are currently manufacturing, whether those sites are producing the Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, Moderna, AstraZeneca or Sputnik vaccine or any other vaccine. The intellectual property argument is one element of that. Last week, for example, Moderna

issued a statement indicating that it will effectively share its intellectual property in terms of the ingredients of its vaccine. More than that, it wants to partner with sites and companies that have the capacity to safely manufacture huge volumes of vaccine. That is part of the issue. I do not think that by simply removing intellectual property protections we will automatically see a dramatic increase in the manufacturing and production of safe vaccines overnight. We need these pharmaceutical giants to partner with countries like India and parts of the world such as South America, Latin America and other parts of Asia to build capacity as well as share property rights.

This will be an evolving debate. We, in principal, support and have supported the CTAP proposals but these have effectively come to nothing, apart from there being a statement that sounds good. It is a statement of intent on sharing of intellectual property, etc. The real issue is how to work with the World Trade Organization as well as the pharmaceutical sector to make sure that the companies with the capacity to do so continue to invest heavily in research for the next generation of vaccines, which we may all need in six months or a year, and, at the same time, that they are sharing their intellectual property and partnering with other parts of the world to safely mass-produce large quantities of vaccines.

India and South Africa are bringing forward a TRIPS waiver-type proposal at the World Trade Organization. We will look at that. As of now, the European Commission negotiates on behalf of the EU and Ireland. There needs to be and is an ongoing conversation within the EU on how to responsibly do this in a way that continues to incentivise the pharmaceutical sector to invest heavily, as it needs to, to ensure that we continue to develop the next generation of vaccines and that we mass-produce this generation of vaccines at the pace at which they are needed. I hope Ireland can try to influence that in a way that most people asking the questions here would like to see.

On Deputy Brady's question with regard to asking a Palestinian speaker to address the UN Security Council during the September presidency, I confirm that we will have a debate on the Middle East peace process during our September presidency and we will look at the options for speakers, including Palestinian speakers, for that debate. I will come back to the Deputy on that.

In respect of Senator Joe O'Reilly's comments, I have probably answered the question on Syria and the Bab al-Hawa crossing. On sanctions, it is important to make distinctions between the EU approach to sanctions and the US approach. People often talk about sanctions on Syria being hugely damaging to the broader population and so on. The EU approach is quite different to that of the US. The EU only sanctions individuals. It seizes the assets of individuals, prevents individuals from travelling and so on. These are individuals who have been associated with the regime, atrocities or breaches of international law.

I had a good conversation with Geir Pederson on this issue. We should not and cannot support sanctions that reinforce hardship on a population in a wartime or post-conflict situation. Sanctions are, however, an important part of trying to ensure there is a political way forward that the EU can support. Sanctions are important leverage in that regard. I take the point but we should always assess the sanctions being applied to make sure they are serving the intended purpose, which is not to add misery or suffering to people or economies nor to affect their ability to get aid or medicines in. The EU is quite careful in the context of how sanctions impact on local populations, and that is the case for Syria. I can follow up with more detail on that if somebody wants it. The official note on sanctions in Syria states that EU sanctions are aimed at combating violent repression in Syria, violations of human rights and international humanitar-

ian law as well as fighting against the use of chemical weapons. They are targeted at specific entities and individuals. There are specific mechanisms to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid, most of which the EU pays for, including medical aid, is not hindered. These humanitarian exemptions and derogations apply at all times.

Ireland has contributed almost €200 million in humanitarian assistance to Syria. It is by far the biggest contribution we have made to any conflict region or unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. The last time I looked we had contributed €193 million to Syria but I suspect it is probably up to about €200 million. We will continue to support the alleviation of suffering there.

**Chairman:** I am sorry for cutting across. I ask the Minister to hold over his comment on Syrian refugees for the moment because I am keen to revert to Deputies Clarke and Gannon and Senator Craughwell. I am sure there will be an overlap so I will call the members for their questions and we will have another opportunity for the Minister's responses, including on the issue of refugees, which is important to many members.

I will go to Deputy Clarke to be followed by Deputy Gannon. Then I will go to Senator Craughwell, briefly, and back to the Minister in advance of our concluding comments. I record the apologies of Senator Ó Donnghaile.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I thank the Minister for his time. I will not go over comments made or questions asked by other contributors but I will touch on something the Minister mentioned around the sexual violence investigation. That is absolutely welcome. While highlighting and acknowledging sexual violence as a weapon of war is a positive first step, we need to see action and accountability. That will be key for those affected by that.

I move on to a recent presentation given to the committee about the disproportionate effect of Covid-19 on women, particularly displaced women, in terms of access to education and medical care and, more important, about how vital women's voices will be when it comes to rebuilding societies and economies after Covid and as we go through the emergence from Covid. It is vital that women's voices are heard at the planning stage and when it comes to implementing the measures for rebuilding economies. As activists and societal leaders, we must ensure Covid is not used as a mechanism to reverse any ground gained by women in relation to representation at any level. What action and position do we take in support of these vital measures?

I will touch on the TRIPS waiver. The Minister used the word "simplistic" when we spoke about it a few moments ago. There are simplistic numbers around this. Our current annual production capacity is 3.5 billion doses but the annual need is 11 billion doses to vaccinate 70% of the global population. We are at a point where neither objecting nor the wait-and-see approach are tenable positions. The Minister mentioned quality being an issue here. Assuring quality around vaccines, while essential, is not an issue that vaccines currently on the market have been immune from. Two vaccines manufacturers have had quality issues at their manufacturing plants. They needed to close to address these issues, and that was a welcome step. When one recognises there is a problem, one takes steps to address it. That does not really hold up to scrutiny, particularly when one looks at the Covid-19 pre-qualification programme run by the WHO. Another point raised by the Minister related to a partnership approach. A partnership approach has been abandoned by other countries such as Canada, South Korea, Pakistan, and he mentioned India. Bangladesh had previously tried a partnership approach. What evident have we available now that indicates this will be an option when it has not been an option in the past and when steps to move down that road have been abandoned?

Finally, does the Minister support the TRIPS waiver, personally, because at this point something has to give? Globally, humanity and health is on the line, otherwise we will be stuck in a cycle of illnesses, of deaths, and of lockdowns unless this issue is dealt with and dealt with effectively.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I thank the Minister for his presentation. I want to begin with the issue of the TRIPS waiver. Notable commentators, such as our own Mary Robinson, have been to the forefront of calling for a TRIPS waiver. It would not be a simplistic position to take. The idea of partnership began when more than €5 billion of public funding went into the pharmaceutical companies in Ireland to enable them to develop the vaccines in the speed and manner in which they have done. It is at this point that the TRIPS waiver has been called for by both India and South Africa, with India being in a position of peril. There is manufacturing capacity in India but it simply does not have enough vaccines to keep up with the surge of the virus. The fact that India is in the condition that it is in means that surrounding nations will be unable to access vaccines because most of the them being produced there will, understandably, go to India. The TRIPS waiver has been called for and I do not think it is simplistic in any way, shape or form. We are at the risk of being too deferential to pharmaceutical companies and their knowledge, when most of this is being funded publicly. What exactly is the Government's position when it comes to the TRIPS waiver? We have always taken the lead on human rights, be it in famine or conflict. We cannot find ourselves short on this issue.

I want to highlight two potentials for conflict and genuine tragedy over the next 12 to 18 months in Ethiopia. One issue relates to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which has the potential to cause conflict with Egypt. What is the status of diplomacy regarding the dam and the potential for conflict with Egypt? Secondly, as a result of the current conflict in Tigray, there is the potential for famine in the coming 12 months because of the inability to plant seeds and crops. How will we support the Ethiopians in offsetting any human rights crisis emerging from the crisis in Tigray, particularly with the threat of famine?

My final question is about the relationship with Russia. Ireland has seen itself, in the absence of diplomacy, shouting into a vacuum when Russia encroaches on our airspace and sea space. Where is the potential for diplomatic gain when it comes to Russia? Who is working on that and what is the potential for that to be improved in the future?

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I thank the Minister for being here. There has been some discussion on TRIPS. I heard a very interesting discussion which suggested that releasing intellectual property is simply not 100% the answer. Moderna, as the Minister pointed out, is looking for partners and that is the way forward. We need to encourage these manufacturers to seek partners in developing economies to manufacture the vaccine under strict quality control measures which are required.

I congratulate the Minister for getting the Passport Office open. That has been a vital step forward and it is great to hear it is starting to process passports. Regarding travel within the EU, he will be aware that the aviation industry is on its knees. Given the vaccine roll-out programme throughout Europe, are there plans for Ireland to join the remainder of the EU states and start travel again within Europe?

A bit closer to home, there is the issue of a border poll. I have written to the Minister on this issue and I constantly receive contact from members of the unionist community, the moderate side of unionism in Northern Ireland, who are deeply concerned at the constant referencing of the need for a border poll. Many of these people believe what is really needed is that we learn

to speak to one another, particularly in the North of Ireland, as communities. The Minister has done a huge amount of work and carries a great amount of respect from both sides of the community in Northern Ireland. I have some concerns about this issue. I appreciate the Minister may not be able to comment on it but I wanted to refer to it with him here.

We have a proud record of peacekeeping throughout the world. With the decline in the Defence Forces, does the Minister see us continuing to be able to provide peacekeepers in all of the stations we currently have?

My final point is on the issue of the Iranian Embassy. I have been an advocate of opening the embassy in Tehran for some time now. I am aware there are organisations and people in this country with difficulties with the Iranian regime. It is my view, and I think the view of the Minister, that we are better talking to the Iranians on the ground than staying away from the country and not being a party to it. I am not going to delay any longer on that issue.

**Chairman:** A number of the points raised relate more particularly to the Minister's role as Minister for Defence. He will be back before the committee dealing exclusively with defence matters in the coming weeks.

There are a number of issues there and I am conscious of the clock and of the members. I want to make two points, briefly. In regard to the international dimension of Covid-19, COVAX and vaccine equity, the Minister will be aware of our report, which was published some weeks ago. I hope the content of that will find favour with the Minister's office and Government colleagues.

On the Syrian refugees, we on this committee had a poignant presentation from Syrian spokesperson, Ghufran Khoufani, last week. She spoke in graphic terms about the refugee situation, particularly in Lebanon. It was noted that the majority of Syrians in Ireland have relations in Lebanese camps and that the deportation of refugees from Lebanon to Syria, from what we are told, appears to be in some way contrary to the international non-*refoulement* regime. I am sure these issues have been brought to the Minister's attention. I believe they are critical.

We also hear that in the context of future elections in Syria, there has been intensive canvassing or the exercise of undue influence by some Lebanese politicians canvassing on behalf of the Assad party, which is worrying. The forcible return of Syrian refugees appears to me to be not right. I wonder whether consideration, on the part of the Minister, would be given to making contact with his counterpart in Lebanon on the basis that we feel the Lebanese Government must have a role here and be held accountable.

Equally worrying is the situation in Denmark. I would be grateful to hear the Minister's views on that and whether consideration has been given to a bilateral meeting between him and his Danish colleague expressing what we believe to be a worrying trend in Denmark regarding Syrian refugees. I welcome what the Minister has said in relation to the individual cases of detention and that he is open to us raising this issue. We will get back to him on that. Overall, on the matter of the Syrian refugee crisis, we urge the European Union and the UN Security Council to be active and engaged.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I will answer the Chair's question on the issue of refugee returns to Syria first. Any returns of refugees or displaced persons must be voluntary, dignified and safe. It is the assessment of reputable experts and, above all, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, that such conditions are not in place right now. EU law and other

international legal obligations rightly prevent EU member states from returning individuals to situations where they would face extreme danger. In our view, this is clearly the case in Syria right now.

As regards the Danish decision, I understand that authorities in Denmark have concluded that it is safe for refugees to return to parts of Syria. It is for Denmark's authorities to come to their own conclusions. Domestically, the Minister for Justice has a policy responsibility for this issue. From my perspective, I note that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees does not consider Syria safe for refugees to return there. I have a very good relationship with my Danish colleague and I will certainly raise that issue with him.

In relation to returns from Lebanon, since 2011, that country has absorbed an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees, which is a number equivalent to almost one third of its population. The scale of the influx has placed enormous strain on the country. I fully understand Lebanese concerns about the impact on the country of hosting such large numbers of refugees. I am also aware of concerns raised about the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. I commend civic society organisations on their vital work in safeguarding the well-being and rights of refugees in Lebanon. Ireland has been consistently clear that refugee returns must be voluntary and safe. The UNHCR is clear that it is not safe for refugees to return to Syria, not yet at any rate. Ireland has resettled more than 1,600 refugees from Lebanon. In 2019, the Government further committed to welcoming 2,900 refugees between 2020 and 2023, most of whom will be Syrian, who are living in Jordan and Lebanon.

I may have an opportunity to visit Lebanon before the Dáil breaks up for the summer. I hope to be able to visit our troops in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, in southern Lebanon, perhaps in late June or early July. If I do, I would certainly like to have political discussions in Beirut as well. Even though there is effectively no functioning government in Lebanon right now, this is certainly one of the issues I can raise directly while there. On COVAX and access to vaccines, we will certainly take note of the report the committee has put together.

In relation to Deputy Clarke's questions on accountability and action as regards sexual violence in Tigray, the place to start is to shine a light on the issue, which is what we have been trying to do. We have been asking many very uncomfortable questions, which is what we need to do. We now have, effectively, the appropriate UN body investigating what is happening in Tigray. I hope, if we get names, accounts and evidence, we will be able to follow up in order to hold to account individuals who have sanctioned, ordered or participated in sexual violence as part of that conflict. That would ensure there will be no impression of impunity when it comes to sexual violence in conflict zones.

The Deputy is right about the impact of Covid-19 on women. Ireland will continue to focus on women's empowerment and gender equality in our development programme. Economic empowerment programmes will be particularly important as women have lost ground economically in terms of employment during Covid. It has also had a huge impact on education and education for girls is always what suffers first. I do not have the exact figure to hand, but we are committing a considerable amount of money in our development programme, distributed through UN organisations, for the education of girls in Africa. It is a big part of our Irish Aid commitment. We will have to double down on those efforts because Covid has clearly set back sustainable development goals, generally, in terms of meeting targets by 2030. It has also had a disproportionate impact on women as part of those goals. That is very much recognised within the Department and in my office.

Deputies Gannon and Clarke both raised the issue of TRIPS. When I said it is not simplistic, what I was talking about was upscaling output from 3 billion to 11 billion doses is not simplistic in terms of any one solution that can do it. Am I saying or do I believe intellectual property rights should be an impediment to expanding the manufacturing capacity of safe vaccines globally? No, I do not. I do not believe intellectual property rights should not be allowed to be an impediment to that. How we expand manufacturing capacity in a way that continues to ensure companies invest heavily in the research needed to continue to advance towards the next generation of vaccines as well as sharing knowledge and intellectual property rights to allow countries like India, which have significant manufacturing capacity in pharmaceuticals, to ratchet up their output is something on which we have to find a way forward. If it is the India-South Africa proposal we can work with, that is great. If it is a version of that, that is what we will have to try to advocate for.

Ireland has to advocate within the European Union for an EU approach. Perhaps first and foremost that is where we can be most impactful, because the Commission negotiates on our behalf on WTO issues. Certainly, from my perspective, and I say this as somebody who lives ten minutes from the second-largest pharmaceutical cluster in the European Union, in Cork, it is not morally acceptable for us to allow a legal intellectual property argument to prevent or slow down the manufacturing of life-saving vaccines.

We have shown a capacity in the past to respond to other diseases in terms of vaccine output, but we must also ensure there is quality control and capacity because this is not just about intellectual property; it is also about know-how. Producing these vaccines in the timeframe that will be demanded of companies requires partnerships and know-how that many of the operators that have researched and manufactured vaccines to date need to be a part of. We should be seriously looking at a TRIPS waiver for the reasons I have just outlined, but that will not solve the problem on its own. That is what I am saying. It is a more complex problem in terms of ensuring we get the kind of volumes of vaccines that are needed. As Deputy Clarke suggested, we must move from 3.5 billion to 11 billion doses to meet the global demand.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam concerns more than Ethiopia and Egypt but that is, of course, where the real tension lies. It also involves Sudan. There have been a number of attempts to try to get a diplomatic solution to this matter involving several countries and international organisations. As of yet, it has not worked. I was in Cairo, possibly two years ago at this stage, to discuss this issue with the Egyptian foreign minister and he was very uncompromising in his message. This could be the source of real regional tension if we cannot get a solution to it. There is enough conflict in this region linked to a whole range of other matters that we have not even had a chance to touch on, without this issue adding to it even further.

On girls' education and that large figure I talked about, Ireland will invest at least €250 million by 2024 in girls' education and education in emergencies, which is everything from education in refugee camps to vulnerable and post-conflict populations and so on. Do not forget there are approximately 75 million people in refugee camps. When one thinks about that, it is quite extraordinary. It is the population of Germany in refugee camps. The challenges of education in the context of Covid-19, in particular, when many schools have been closed down in an effort to prevent spread, are huge. Again, €250 million over the space of a couple of years is a big commitment from an Irish perspective.

I apologise to Deputy Gannon who asked about Russia and there were questions earlier on Donbas. There was a big military build-up on the Ukrainian border which, as one would expect, was causing much concern within the EU and, from what I hear, within NATO countries as

4 May 2021

well. Perhaps that tension has eased a little bit but Ukraine is a real concern for the EU and the support for the Ukrainian Government and the sovereign integrity of that country is something the EU has to, and does, stand for.

The Navalny case is seen in the European Union as simply silencing a credible critic of the Russian Government. Within the EU, there is real concern about Alexei Navalny's health and we continue to call not only for access to healthcare but healthcare that he can trust, which has not been the case. Of course, we have been public, vocal and critical of arbitrary detention of people who are legitimately raising concerns through marches, rallies and peaceful demonstration. It is not a good situation.

Likewise, in terms of Belarus, we have been as supportive as we possibly can be of the opposition movement in the context of the demand for free and fair elections which any country should be entitled to. We do not believe that the last presidential election in Belarus was in any way credible. I say that as someone who has been in Belarus and, ironically, the most high-profile opposition spokesperson who is outside of Belarus at present has strong connections with Ireland. We have been as supportive of her as we can be.

Senator Craughwell referred to the Passport Office which, by the way, never closed during the pandemic. I know the impression is there that it has been closed. It was closed to the public for public health reasons but approximately 235,000 passports have been issued since the first restrictions were put in place in response to Covid-19 in March of last year. This year, we continue to provide thousands of passports every week, predominantly the applications that are online and pretty straightforward and, of course, emergency passports people need.

However, we need to move beyond that and I anticipate a significant increase in demand for passports as we move through the summer because many people who have not even thought about international travel may start thinking about international travel again and other people may need passports for other reasons in terms of identity.

We regard passports as an essential service in terms of renewal and getting passports for children and so on, so we have had one third of our team in the Passport Office. It is a confined office. They work in close proximity to each other and we need to make sure that we do that safely. We want to be able to move to 50% to 70% so that we can really ratchet up capacity. There is an overhang, particularly in terms of people who have paperwork stuck in the system for a number of months. Approximately 90,000 people are waiting. We can clear that backlog quickly, in the space of approximately six weeks, once there is a significant increase in our team in the Passport Office but we must do it safely. I hope people will understand that people working in close proximity to one another need be able to do that safely.

I do not want to go into the detail in terms of travel, but the Government will be looking at international travel in terms of a discussion as to how we approach the reopening of international travel over time. We will be doing that later this month.

The European Commission is developing what will be a helpful data tool to which countries throughout the European Union will contribute data on people's Covid-19 status and we have the systems to be able to do this. It means that when a passenger comes through an airport, he or she will have a code on his or her mobile phone that can be scanned to give his or her Covid-19 health status in terms of whether he or she has been vaccinated, PCR tested or has had Covid-19 and recovered. On the basis of having that consistent and trusted data throughout the European Union, countries will be able to make decisions as to what level of easing of restrictions on

international travel they will facilitate and for what category of person.

That is a debate we need to have but I hope that later on in the summer, we will be able to facilitate people who are fully vaccinated to be able to participate in international travel. The restrictions and management of them, obviously, need to be discussed with our public health team to make sure we do it safely. The public would expect that of us.

My view on a border poll is that we have many complex and difficult issues to resolve with the British Government and political leaders and communities in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a place of tension, polarisation, anxiety and worry at present. Many people are worried about what the summer might hold in terms of a marching season, bonfires, potential protests, violence and so on. We must try to reduce the temperature in terms of political interaction, not increase it. I do not believe that calling for an immediate border poll is helpful in that context. Instead, we must try to bed down and support the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. We must try to rebuild relationships that have been damaged - and I include myself in that - to try to rebuild an atmosphere of trust again. Of course, the aspiration for a border poll is perfectly legitimate, just as is the aspiration to maintain Northern Ireland as part of the Union. Many people hold strong views.

For now, whether it is Brexit, protocol issues, policing or protecting the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, not just the Assembly and the Executive but also North-South Ministerial Council meetings and east-west infrastructure between Dublin and London, we must use all of those institutions to maintain calm and show people that politics works. I hope that as we improve relationships, many of these discussions will be taken forward in time but there are immediate challenges we face and they need to be the focus.

We are focusing on peacekeeping mandates in the Security Council. Senator Craughwell had recognised that. We can maintain our current missions. We may choose to evolve those missions into a focus on other parts of the world, over time, and we have had an initial discussion with the Defence Forces on that. In terms of the numbers that we contribute to overseas peacekeeping missions, I have no intention of reducing Ireland's footprint overseas.

That means we must get better at recruitment and retention to make sure we build up the numbers. We are 1,000 people short of where we should be in terms of our overall Defence Forces contingent, as Senator Craughwell knows, but we are working hard to try to change that and we will be successful but it will take some time.

On the Iranian Embassy, one should have embassies in countries with which one has disagreements and to which one has different foreign policy approaches, as well as in countries with which one has significant consistency in that regard. In my view, Iran is a significant regional actor. We have real concerns with much of what it has done and is doing but we have made a commitment to open an embassy by 2023. Of course, our role on the Security Council reinforces the need for this. We are the facilitator on the Security Council of Resolution 2231, which essentially is the Iranian nuclear deal. Not to have a presence or footprint in Teheran in this context would be wrong. This is why we will have a diplomatic footprint in Teheran very soon. It will be in the German Embassy initially, working in partnership with Germany and using its facilities but having a separate office ourselves. Over time we will go through the process of finding an appropriate location to have an embassy of our own at some point over the coming years.

I believe I have answered everybody's questions. I apologise for going a little bit over time

4 May 2021

but they were important questions.

**Chairman:** I do not have time for a second round. A number of issues were raised on which the Minister said he will follow up by means of a note and I thank him for his interaction with the committee. I thank the Minister for meeting us this morning and dealing with our issues. I also acknowledge the very positive relationship between departmental officials and the committee. Often we seek briefing notes at short notice and I want to say how very much we appreciate the manner in which these notes are prepared and received. It is very important in terms of positive interaction between Parliament and Government. I would be grateful if the Minister would convey to his officials our appreciation of those notes, which are very important to us in the context of our interaction with our witnesses, guests and work programme.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.42 a.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 6 May 2021.